Speak Up!
National Report
Focus Group II
10th & 11th November 2011

Roots Research Centre
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FOCUS GROUP TWO
INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF ATHENS

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1. INTRODUCTION

The second focus group, or the control group, was a group comprising of ten children. These children were currently beginning their eighth grade at school and were either thirteen years old or soon to become thirteen in the approaching year. All of the children in the consultation group are currently attending the same school, an international school in the northern suburbs of Athens. The school ranges from grade one until grade 12, and is attended by both boys and girls. Many of the children are Greek citizens, as well as a number of students currently living in Greece as expatriates. The children come from a number of countries; Italy, France, Germany, America and China. Lessons are conducted in English to accommodate children from all of the world as well as offering language lessons in Greek and other European languages. The gender breakdown of the consultation group was sixty-forty, comprising of six boys and four girls.

The children that partook in the consultation group all live in close proximity to the school, either in Kifisia, Nea Erethrea or Aghia Paraskavi. These areas are situated in the Northern suburbs of Athens and are generally viewed as being neighbourhoods with a higher socioeconomic status.

The ethnic breakdown of the control group is as follows. Of the young males, three of the boys were Greek and Greek-American, with both or one of their parents having been born in Greece or America. All three of these boys were born in Greece were able to speak both English and Greek. The remaining three boys were born in Romania, Italy and America as well as both of their parents. The boys had all lived in their respective countries prior to immigrating to Greece. These boys were all able to speak their native language, English as speak and understand Greek reasonable well (as a third language). Two of the girls were Greek citizens, born in Greece to Greek parents. They were both able to speak Greek and English. The third young female was born in Vietnam, to Vietnamese parents. She was fluent in her native language and in English, but was unable to speak or understand Greek.

The fourth young female was born in America to an American father and British mother. She was fluent in English and had a good knowledge of Greek due to having spent much of her education schools in Greece, surrounded by Greek speaking children.
In discussing ethnicities within the group, the religious preferences of the children were not discussed as this is not part of the schools curriculum and the facilitators did not feel it was necessary to introduce the topic.

The focus group was composed of school children of the same age as the children consulted in the vulnerable children focus group. However, these children, but one, did not have any obvious vulnerabilities and all lived with two parents with a good home life, as described by all of them. One of the boys, however, did have quite a severe speech impediment. He had been extremely eager in joining the group, and was welcomed as a key contributor to the consultation process.

The children within the control group were selected at random from a year eight class. The facilitators had contacted the guidance counsellor working at the school and had given her all relevant information regarding the project. This woman then asked for ten volunteers and through this process selected the ten children that took part in the group. The facilitators selected this school on the basis that they felt that the children selected would offer good insight into the rights of children experienced within Greece from a range of perspectives, both expatriates and Greek born children. The facilitators recognised that although the children in this group were not ‘vulnerable’ in the same sense as the children from the Roma community, but that they may experience other vulnerabilities which are not obvious and easily addressed. During the consultation process the facilitators explored this different perspective of vulnerability with the children.

This control group of children were able to provide the facilitators and the overall consultation process the opportunity for an analytical comparative study between the two focus groups to take place, with the view to identify the types of children’s rights that resonate more with certain groups of children – and how the existence of certain children’s right play are larger or lesser role and impact differently on the life experiences of various groups of children.
1.1 PREPARATION OF THE CHILDREN

The facilitators had approached the guidance counsellor at the school well in advance of the commencement of the focus group consultations. This was necessary due to the fact that focus group consultations were due to take place during school hours, and with an already full daily schedule, a lot of pre planning was needed to ensure that the consultations could be incorporated into the children’s daily educational programme.

The facilitators had approached the guidance counsellor of the school, as mentioned above, approached a group of eighth grade students requesting volunteers to take part in the group. The counsellor was fully aware and had been well informed about the nature of the Speak Up! Project, its objectives and expected outcomes. Once the selected ten children had committed to taking part in the consultation process, their parents were made aware of all the details of the project and an information sheet and consent forms was sent home for the parents to sign and agree to.

Prior to the commencement of the first focus group meeting, the children were all known to each other as they were classmates. The children were not known to either of the facilitators or the organisers. Both focus groups were facilitated by the same two individuals. The children were asked if they had been spoken to previously about human rights or children’s rights by any of their teachers or by any other person during school. Some of the children said they had not, and other seemed to vaguely recall having been educated on the matter of children’s rights previously, but they were not able to say when this had taken place.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

The facilitators had drawn up a programme prior to meeting the children. A structured approach was very necessary due to particularly tight time constraints. Each session with the children was allowed to be a maximum of three hours. The sessions were taking place during normal school hours and would be ‘cutting’ in to their academic lessons.
Consultation sessions outside of school hours were not viable as most of the children would be attending extra curricular activities and extra academic lessons during afternoons and on weekends. The decided approach to be used during consultations was that of the group interview style, individual writing and drawing activities as well as being shown video clips and images involving an assortment of children’s rights as well as images pertaining to children’s rights violations. The children would then be given the opportunity to comment and discuss their personal views regarding the images. The children were also given an introduction to children’s rights, and after this the children’s rights game was played – hereafter the four selected children’s right were to be chosen.

The facilitators ensured that the children were aware that if at any point during the focus group consultation they would prefer to leave, that this was okay and that they were free to exclude themselves if they wished. The facilitators explained the roles of all adults present as well as that all discussions were private that if at any point the children needed to speak with an adult present about any issue that they should do so freely.

All of the children were able to speak in whichever language they preferred, either Greek or English. The facilitators were able to speak and understand both Greek and English. The facilitators did inform the children that the focus group consultations were a place where they should feel at ease to express their feelings and thoughts, and asked that all present in the consultation respected each others right to do so. If at any point, the facilitators felt that a child was not being given the opportunity to share their thoughts, due to another child not allowing them to or a disruption going on within the session all children were reminded of the importance of listening to others and respecting their right to an opinion. Both facilitators installed and facilitated a child centred approach within the consultation meetings. Within a child/adult relationship, as in these meetings, a power imbalance may affect the children’s willingness and ease in sharing their thoughts and opinions. Children sometimes feel less certain of what they may say, especially in an institution such as school.
The facilitators explained to the children that they were not teacher and both facilitators aimed at ensuring a sense of equality within the sessions by treating the children as valuable contributors with valuable contributions.

The facilitators were sure not to make assumptions about what the children were saying, and allowing the children to direct the dialogue and discourse, whilst remaining present as a guiding tool to the process. This approach was thought to be best in empowering the children to share their views.

The Speak Up! ‘Activities’ and ‘Step by Step’ process (Speak Up! Toolkit pages 4- were used as a general guide in the focus group consultations.

At the very start of the first meeting the children were quite reserved, in part, due to the fact that they were in a school setting – where they were typically expecting to be talked to and ‘taught’. The aims of the consultations were for the facilitators to have the children talk to them about their views and knowledge about children’s rights. The introductory game was of great value here in that it aided the consultation process in developing a relaxed and open environment for the children, also giving the children the opportunity to learn more about the facilitators who were strangers to them before that day. The children really enjoyed talking about themselves and their own lives. They were keen to hear about each other lives and experiences, as well as the lives of the facilitators.

Background information about the project was provided to the children as well as the programme that would be followed during the sessions. The children were informed about the fact that their contributions would be used in informing policy and that this project was taking place with another group in Athens, as well as throughout Europe. The children were made aware of Eurochild, their position and also given a Speak Up! Badge and the miniature book of children’s rights. The EU and the UNCRC was explained to the children in a child-friendly way, which the children were able to comprehend and explain that they were aware of what the EU is.

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The information stemming from the consultation process was gathered and recorded as detailed minutes. Information was also extracted during meetings between the facilitators. After each consultation, the facilitators scheduled a meeting where they reflected on the session, both the information gathered from the children’s contributions and also a reflection on their (the facilitators) contribution within the consultation. The facilitators used these meetings to consolidate the children’s information and interpret it from three different perspectives, bringing a well rounded analysis of each consultation. These meetings proved very useful as a way to analyse consultations, looking at what worked and what didn’t work and adapting strategies to be used in the next session.

The focus group meetings took place in a familiar environment to the children, a classroom in their school building. The class room was a typical academic setting with rows of children’s desks and chairs, with a teacher’s desk at the front of the class room. The class room had AV facilities as well as a computer. For this reason the facilitators were able to plan a programme which included audiovisual information. The classroom was a clean, light filled and airy room and was adequate for the purpose of the consultation. The children were seated in the classroom, prior to the facilitators entering the classroom. They were seated one behind the other, in two rows. The children were asked if they were comfortable in this seating arrangement. They were, as it was a familiar style of seating to them.

2. KEY FINDINGS

In discussing the subject of children’s rights with the children, the facilitators were offered a large amount of insight into the perceptions and perspectives of the children in the group. The children were able to identify that as children, they are in need of a special protection by adults. They said that this was because as children, they were controlled by adults and that things may be done to them that they could not be in control of. They recognised that is was the responsibility of adults, especially their parents to provide them with this special protection.
The children were aware that human rights as well as children’s rights exist, but were not able to name any rights in particular. They were also unaware of the UNCRC and that it is a legally binding agreement which countries sign – showing that they are committed to enforcing these rights within their countries. The children did know that the violation of a child’s rights was a negative act.

While playing the children’s rights game, the children commented that many of the rights that the facilitators informed them of were silly and did not quite understand as to why it was necessary for that particular right to be in existence. An example of this is where all children have the right to health care as well as the right to education (Article 24 UNCRC). The children perceived these rights as redundant. They stated that the responsibility of the child’s health and education lay with their parents. The children commented that they thought that “all parents love their children so the parents will look after their children” and that “parents could home school their children, so they did not need to go to school”. The children also found it amusing that there was a right that looked to ensure that all children were able to play. They could not comprehend that some children are not afforded this right. Play was viewed as an activity that ‘goes without saying’, and an activity which is impossible to separate from a child’s daily life. All of the children, bar one, felt that the right concerning disabled children was unnecessary. Here, they felt that special care would always be ensured by their parents. One of the children, however, who suffers from a serious speech impediment, was very vocal in how important it is that people provide special care toward children who have a disability. Due to his speech impediment he was unable to express himself fully, but his body language showed his enthusiasm when this right was discussed - he had jumped up from his seat and raised both hands in the air. The facilitators felt that this displayed his feelings of recognition, which he valued.

Of the four rights selected by the children, all of them seemed to be rights that were quite distanced from their own reality. Three out of the four rights were those dealing with issues of the protection of children. These four rights were quite obviously different to the rights that had been selected by the vulnerable group of children.
From this, the facilitators deduced that the most basic of rights, those concerned with affording children daily and normative activities were so available and enjoyed by the children in the control group that it was not necessary to have to document these rights and ensure that people would respect them. Education, play and healthcare was a certainty – so integrated into their lives that they were not able to distance themselves from what seemed a guaranteed daily experience.

The most important rights as chosen by the children in the control group were those concerned or linked to incidents of criminal activity. For example, the protection from torture was something that may occur in the worst of circumstances – and if it occurred, children would need to be protected from it.

Another key finding was that when shown images of children holding weaponry or working in the streets, the children were astounded that these occurrences take place. They could not understand that if there are laws in place to protect children, that the exploitation of children still takes place.

The facilitators had explained to the children that they had completed that same sessions with another group of children in Athens, and that these children were from the Roma community. The boy from Romania was able to explain to the rest of the group what a Roma person is, and that they are mostly referred to as ‘gypsies’, although he said that this was not a very nice name. The other children were unaware of the Roma populations vulnerabilities, and showed a great deal of interest in finding out more about the Roma children – and asked if they could write the Roma children letters to explain to them that they were very regretful of their circumstances. These letters are included in the complete report package that has been handed in to Eurochild. The letters show a great deal of sympathy by these children for the Roma children. The children commented that they felt a lot of concern as to why the rights of the Roma children are not being protected and adhered to, despite the existence of the UNCRC.
3. CHILDREN’S AWARENESS OF RIGHTS

The children’s rights game was introduced during the second focus group consultation. Following the programme provided within the toolkit, the facilitators showed all twenty five cards to the children, alternating the real and fake rights. Each right was shown and then read out aloud. All of the children were able to distinguish between which was a real and a fake right, and were particularly expressive about the fake rights being very obviously fake and that the game was silly because they “were not first graders who could be tricked”. The children did comment that the right for a child to have their breakfast in bed was a reasonable request to ask of their parents, if they were feeling ill. The children were able to grasp the concept of all the rights that were explained to them, and commented that children’s rights concerning the protection from harm as really important and necessary.

3.1 FOUR SELECTED RIGHTS

The children were shown the fourteen rights three times, so that they may become familiar with them. Following this, the facilitators asked that children to think about which four rights are most important to their own situations and experiences. The children discussed the rights amongst one another and with the facilitators, and stated which rights they thought were the most important. The children gave the following four rights as their answer. The rights listed below are in no particular order of importance, and were thought to all be of equal importance. The facilitators felt that the four rights selected by the children were not rights that are highly relevant to their own life experiences, however, the children expressed very strongly that the rights they had chosen were the most important rights to their own situations because right existed to prevent any harm or danger being acted out upon them.
3.1.1 All Children are Equal (Article 2 UNCRC)

The children were familiar with this right, and were able to explain the concept of it easily and without much explanation needed from the facilitators. They were particularly vocal on the fact that discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity and colour was “very bad”. All of the children explained to the facilitators that racist slogans and prejudicial statements were never to be used and could be extremely hurtful if used towards someone. Together, the children and facilitators noted that within their school, there were a number of students who had been born in different countries and that had different skin colours and languages to the Greek children. In a general comment earlier in the consultation period, whilst talking about immigrants from Pakistan, one of the children had said that “In Greece, Pakistani’s come from their country to wash care windows in Greece – to make money”. One of the boys become quite offended and said that we should not use words such as “Pakistani’, that this was very racist. The children discussed this amongst themselves and decided that they should rather say “a person from Pakistan”, as this did not sound “ugly”. The facilitators explained that when discussing our differences, it is important that we are sensitive to other people’s backgrounds.

One of the children noted that in these circumstances, adults are always “PC”. He went on to explain that this meant “saying certain things you wish at home, but when outside and in front of a lot of people – you have to be careful because everybody is listening to what you are saying”. This individual, who had also commented on the term ‘Pakistani’ being offensive, is the son of an ex politician. He seemed particularly sensitive regarding issues concerning equality and difference throughout the consultation process.
3.1.2 Children without a Family have the Right to Special Protection

(Article 20 UNCRC)

The children were aware that if children have no families that they would need special protection from another source of care. The children felt that the duty of care lay with society as well as with the government. The children were aware that special institutions exist where children with no families or parent live all together, although they were not aware of any within Athens. None of the children had had any experience of living in care. This right did not directly relate to any of the children’s situations or living experiences, however, they felt that a child without any family or parents were extremely vulnerable and therefore needed extra care and state interventions were necessary. Throughout the consultation process the facilitators had noticed that the children associated all care responsibility and place there utmost trust in their own parents. For this reason, the facilitators felt that the fact that a child may not have a family or parent was really, in their own words, extremely “sad”. The children also expressed a real sympathy for these children and worried about their well being.

3.1.3 No Child Shall be Abused or Maltreated (Articles 19, 34 UNCRC)

The children expressed to the facilitators that no child should be hurt in any way, and by anyone. They all commented that even their parents should not hurt them in any way. The children were aware that that the following acts were against the law and that an individual may be punished by the stated if they (1) “had sex with a child”, (2) “beat up a child” or (3) “did not take care of their children”. The children commented that the police should arrest anyone who did not treat a child well.
3.1.4 Children have to be Protected from Deprivation of Liberty 
(Article 37 UNCRC)

The children’s initial comments regarding this right were that children were different from adults and that if they had done something “wrong”, that they might not understand that they had done so, especially if they were younger (than them). They also felt that it is the responsibility of parents and family to make sure that children do not get into situations where they may be able to commit a crime. The children were aware and understood that as children, parents should make sure that legal representation was available and that the police should always inform a family member or parent if their child has been taken into custody. The facilitators further explained that this right concerns the protection of children from being tortured and treated in an inhumane way. The thought of a child being tortured stirred up a lot of emotion from the children. They asked whether these sorts of acts are common. The facilitators informed the children that in some cases, children are exposed to imprisonment and torture. The children asked how this was possible as there were rights in place to stop this from happening.

4. CHILDREN’S NEEDS IN RELATION TO THE FOUR SELECTED RIGHTS

Discussions were held and questions were posed about the children’s daily lives and experiences in regards to the four selected rights and their own experiences of how these rights directly affect their own lives.

4.1 All Children are Equal (Article 2 UNCRC)

The children are all pupils at a school which is very diverse in that the pupil population comprises of children from many different countries, all with varying ethnicities, culture and languages. The ethos of the school promotes tolerance towards others and respect for diversity. Here, the children commented that they all felt able to “be themselves” an accepted and respected for their differences.
The children did not comment that they feel that they are treated differently in any manner. One of the boys in the group had an apparent disability, a speech impediment. While conducting interviews in the group, he too had the opportunity to discuss his likes and dislikes, pets and hobbies. He had what appeared to be great difficulty in sounding out his words and took a considerably long period of time to talk about himself. Although he has this ‘perceived’ disability, the environment that he is in is not disabling. At no point during the consultations was he ‘rushed’ or teased by any of the children. The boys in the classroom tended to ‘joke’ and tease each other in a friendly manner, and they carried out this behaviour with this particular boy too. He was not seen as someone with a disability who needed to be handled differently. This was a very pleasant experience to witness. He commented that he really likes school and that he feels good about coming to school.

4.2 Children without a Family have the Right to Special Protection

(Article 20 UNCRC)

All of the children who were participants in the consultation group had two parents and were living with both of them in a safe family environment. They described their family lives as safe, loving and described as what would seem a normative family environment. At no point during the consultation process did any of the children divulge any information that led the facilitators to believe that they were not being looked after by their parents. The children all described their parents and siblings as loving and that they too loved their families very much. With regards to the parental role, the children had commented throughout the consultation process that parents (and not the state) were primarily responsible for the education, health care and overall well being of their children. In some cases, the children commented that certain rights seemed unnecessary. They thought it was silly that the right to health care existed because their “parents would always look after them” and this was guaranteed. Parental responsibility for their care and well being was strongly featured as a certainty in the discourse of these consultation sessions.

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4.3 No Child Shall be Abused (Articles 19,34 UNCRC)

Within the homes of these specific children, there was no reported evidence of any punishment manifest in a physical manner. They all commented that their parents spoke to them about any acts that they had done that were not seen as the right thing to do. All of the children did say that within their households there are rules that need to be followed, such as a set bedtime and a certain amount of study time that was expected to be adhered to. One of the children commented that she had seen a mother walking down the street with a young girl, and that the young girl was crying. The mother then pulled the child towards her and began to hit the child on her behind. The girl commented that she had been quite upset to see this and that by hitting a young child, that mother had abused her child. She felt that hitting a young child is never acceptable because the young child probably does not understand why she is being hit. The other children in the group acknowledged and generally agreed with this statement. They all felt that it was not acceptable for a parent to hit their children. None of the children in the focus group consultation reported being abused or bullied in any way.

4.4 Children have to be protected for Deprivation of Liberty

(Article 37 UNCRC)

None of the children within the focus group had ever been in contact with the juvenile justice system or knew any children who had. The children were concerned with the section of the act that dealt with issues of torture, incarceration and any other form of inhumane treatment. In order to stimulate discussion regarding this right, the children were shown appropriate images of children in situations where this right was not being respected. The images consisted of depictions of imprisoned children, children being forced to become child soldiers and children working (under duress) in some sort of factory setting. The children were shocked to see these images and strongly felt that adults should not allow these children to end up in situations like these.
In response to the child depicted in a prison cell, the children commented that children should not be placed in a prison cell, ever. Prison cell are places for adults. The children asked why the child in the picture was on his own and not in a room with his parents or adults. They were concerned that the child’s parents had allowed their son to be placed in this “horrible” environment.

With regards to punishment, the children did comment that crimes committed by children should be dealt with sensitively. They were concerned that young children were not able to know if they had done wrong.

5. PROPOSALS FOR POLICIES OR ACTIONS FOR CHILDREN’S RIGHTS

In order to ensure that children’s rights are adhered to the children within the focus group made the following suggestions. The first of their suggestions was that it was necessary for all parents to show their children that they loved them. This would promote healthy relationships among families. The children in the focus group had also become quite focused on the group of Roma children that the facilitators had told them about. They directed many of their proposals and solutions towards these children. As mentioned previously, the children chose to write letters to the Roma children, in attempt to make a connection with these children, in the hope that they could become friends as well as share their belongings with them. Most of the children asked if it would be possible to organise a activity day or party with the Roma children. They suggested that their parents would buy presents as well as drinks and food for the party so that they could share they fortune with the Roma children. Two of the children asked for the telephone number and name of the Support Centre for Children and Family and asked that they could take donations of books, toys and clothing to these children so that they may be treated equally and also have the items that they themselves for fortunate to have. They felt that charity at a local level could be a great opportunity for all children to experience the same advantages as one another.

The children considered the role of society members as key to ensuring that children without families would be taken care of.
They mentioned that adults without their own children could “help look after” the children on the street or children without their own parents. They also suggested that the government built safe places for these children to live and that enough money would be set aside to ensure these children were able to go to school and have a safe place to sleep at night. In the instance of the protection of children from maltreatment and deprivation of liberty and torture, the children did not offer any specific solutions. As mentioned before, the children had been surprised that the existences of these rights were not adhered to. In response to the final question regarding what they would change if they were the Prime Minister; the children responded unanimously that they would give money to all the children who were poorer than themselves so that all families could have a warm home, food and clothes.

6. EVALUATION OF THE FOCUS GROUP MEETINGS

In evaluating the consultation process, the children were given the opportunity to tell the facilitators about how they felt about the consultation process and the issues that had been raised within the focus group sessions. This evaluation took place in a discussion setting, as this process had proven successful throughout the consultation process. The children were able to freely express their feelings and thoughts about the project. All of the children provided positive feedback and expressed that they had found the experience very interesting and fun. They commented as to how important it is to think about the issues that had been discussed because sometimes these issues may be overlooked if they do not directly affect your daily life.

The children also expressed their positive feelings towards the facilitators. During the consultations, the facilitators developed and nurtured a relationship of respect and mutual understanding of each others roles.
The general atmosphere within the group, throughout the consultation process, was filled with deep discussion and a continuous effort on the part of the children to be active in the process, lead to a range of issues being discussed and a deep exploration of their own understandings of children’s rights. Children were encouraged, but not forced, to engage in the process.

In the final session, one of the boys put on a magic show where he performed card tricks. This was enjoyed by both facilitators and participants. The children seemed to thoroughly appreciate the opportunity to share their opinions and to be listened to by their peers, the facilitators and that their ideas were going to contribute to tackling issues regarding children’s rights.