

FINLAND [2] - 2012 CHILDREN'S SITE

A. BASIC INFORMATION

Country:	Finland
Title of initiative:	[FI] <i>Lasten sivut (Lasten asialla -projekti)</i> [EN] Children's Site
Coordinator/ Organization:	University of Jyväskylä, Agora Center
Key competences addressed:	[FI] <i>Kommunikointi äidinkielellä</i> [EN] Communication in the mother tongue; [FI] <i>Digitaalinen kompetenssi</i> [EN] Digital competence; [FI] <i>Sosiaalisuuteen ja kansalaisuuteen liittyvät taidot</i> [EN] Social and civic competence; [FI] <i>Tietoisuus kulttuurista ja kulttuurin ilmaisumuodot</i> [EN] Cultural awareness and expression;
Type of initiative and channels used for implementation (e.g. curriculum reform introduced through legislation etc.)	The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) introduced to children through a website, maintenance and development of the website. The website is related to the work of the ombudsman for Children in Finland.
Partners:	Ombudsman for Children in Finland
Scope: (student/teacher/school level; local/regional/national)	Elementary school students National
Learning context: (formal or non-formal)	The website can be utilized both in the formal and non-formal contexts. There are for example several classes who actively participate in the activities related to the website.
School education level/s: (primary, lower secondary, upper secondary)	Primary, also early childhood education to some degree.
Target groups:	Primary school aged children, their teachers and parents.
Time frame: (start and end date)	2006 – on-going
Relevant links:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Ombudsman for children in Finland: www.lapsiasia.fi/en/frontpage · Children's Site: www.lastensivut.fi/

B. SUMMARY

The Children's Site is a website aimed at primary school students. The project is implemented at the Agora Center of the University of Jyväskylä, in partnership with the Ombudsman for Children in Finland in order to provide a forum for children to express themselves on issues affecting their daily life and to encourage their active participation. It serves as a communication tool for informing children about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in a child-friendly way, with the aim of promoting children's rights and supporting their participation.

The website acts as a platform for making a difference and as a forum for children and the youth by including them in decision-making processes that affect them, via the Ombudsman for Children in Finland. The website offers information on the everyday lives of children in contemporary Finland, illustrating the lives and everyday realities of children and the youth by linking the situation of Finnish children to the application of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

C. IN DEPTH INFORMATION

Rationale/contextual background/motivation for introducing the initiative/reform:

The aim of this website is to provide a channel for children to be able to express themselves on issues concerning them and to serve as a communication tool for informing children about the UNCRC in a child-friendly way. The website acts as a platform for making a difference and as a forum for children and the youth by including them in decision-making processes that affect them, via the Ombudsman for Children in Finland. The website offers information on the everyday lives of children in contemporary Finland, illustrating the lives and realities of children and young people by linking the situation of Finnish children to the application of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Objectives:

The goals of the site are:

- to promote children's rights and to enhance children's understanding on the issues affecting their daily life
- to encourage children's participation

Dimensions targeted by the initiative/reform (e.g. student curriculum, assessment, initial/in-service teacher education, school autonomy etc.):

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, participation of children.

Overall approach (e.g. holistic – existence of an overarching strategy, or targeted approach focusing on a specific dimension etc.):

The Children's Site is a forum that aims to increase children's awareness of their rights and to encourage their active participation in the issues affecting their daily lives.

Detailed explanation of the key competence/s concerned:

- Communication in the mother tongue: children are able to express their thoughts, feelings and opinions in written form
- Digital competence: children learn to use computer as a tool for communication
- Social and civic competences: children will gain information about democracy, justice, equality etc., children learn to be active in relation to the issues affecting their daily lives
- Cultural awareness and expression: through interactive themed pages children learn to express their opinions (e.g. on creativity, poverty etc.)

Specific subjects concerned or cross-curricular approach:

Cross-curricula approach: participatory citizenship and entrepreneurship; ICT skills / digital competence.

How the initiative/reform is being implemented (e.g. process followed, political commitment, consultation with stakeholders and their respective roles, incentives for stakeholders, dedicated funding, teaching material, definition of goals and standards, assessment and evaluation mechanisms, impact on teacher training/professional development and school practices/leadership, scaling-up approach, based on research/evidence? etc.):

The initiative, the website for children, was initiated by the ombudsman for children in Finland, who wanted to have a direct link with Finnish children and so contacted the Agora Center, University of Jyväskylä and together we agreed on the collaborative design of the website. The ombudsman has been committed to the continuous maintenance of the website and provided the resources (funding from Ministry of Social Affairs and Health) for Agora Center for the tasks of designing, maintaining and updating the website. Over the years, there has been also a network of schools around Finland, who has been active both in the co-design process as well as in the diverse uses of the website. The maintenance of the website is included into the research field Innovative learning environments at the Agora Center. This means, that the co-design and also the actual use of the website closely relates and is based on the research activities, methods, and themes in the research field.

Present stage/phase of implementation:

The first version of the website was designed in 2006. During these years there have been several updates to the website and also several cycles of user-driven design and user studies related to the website. The website can now be said to be functioning fully as part of an established practice, but nevertheless requires continuous updating of content, layout, and technological characteristics in order to attract users and ensure they continue to be involved in it.

Pedagogical issues (issues related to how key competences are being taught to students and how are teachers being prepared to teach them):

The website has ready-made content for children related to children's rights, but it also encourages children to produce their own content, which also opens up the perspective of children into their daily life. The aim is to design the website in pedagogically meaningful way i.e. at its best the use of the website gives children an embedded possibility to learn key competences. The teachers are guided to use of the website with the children.

What works well (to identify enablers):

- It gives children a virtual meeting place. It encourages children to express their thinking and experiences e.g. through writing and drawing.
- It is non-formal making it easily accessible.
- The website also provides teachers a forum through which they can inform and activate children in the issues related to children's rights and expression of their own opinions.

Challenges and how these are being addressed (to identify obstacles and solutions):

- The continuous challenge is increasing the amount of children using the website. The website could be better 'marketed' in Finland by diverse means (e.g. through media). We could have a wider network of active teachers, who would involve their classes as content producers of the website.
- On the other hand, the more children are involved in the use of the website, the more there is a need for maintenance of its content. There have been design attempts on making the website as user-friendly (easy to use, e.g. easy to add content) as possible in order for children themselves to be content producers. However, this has also resulted in inappropriate content. The maintenance of the website requires continuous evaluation about the diverse use of the website as well as the wishes of the children, in order to attract them.
- Risks of inappropriate use of site. The website is continuously under content maintenance and the inappropriate content is deleted / not included on the website.

Monitoring & evaluation so far/planned, and which methods are being used (e.g. internal/external quality assurance, inspection, national assessments, international tests, self-evaluation, formative or summative evaluations):

The website has been co-designed with children and teachers at primary schools according to the principles of user-driven design. This design process started at the beginning of the project and has continued through several phases of updating both the content as well as the layout of the website. In the diverse phases of this updating, the website has, thus, been evaluated by the users (children and teachers). Based on the evaluations, the website has been further developed. This has included the assessment of the diverse users and the meaning of the website for children, as well. The content, especially the content created by the users, is continuously assessed by the team (at the Agora Center and the office of child ombudsman) responsible for the content and technical maintenance of the website.

Impact (e.g. any planned impact assessment?):

See previous question: the impact assessment is included in the continuous process of co-design of the website.

Communication of the initiative/dissemination of outputs and activities:

- Dissemination of the website and its user experiences in e.g. seminars
- Spreading the information of the availability of the website for diverse school networks.
- Building a network of active schools who participate in the diverse activities of continuous co-design of the website as well as the practices related to the website (e.g. there is a soft toy called “Sisu cat” that travels to schools. Through the Sisu cat the classes present their daily lives and produce content for the web site.
- Visibility in the media
- Research articles

Next steps/follow-up:

The research case studies related to the uses and effects of website for children’s participation and understanding of children’s rights.

Continuous follow-up (at least twice a year) by the advisory board of the Children’s site.

Additional information:

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