



Ombudsman for Children's Office Opening Statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

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We are the Ombudsman for Children's Youth Advisory Panel and we are here today to talk to you about our work.

Firstly, we want to tell you about our Pieces of Us series of reports, which form a part of the Ombudsman for Children's Office submission to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child.

The Youth Advisory Panel started work on the Children's Report to the United Nations in early 2021. Alongside the OCO we designed a survey which was sent to every school and over 100 youth groups in Ireland. We asked what children under the age of 18, thought was good, bad and what they would change about life in Ireland. Over 5,100 children answered the survey. We took the key findings from the survey and created questions that the OCO staff could ask in focus groups. We helped design the focus groups and select the children that would take part to make sure that the questions were age appropriate and that the OCO was talking to children we really wanted to hear from.

The OCO staff held 23 in-depth focus groups with over 100 children from all across Ireland. The children included, young children in early years' services, to children from Traveller and Roma backgrounds, children in detention, LGBTI children and also children in conflict with the law. After each focus group we co-analysed all of the data that the OCO collected. We decided what should be in the report to the UN, what it should look like and what it should be called. We called it Pieces of Us – because we felt connected to every single person and story in the report, and it represented all the children in Ireland.

The YAP then went to the United Nations and presented [Pieces of Us](#) to the Committee on the Rights of the Child. When we returned from Geneva, we also held meetings with Irish government officials to make sure that they knew what children were saying. When the Committee gave Ireland its Concluding Observations we knew that we wanted to find out what children thought about them. So we held a massive children's conference in Croke Park to get children's opinions on what they thought the government should do to implement the Concluding Observations. This event was called [Pieces of Us – What's Next?](#) Again we designed and delivered every part of the conference and the report, including analysing all of the data and designing the report.

Both Pieces of Us and Pieces of Us – What's Next? cover many themes, including; education, services for children and community and leisure. But we know that this Committee is interested in equality issues and particularly racism. So we are going to focus on these issues and recommendations.

Firstly, in Pieces of Us, children of colour described both overt and covert displays of racism in their everyday lives, which had an effect on speaking out against racism. Having experienced racism many

children did not feel safe. These children also felt that others view them as a homogenous group rather than considering their unique experiences of racism.

Children also experienced racist bullying at the hands of their peers in school. Some children also experienced racism from their teachers. Most of the children experienced micro-aggressions in school and in the wider community. The micro-aggressions came from teachers, peers and other adults. This led some children to feel ashamed or embarrassed of their culture, when their food or cultural expression was questioned. Racism was also at a systemic level, many children questioned the narrow content of some subjects like history and the lack of education on other cultures.

In Pieces of Us – What's Next? children made several strong recommendations for change and improvements for children of colour in Ireland. These include: improved teacher training, changes to curriculum and changes to the wider school environment.

The children had many suggestions about improving inclusion and diversity in school and how inequality and discrimination can be tackled. Firstly, children recommend more teacher training including mandatory courses on different cultures and anti-racism and unconscious bias training for teachers and guidance counsellors.

Children believe that there needs to be more diversity in the curriculum. They recommend changes to the CSPE, SPHE and history curriculums. They believe that there should be education on micro-aggressions, systemic racism and black history.

Children also suggested changes in the wider school environment. This includes; anti-racism policies in all schools, which are separate to anti-bullying policies. The children feel that there should be sanctions for students and teachers who breach anti-racism policies.

Additionally, children want to see greater representation of teachers from different races, cultures, religions and gender identities in schools. They also want greater acknowledgment of different cultures and religions throughout the school year, not just one off culture days.

We are looking forward to telling you more about these issues in our discussion and we would like to give you some quotes and examples from the children. We are also aware that you would like to discuss AI and we have many opinions we are eager to share.