



“My Opinion My Vote”

Educational needs and good practices of education/
awareness raising in the field of exercise of political
rights by people with Id

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INTRODUCTION

It is true that in the past and still in many countries, people with special needs were not asked or consulted when they had to plan and make decisions concerning their own lives (Frederickson and Cline 2002) and, in the vast majority of cases, these decisions were made for them. However, in the late twentieth century a unique phenomenon appeared in England known as 'Self-advocacy' (Buchanan and Walmsley 2006).

As Aspis (1997) says, there can be found many definitions of what self-advocacy means. One definition maintains that self-advocacy refers to an individual's capacity and ability to explain their own thoughts, opinions and interests. In this sense, it could be said that this term refers to the capacity of speaking for oneself. Thus, promoting self-advocacy, people with disabilities have a chance to express their points of view and their decisions concerning their own lives. Furthermore, as 'People First' (cited by Aspis 1997:648) argues, 'self-advocacy' includes:

- speaking up for yourself
- standing up for your rights
- making choices
- being independent
- taking responsibility for oneself

As Cavet and Sloper (2004) indicate, people with Learning Disabilities (LD) should be involved and participate actively in their decisions. However, it is necessary to understand the five levels of participation that Shier includes (cited by Cavet and Sloper 2004) which are: children are listened to, children are supported to express views, children's views are taken into account, children are involved in the decision-making process, and children share power and responsibility for decision-making. Thus, it is important for people with LD to become self-advocates, because then they are more likely to get those things that they want and that they wish for. In other words, promoting self-advocacy is a way to keep people with LD' dreams alive. Otherwise, if they can not ever choose what they want, they can not say what is important for them and they do not feel respected and trusted because nobody listens to them. Their lives can become defined by the theme of 'loss'

related to the loss of a dream and 'anger' related to the anger of being a victim (Manners and Carruthers 2006) and of not being listened to.

Even though self-advocacy is a widespread phenomenon in the field of disability, a situation whereby people with learning disabilities do not exercise their right to vote still exists. It can be hypothesized that this may be attributed to a lack of:

1. Awareness and education of people with LD themselves;
2. Awareness on the part of their relatives and careers;
3. Facilitating measures by public authorities

As Cohen (2006:35) states, 'disabled voters have long faced a history of obstacles in the exercise of their right to vote'. Therefore, for the most part, people with LD do not engage in political participation as electors, thereby not exercising their right to vote. However, there can be isolated instances whereby, particular families address the issue and as such those individuals with learning disability may exercise their right to vote. As Warnok (1978) argues, education should prepare all individuals with formal and informal skills in order to become participative members of society, and education is also 'an essential agent of socialisation, which is required for a society to survive' (Giddens cited by Shah et al 2004).

Therefore, the Associazione Italiana Persone Down (AIPD), the coordinator of this project, (*My Opinion My Vote*) has aimed to empower people with LD through active citizenship and participation in political rights. In other words, the project focuses, on one hand on the encouragement of people with LD to express their voice and to make them aware of their political rights and, on the other, on the awareness of all citizens.

In order to accomplish these aims and to be able to design, develop and test an educational programme, AIPD asked Ramon Llull University to prepare a template for the reporting of the survey. Therefore, Ramon Llull University has designed and coordinated the survey and drafted the research tool which aims to explore good educational practices in the field of exercise of political rights of people with LD in six different European countries. The countries involved in this project are Italy, Malta, Ireland, Hungary, Denmark and Spain.

Thus, the present paper tries to summarize the most relevant ideas from the survey. In doing so, it is organized in four main parts. Firstly, the principal aims of the study are presented. Secondly, the method used is briefly explained. Thirdly, it shows the results from the survey in two main blocks. On one hand, those results from the interviews and questionnaires addressed to the institutions and

schools; and on the other, those results from families' points of view. Finally, the third block of this report emphasizes some concluding comments and suggestions which try to contribute to the issue that the survey has addressed.

AIMS

As has been mentioned, the purpose of this study can be summarized as follows:

General/Main aims

- To explore good educational practices in the field of the exercise of political rights of people with LD.
- To explore institutions and families' perspectives on raising awareness on political rights of people with LD.

Specific aims

- To explore examples of good educational practices of awareness-raising on political rights of people with LD.
 - o To explore effective educational activities of different institutions.
 - o To explore significant material used to carry out effective educational practices.
 - o To examine effective educational practices on families.
 - o To examine the extent to which the right to vote is promoted to people with LD.
 - o To examine the extent to which the right to vote affects institutions' daily educational practices.
- To explore institutions and families' perspectives on raising awareness of political rights of people with LD.
 - o To explore the importance of, and reasons for, institutions and families to work on political rights for with people with LD.
 - o To know what families' feelings are about raising awareness on political rights of their children with LD.

METHOD

a. Sample and participants

A total of six European countries have participated in this research. These are Italy, Malta, Ireland, Hungary, Denmark and Spain. In order to get meaningful information from each of them, the sample of the present study involves both families with a child with LD and different schools and institutions that work with children with LD.

Table 1 shows the number of participants (organizations/schools and families) that have been involved in the present study. It is necessary to point out that the number of participants varies from one country to another according to their facilities and participant's involvement. However, as education in political rights is not considered a family matter in Denmark, it was irrelevant to interview families in Denmark. Thus, no interviews were conducted in this country.

Therefore, the participants of this study were as follows:

	Number of Organizations/schools	Number of Families
Italy	17	4
Malta	7	3
Ireland	15	15
Hungary	7	12
Denmark	15	0
Spain	14	15
TOTAL	75	49

Table 1. Participants of the study

Regarding the kind of institutions involved in this research, it is worth emphasizing that the professionals included were from private and public institutions, public mainstream schools, public special schools and training centers, Government-funded bodies, special schools and mainstream schools, training centers, disability organizations and umbrella bodies for organizations concerned with people with LD.

b. Tools

In order to get meaningful information about the political rights of people with LD, two main tools were used; questionnaires and interviews. These tools were used to gauge perceptions,

experiences and good educational practices from, on one hand, institutions and schools, and on the other, families. Thus, the use of two different tools for this research let the researchers get a general idea about the situation (with the questionnaires) and to explore in detail the individual experiences (with the interviews).

The questionnaires addressed to the schools contained eight questions; five of them were closed questions (answer - yes/no) and the other three were with multiple choice. Regarding the interview, it was made on a semi-structured interview format and it consisted of eleven questions.

The questionnaires and the interviews conducted with the families were designed in two different parts. On one hand, questions about families' beliefs and on the other, families' actions. It means that it was asked not only what families think but what they do to promote their children's' right to vote. Therefore, there were different questions for each of these parts. The main aim of doing so was to explore and identify not only good educational practices, but to explore the point of view of families of children with LD. Therefore, the questionnaire had a total of six questions (two of them about families' beliefs and four about families' actions). All of them were closed questions (answer - yes/no). Regarding the interviews, they were conducted in a semi-structured interview format and consisted of a total of 8 questions (one about families' beliefs and seven about families' actions).

c. Phases - Procedure

Once the questionnaires and the interviews were conducted, they were examined by all research partners. In doing so, a more significant analysis of them was made and some questions were rewritten and some questions were added. It also helped to check if the questions suggested answered to the research aims.

Keeping in mind that for most of the partners English is not the first language, this analysis helped all of them to understand the questions in the same way and to avoid misunderstandings.

Once the tools were ready, they were distributed to all partners and the fieldwork began. The way questionnaires and interviews were conducted was different according to each country's facilities. The three ways interviews and questionnaires were conducted were face to face, by email and by phone. As the project partners in Malta stated, it was better to carry out the interview and the questionnaire face to face, but some times it was impossible due to the tight time frame.

Once each partner had the results ready, they were sent to one of the partners, Spain, where the data was analyzed and the final report was prepared. Therefore, results were put together according to the questions and analyzed. As a significant number of the results were similar, the

three most repeated responses were picked out in order to write the final report. However, as some differences can be found between countries, we decided to include a section on the last report explaining them. This means that results show on one hand, the most relevant/general characteristics or ideas about our aims and on the other, those ideas or topics that differentiate the countries and that can help to improve actual educational practices in the field of the exercise of political rights of people with LD.

RESULTS

Before beginning to explain the results it is necessary to remark that results are presented in two parts. Firstly, general results from institutions and schools and secondly, general results from families. At the end of each of these parts, we include a section that tries to emphasize the main differences which were found between countries.

1. Schools and institutions

1.1 Schools and institutions – General results

Results are shown in six main areas; aims of the institution, areas to work on, activities, age of participants, strengths and weaknesses of educational activities and published materials.

Figure 1 shows that the majority of the institutions and schools understand political participation as a learning objective. In other words, it is considered an objective in their curriculums. Therefore, most of the institutions (68%) try to promote the right to vote in their daily educational practices.

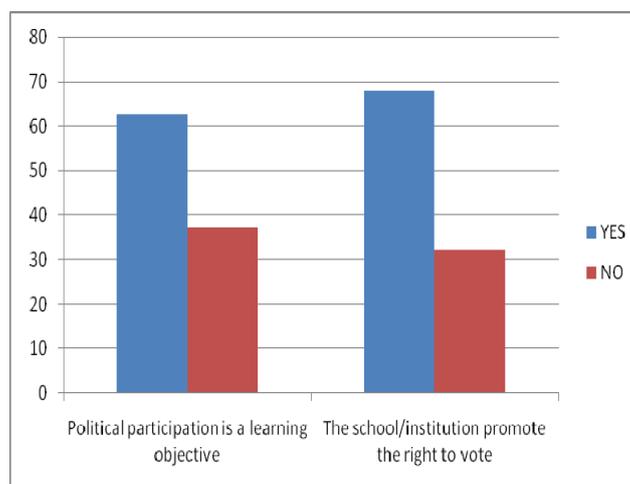


Figure 1

As they explain in the interviews, the three more important *aims* that they try to employ in their educational practices addressed to people with LD are a) to become a citizen who enjoys their rights, b) to empower them to form opinions and questions in connection with their own lives, developing their competencies, personalities and collective preparations and c) to develop a practical approach to educational practices that provide people with LD the chance to practice skills related to expressing their citizenship; such as public speaking and arguing. Furthermore, some institutions explain that it is important for people with LD to gain the skills and confidence, to be able

to speak up for themselves, and voice their opinions; therefore increasing the opportunities to take control of their own lives and to empower themselves. In doing so, it is necessary to promote equality among all citizens, because they have the same opportunities and rights as the rest of the population.

It is worth emphasizing that the majority of the institutions said that these aims are shared with all the staff. However, just to mention, there were a number of replies that the aims were not shared due to, for example, the fact that teachers are free to choose the approach that they find suitable. Even though they also confirm that most of them are not in liaison with any other institution that supports or advises their educational program, some worked with disability organizations or other non-profit organizations.

Working with people with LD about the issue of political rights, the institutions and schools think that the most important areas to work on are a) the rights and duties of the citizens and the responsibilities and reasons related to voting and one's role as a citizen (the right to vote), b) the state, its organization (the position, political structure and methods of functionality of the government) and knowledge of politics and c) democracy; the democratic processes in everyday life.

In relation to their everyday practices, they do explain that they usually work with people with LD during the academic year independently of when the elections take place (56%). However, some institutions and schools start a few months before the elections (10.66%) or a few weeks before (28%).

Data from the interviews suggest that in schools' and institutions' everyday practices, they usually involve activities such as group discussions about relevant topics, reading newspapers, role playing, practical activities (activities where they can actually vote, such as student and school council elections) and group discussion (where they can voice their own opinion and receive recognition from others). The institutions and schools confirm that this is due to the significant interest people with LD show in these kinds of activities. Data from the questionnaires confirms that fact (role play 50.66%, focus group 28% and purpose-made teaching materials 41.33%). Furthermore, they also say that the most useful and effective activities are role play games (specifically mock elections), educational visits to government buildings, group discussion and activities using visual aids such as videos.

It seems necessary to observe that most of the practices are addressed to people with LD older than 20 years old (53.33%). **Figure 2** shows the age group that educational practices are addressed to. This age group category includes individuals between 12 and 16 years old, 16 and 20 years old and 20 years plus individuals.

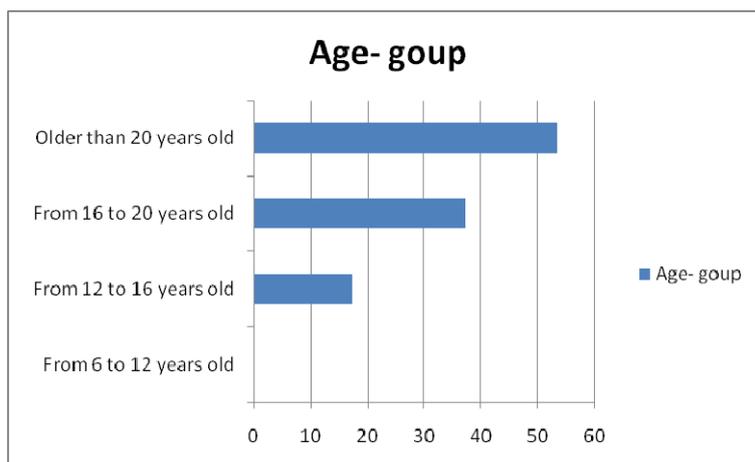


Figure 2

In the interviews, schools and institutions explain some of the *strengths and weaknesses of their educational activities/practices*. The most relevant strengths are a) the users are the real protagonists (teaching self determination), b) interesting and unexplored topics are developed, and c) exchanges with other schools or associations are common. However, they remind us that the most significant weaknesses they have to face are a) this topic isn't organized in a well-framed educational program, b) the time during the school year dedicated to this topic is not sufficient and c) a lack of available material and resources for such programmes.

The majority of respondents remarked that they did not find any *published materials useful* in this topic, indicating that there are not enough material/programmes currently available. This opinion is also expressed in the questionnaires. 92% of the people who answered think that there are not enough published materials. Only three works on the topic have been indicated from all of the research:

- A mainstream school noted that a book called "Impact" was useful in Ireland.
- "I have an opinion" program, "I go to the Minister" program, "Equal Hungary" project in Hungary.
- The work of ÉFOÉSZ (Hungarian Association for Persons with Intellectual disability) in Hungary.

1.2 Schools and institutions – Differences between countries

In order to explore the differences between countries, these differences will be presented in two main parts. Firstly, results from the interviews will be presented through four main areas: aims of the institution and rationale for teaching political rights, the main areas to work on, activities and strengths and weaknesses of the methods and activities. Secondly, results from the questionnaire will be shown.

1.2.1 Differences between countries from the interviews

Differences are shown in four main areas and per country. In doing so, specific differences can be seen. Results from each country can be specified as it follows:

Aims of the schools and institution and rationale for teaching political rights:

- *Italy*: They believe that people with LD can be aware of their role as active citizens and people with LD should be seen as protagonists in their society (equality among all citizens).
- *Ireland*: It is necessary to teach children with LD the responsibility that comes with democratic duties and create an awareness of their rights.
- *Malta*: They believe that people with LD must gain the skills and confidence necessary to be able to speak up for themselves and voice their opinions. Therefore, it is necessary to present information related to political issues as objectively as possible in order to reduce the probability of people with LD adopting certain political perspectives as a result of being influenced by prejudices related to other's opinions about politics.
- *Spain*: They think that people with LD have the same opportunities and rights as the rest of the population and should participate in society. Thus, it is necessary to make their voice heard.
- *Hungary*: People with LD should practice their civic rights, following the UN Convention that ensures the freedom of the will of intellectually disabled people through political participation.
- *Denmark*: Their main aims are to promote independent adult life, self determination, involvement and respect. People with LD should participate actively in society

The main areas to work on:

- *Italy*: The right to vote, the state and its organization and democracy.
- *Ireland*: Awareness of social & local issues, the right to vote and the concept of politics
- *Malta*: Knowledge about politics and democracy, the State and the characteristics of democracy and basic choices of everyday life.
- *Spain*: The right to vote, the rights and duties of the citizens and knowledge about politics and democracy.
- *Hungary*: Family rights, forming an opinion of people with LD and democracy and elections.
- *Denmark*: Self determination, democratic process and knowledge about politics and democracy.

Useful activities for people with LD

- *Italy*: Group discussion, Role-play games and Internet and computer games.

- *Ireland*: Educational visits to government buildings, role-play and information sessions with local representatives.
- *Malta*: Activities using visual aids (such as videos), practical activities and activities where people with LD learn to voice their own opinion (such as public speaking).
- *Spain*: Role-play, information sessions with local representative, and educational visits to government buildings.
- *Hungary*: Campaigns, role-play and practical activities (such as meetings with politicians).
- *Denmark*: Activities that make things specific and visual (such as interviewing and visiting politicians) and one-to-one teaching.

Strengths and weaknesses of the methods and activities

Strengths:

- *Italy*: Exchanges with other schools or associations, and that the users are the real protagonists facing an unfamiliar topic.
- *Ireland*: The curriculum is flexible and the staff of the institutions/schools can control how much or little depth a given topic is covered in.
- *Malta*: Giving the opportunity for people with LD to gain confidence to voice their own opinion and learn about rights. About the activities they use, they explain that help to become more aware while they have fun.
- *Spain*: Empowering self advocacy and the fact that the participants are the real protagonists.
- *Hungary*: The opportunity to let people with LD have knowledge about political rights.
- *Denmark*: The fact that students are given the tools to act in democratic processes, making them clear why their participation is important

Weaknesses

- *Italy*: The topic is not organized in a well-framed educational program, the time during the school year is not enough and the meetings with parents on this topic are not scheduled.
- *Ireland*: There is a lack of a definitive guide for working on the issue with people with LD.
- *Malta*: During activities that involve active participation, at times it is difficult for students to focus on one topic. Furthermore, there is also a lack of available material about such programmes and so there aren't enough resources to suit all the varieties of LD different people have.
- *Spain*: There are many variable learning difficulties but no program which accounts for all of this diversity.
- *Hungary*: The funding of the project after the initial period (continuity) and the difficulties of expanding it to the whole country.

- *Denmark*: The group of students is often very heterogeneous which makes it difficult to reach each student at the same time. Furthermore it is difficult to find materials that are not too childish /targeted people with LD

1.2.2 Differences between countries from the questionnaires

Figure 3 represents the percentage of countries answers¹. Four relevant topics were asked, these are as follow:

- The topic of political participation is a learning objective on school's or institution's curriculum.
- The school or the institution promotes the right to vote to people with LD in their daily educational practices.
- They believe there are enough published materials.
- They believe the educational practices they carry out are appropriate to students with LD.

	Political participation as a learning objective in the curriculum		Daily activities promote the right to vote		Enough materials published		The activities are relevant and appropriate to students	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Italy	41.17%	58.82%	70.58%	29.41%	5.88%	94.11%	76.47%	23.52%
Ireland	100%	0%	73.33%	26.66%	13.33%	86.66%	86.66%	13.33%
Malta	85.71%	14.28%	71.42%	28.57%	0%	100%	57.14%	42.85%
Spain	21.42%	78.57%	21.42%	78.57%	0%	100%	78.57%	21.42%
Hungary	71.42%	28.57%	100%	0%	0%	100%	100%	0%
Denmark	73.33%	26.66%	86.66%	13.33%	13.33%	80%	80%	6.66%

Figure 3

From this data some results are especially meaningful. As shown, most of the countries have listed political participation a learning objective; such as Ireland. However, it illustrates that Italy and Spain do not consider it a learning objective. Therefore, it seems necessary to point out that most of the schools and institutions promote the right to vote in their daily activities; except Spain (21.42%).

Significant differences are found on the topic of the activities. It is shown that most of the countries believe that their activities are appropriate to people with LD; but for instance, nearly half (42.58%) of Maltese schools and institutions do not think so.

¹ Note: not all countries returned the same number of questionnaires. Thus, the number of questionnaires returned was as follows: Italy (17), Ireland (15), Malta (7), Spain (15), Hungary (7) and Denmark (15).

2. Families

2.1 Families – General results

Results are shown in two main sections. Each section has different parts, as follows:

- Families' beliefs
 - o Political participation and the meaning of the vote.
- Families' action
 - o Talking about politics.
 - o Discussion of elections results.
 - o Effective activities.
 - o Improvement of child's quality of life.

2.1.1 FAMILIES' BELIEFS

Figure 4 shows what families think about the *importance of political participation for people with LD* and the *understanding of people with LD about their vote*. It seems that the majority of the families (87.75%) believe that it is important for people with LD to participate in elections. As they explain in the interviews, families think that it is important to work on political participation with people with LD due to a) the fact that individuals should know his/her rights and duties as citizens (the child should have the right to vote, have a choice and be able to express it like everyone else) and b) for his/her voice to be heard as an equal citizen. The figures also illustrate that most of the families (71.43%) think that their child, youngster or adult with LD understands the importance of their vote in the elections; whereas 30.61% do not believe so.

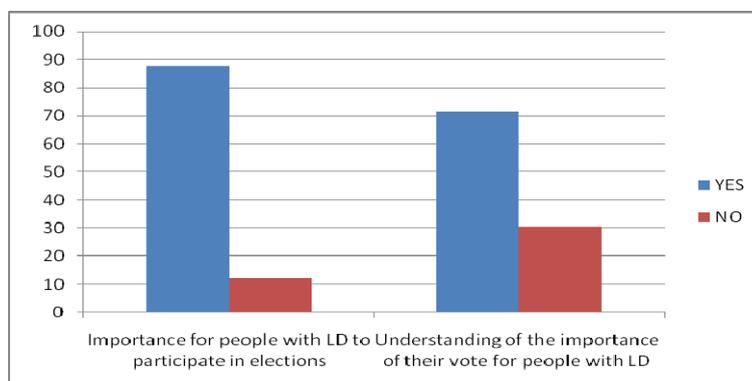


Figure 4

2.1.2 FAMILIES' ACTIONS

If we focus on the “actions” part of the interviews and questionnaires addressed to the families, we can observe that the majority (85.71%) explain the important role politicians play in everyday life (**figure 4**). Families also report that they start speaking with their child with LD about the issue of elections when he/she had reached the required age to vote (i.e. 18 years) or in the first elections he/she could vote in. It was also found that some families start speaking about this topic when the individual with LD brought it up at home. They also said that they try to speak about this as objectively as possible in order to try to reduce imposing personal beliefs and further decrease influences and effects of adopting cultural prejudices.

Data from interviews explain that most of the families talk about a) how to vote (practical aspects of how to vote correctly by not making certain mistakes to ensure validity of the vote), b) the programs of political parties and c) the EU and all its associated factors. Furthermore, the majority of the families who were interviewed said that when elections come, they go together to the polling station.

Figure 5 also displays to what extend families discuss the elections results with their child with LD. It is observed that families do not place the same emphasis on this that they do when explaining the importance of the politicians' role. In this case (discussion of elections results), only 57.15% carry out a discussion or conversation with their child with LD about the election results; whereas 42.85% do not explain anything about it. During the interviews it was found that some of those families who do discuss the results do explain the importance and reason for a particular party winning and the difference in vote numbers allocated to each party.

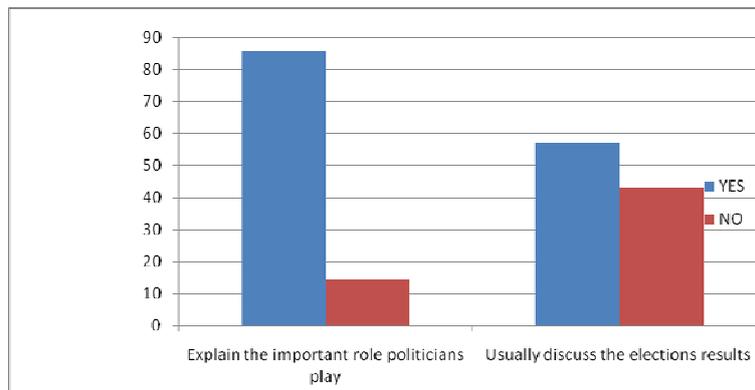


Figure 5

In order to improve people with LD' understanding of political participation, families emphasize some activities that they found effective. The three more relevant activities found in the interviews were:

- Explanation of how to vote using fac-simile of a ballot paper.
- Participation in meetings of political branches (accompanying the parent to a political session where a leader of a party gave a speech).
- Encouragement / advise to watch news and pre-election debates on television (he/she judges the politicians according to his/her emotional impressions after a TV programme) or explaining the roles of each political leader whilst showing their photos in order to help the child recognize these people when they are presented in the media

It is important to mention that half of the families (51.02%) share their experiences with someone else. In particular they share them with relatives, friends, family or other families who have children with LD.

Finally, some families think that promoting political rights to people with LD does indeed improve their quality of life. At the same time, there were a number who did not agree with this. To sum up the relevant ideas about this question, it was found that:

- Those who think so believe that people with LD consider themselves to be more adult and more responsible when it comes to exercising human rights that all members of society have. Moreover, they feel part of society because they contributed to an important social decision, and resultantly felt equal to other people. As a result of this, voting has improved the quality of his/her participation in social or public life.
- Those who did not think so, express that their quality of life could be truly improved if the parents do not impose their own views on their children with LD as that choice might even be unbeneficial to the child themselves. Reducing this may therefore enable the child to make their own informed decision and so eventually give them the courage and skills to make other similarly important decisions in their life. Furthermore, families manifest that politicians must take into account the rights and life conditions of people with LD without their votes.

2.2 Families - Differences between countries

Once again, in order to explore the differences between countries, these differences will be presented in two main parts. Firstly, results from the interview will be presented through four main sections: the importance of work on political participation, talking about politics and sharing experiences, examples of effective activities and improvement of child's quality of life. Secondly, results from the questionnaire will be shown.

2.2.1 Differences between countries from the interviews

Differences are shown in four main parts and per country. In doing so, specific differences can be seen. Results from each country can be summarized as follows:

The importance of work on political participation

- *Italy*: Families think that to vote is a right of everyone and that people with LD should be able to practice their right to vote.
- *Ireland*: In order to boost people with LD's self esteem, and for his/her voice to be heard as an equal citizen.
- *Malta*: The child deserves the opportunity to understand and to be aware of their political rights and should have the right to vote. Moreover, they have the opportunity to make decisions according to what they believe.
- *Spain*: In order to empower self advocacy, and to encourage people with LD to know their rights and duties as a citizens.
- *Hungary*: In order for his/her voice to be heard as an equal citizen. However, four families believe that they do not feel it is important.

Talking about politics and sharing experiences

- *Italy*: Families start talking about the issue when the child is 18 years old and for the first elections. Even though some families share experiences with relatives and friends, there are some families who do not.
- *Ireland*: Families start talking about the issue when the child reaches the required age to vote and during the late teenage years (i.e. 16/17 years). Moreover, families start talking when the individual with LD brings up the topic. In relation to sharing experiences, nearly half of the families share experiences with others.
- *Malta*: Started discussing this issue a few months prior to elections. Even though most families do not share experiences, one of them does. This family stated that they shared experiences with another family that has a child with LD
- *Spain*: Start talking about the issue when the child reaches the required age to vote and when the child with LD brought up the topic. Families share their own experiences with friends, and other families.
- *Hungary*: After the 18th birthday and during the elections. Only 40% of the parents share their experiences with other parents who are involved in the issue.

Example of effective activities

- *Italy*: Explanation of how to vote using face-simile of a ballot paper and participation in meetings of political branches
- *Ireland*: Encouragement to watch news and pre-election debates on television and accompanying to polling station at 16/17 years of age.
- *Malta*: Explaining the roles of each political leader whilst showing their photos and a visit from a political leader who explains certain political issues.
- *Spain*: Watching the news together and looking at the different ballot papers that arrive at home.
- *Hungary*: Attendance at a political session where a leader of a party is speaking, and watching TV programmes in order to develop their own emotional impressions and judgments.

Improvement of child's quality of life

- *Italy*: Families think that voting makes their child with LD feel more mature and more responsible. Thus, it improves child's quality of social and public life.
- *Ireland*: Most of the families think that it does improve child's quality of life.
- *Malta*: Families believe it does improve child's quality of life. As they argue, they feel a part of society as they contributed to an important social decision. Thus, they exercised a human right
- *Spain*: Many families think that it does improve child's quality of life. However, there were a number of respondents who did not know if it would really improve it.
- *Hungary*: Even though 60% of the families did not think it improves a child's quality of life, they think that politicians must take into account the rights and life conditions of people with LD

2.2.2 Differences between countries from the questionnaires

Figure 6 represents the percentage of countries answers². As shown, five relevant topics were asked. These are as follow:

- Parents believe that it is important for people with LD to participate in elections.
- Parents believe that their child with LD understands the importance of his/her right to vote.
- Parents explain to the child the important role politicians play.
- Parents discuss elections results with the child with LD.
- Parents share experiences and feelings with someone else about a person with LD's participation in elections.

² Note: not all countries carried out the same number of questionnaires. Thus, the number of questionnaires administrated was as follow: Italy (4), Ireland (15), Malta (3), Spain (14), Hungary (12) and Denmark (0).

	ATTITUDES				ACTION					
	It is important to participate in elections		The child with LD understands		Explain to the child the important role politicians play		Discuss elections results		Share experiences and feelings with others	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Italy	100%	0%	75%	25%	100%	0%	50%	50%	50%	50%
Ireland	100%	0%	80%	20%	100%	0%	53.33%	46.66%	66.66%	33.33%
Malta	100%	0%	66.66%	33.33%	66.66%	33.33%	66.66%	33.33%	33.33%	66.66%
Spain	86.66%	13.33%	73.33%	26.33%	100%	0%	66.66%	33.33%	60%	40%
Hungary	66.66%	33.33%	58.33%	50%	50%	50%	50%	50%	50%	50%

Figure 6

As shown, most of the parents who responded to the questionnaire believe that it is important for the child with LD to participate in elections and that their child understands the importance of his/her vote. In relation to the second question (the child understands the importance of his vote) significant differences are found in Malta and Hungary where nearly half of the parents interviewed think they do not understand it. The percentage of Hungarian families sums a total of 108.33% due to a family who answered both; which means that they were not sure if the child with LD does or does not understand the importance of a vote.

At the same time, most of the parents explain to their child the important role that politicians play as it is in the case of Italy, Ireland and Spain (100%); conversely, in Malta and Hungary the parents that explain the role of politicians are 66.66% and 50% respectively.

As can be clearly seen, nearly half of the families interviewed in all countries discuss election results with their child. Half of the parents who responded to the questionnaire do discuss them (Italy 50%, Ireland, 53.33%, Hungary, 50%), while the other half do not (Italy 50%, Ireland, 46.66%, Hungary, 50%).

These results are similar to those found when parents were asked about the sharing of experiences with third parties. Thus, nearly half of the families do so, and the other half do not. As shown in Figure 6, the families who did share were about 50% in Italy, 66.66% in Ireland, 33.33% in Malta, 60% in Spain and 40% in Hungary.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, the following is a list of some of the most relevant and important findings from the research. The comparison of data between countries was carried out to discover variances in general trends across Europe.

1. Institutions and schools

- a) *Aims of the institution:* The majority of the schools and institutions try to improve political participation amongst their students. In doing so, children can be empowered to form an opinion and can become a citizen that enjoys his/her rights.
- b) *Areas to work on:* Most of the schools think that when we start working on political rights, it is necessary to work on different issues such as the rights and responsibilities of the citizens, the state and its organization.
- c) *Actual activities:* Even though it is possible to use many kinds of activities, the most effective ones are role play games, educational visits to government buildings and group discussion.
- d) *Age of the participants:* Most of the educational practices refer to young adults instead of children. It means the institutions and organizations think that it is worth working on this issues from 12 years old onwards.
- e) *Strengths and weaknesses of educational activities and published materials:* Despite the many benefits of working on political participation (such as teaching self determination), schools and institutions still face many challenges (such as the lack of a structured educational program).
- f) *Published materials:* Across all countries there are not enough materials/programmes available. However, there are some interesting attempts in the cases of Ireland and Hungary.

2. Families

- a) *Political participation and the meaning of the Vote:* Most families think that it is important for people with LD to participate in elections. In doing so, they can have a better understanding of their rights and duties. Furthermore, the majority also believes that they do understand the meaning of their vote.
- b) *Talking about politicians roles:* Families usually explain the importance of politicians' roles in everyday life. However, they do not start talking about elections till children reach the required age to vote. It has been illustrated that, when elections come, families talk about how to vote and political programs around the time of upcoming elections.

- c) *Discussion of the election results*: Not many families discuss the election results with their children with LD. However, those who do so explain many aspects such as the difference in voting numbers, and the importance and reasons for a particular party winning.
- d) *Effective activities*: Families suggest there are many significant and effective activities to work on political participation with children with LD such as participation in political meetings.
- e) *Improvement of child's quality of life*: The majority of the families believe that prompting political participation improves a child's quality of life because they feel part of society as they are contributing to important social decisions.

From all of the collected data it is safe to conclude that it is necessary to work on political participation with children with LD. It seems that working on political participation may help people with LD to improve their knowledge of how society works and the importance of each citizen's vote. It is worth emphasizing, that even though many effective activities were suggested, many schools and institutions may struggle to work on political participation due to a lack of published materials. Finally, it needs to be said that many families believe that work on political participation contributes to an improvement in a child's quality of life. With that in mind, families need to explain and discuss all election processes in everyday life.

The way ahead - future directions

The schools and institutions who took part in this research have contributed a number of suggestions as to how to move ahead with promoting political participation for individuals with LD. The following are some of those suggestions on how to promote the right to vote for people with LD:

- a. Less taught lessons and more user involvement. To help teachers to improve the ways in which they inform students about democracy and to increase practical activities utilized especially in relation to providing people with LD more opportunities to make decisions.
- b. Publications which help people with LD to easily understand political topics, such as providing more structured visual and audio resources.
- c. This topic must involve families. To increase interaction with the families of people with LD in order to help them become aware of the importance of their children becoming informed about voting and related subjects.
- d. To be opened to other institutions. To increase collaborative practices with other schools that also utilize inclusion measures.

Furthermore, all people interviewed on this research said that they would be extremely interested in experimenting with new methods/activities which may arise from the "My Opinion My Vote" project.

Even though the use of these methods will take time to integrate adequately current teaching practices, the ways in which they will be used are:

- a. Adapting the methods according to the situation and various group dynamic aspects such as type of group and the way in which the group develops.
- b. The materials will be used if they can be realistically applied in various situations.

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Annex 1: INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW – SCHOOLS AND INSTITUTIONS

- 1- What is your rationale for working on political rights with people with LD?
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
- 2- What educational practices do you aim to employ?
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
- 3- Are these aims shared with all the staff in the institution?
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
- 4- What areas do you think are the most important when you start working on political rights with people with LD? (Example; the vote, the State, democracy, etc.)
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
- 5- Are you in liaison with any other organization that supports and/or advises you in carrying out this programme?
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
- 6- Of the activities you usually carry out, which ones do you think people with LD have the most interest in?
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
- 7- Which activity do you think is the most useful and effective when addressing the right to vote with people with LD?
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
- 8- Which materials or programmes that have been published do you think are important to emphasize?
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
- 9- Could you list the strengths and weaknesses of the methods/activities utilised relative to this subject? How do you think you could improve the actual educational activities/programme in order to promote the right to vote to people with LD?
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
- 10- Would you be interested in experimenting with new methods/activities as proposed by the "My Opinion My Vote" project?
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.

OVERALL CONCLUSION – (no more than 1 page)

INTERVIEW – FAMILIES

Beliefs

- 1- Why did you believe / feel that it is important to work on political participation with your son/daughter?
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.

Action

- 1- How and when did you start speaking on the issue of elections with your child with LD?
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
- 2- Did you share your feelings or experiences with someone (school/neighbour/any association or institution...)?
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
- 3- What did you speak about with your child?
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
- 4- When elections come, what do you do with your child with LD?
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
- 5- Do you explain election results? (For example, do you talk about a given political party who were victorious and what the consequences of such a result could be?)
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
- 6- Could you give an example of any activity you carried out with your child with LD that you feel is worth emphasizing / OR you found effective?
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
- 7- Do you think that exercising his/her political rights (i.e. by voting or other activities) has improved your child's quality of life?
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.

OVERALL CONCLUSION (no more than 1 page)

Annex 2: QUESTIONNAIRES

“My Opinion My Vote” Grundtvig multilateral project.

**QUESTIONNAIRE AND INTERVIEW TO SCHOOLS AND
INSTITUTIONS**

GENERAL INFORMATION

Name of the institution:

Address:

Web site:

Which of the following define best your institution/association:

- Mainstream school
- Special school
- Disability organization
- Vocational training centre
- Other (specify):

QUESTIONNAIRE

- 1- Is education in relation to political participation a learning objective on your curriculum?
 - Yes
 - No
- 2- In your daily educational practices, do you promote the right to vote with people with Learning Disabilities (LD)?
 - Yes
 - No
- 3- Approximately which age-group do you carry out teaching activities related to political participation with? From 12 to 16 years old
 - From 16 to 20 years old
 - 20 + years old
- 4- When do you usually start working on issues related to political rights with people with LD?
 - Few months before the elections
 - Few weeks before the elections
 - during the academic year independent of the elections
- 5- What kind of activities do you carry out?
 - Focus group
 - Role play
 - Purpose-made teaching materials
 - Paper (printed materials)
 - Computer (Use of I.T)
 - Others: _____
- 6- Presently, do you consider there are enough published materials available in order to work on this subject with people with LD?
 - Yes
 - No
- 7- Do you consider that the educational practices you carry out are appropriate/relevant for your students with LD?
 - Yes
 - No
- 8- Would you like to emphasise which activity you consider most important? (When teaching re: political participation?)
 - Yes
 - No