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Author(s): Dimitra Hartas and Geoff Lindsay

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Young People's Involvement in Service Evaluation and Decision Making

Dimitra Hartas

Institute of Education, University of Warwick

&

Geoff Lindsay

Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research (CEDAR),

University of Warwick

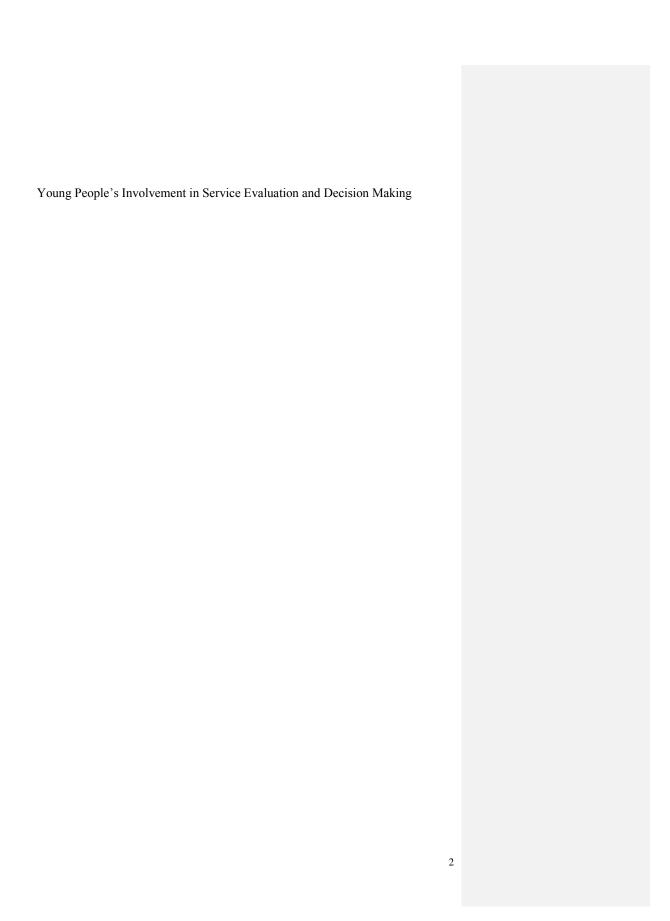17/11/10

Address for Correspondence:

Dr Dimitra Hartas

Associate Professor in Special Educational Needs

Institute of Education

University of Warwick

Coventry, CV4 7AL

UK

Young People's Involvement in Service Evaluation and Decision Making

Abstract

This study examined young people's decision making on issues that affect their life, i.e., bullying, across different contexts (eg, family, peer, school) and involvement in evaluating the availability and effectiveness of services for young carers, young people with disabilities and their families. Key aims of this study were to offer young people a platform to evaluate existing services and make recommendations towards their improvement and to discuss ways of tackling bullying at school. Focus groups were formed with 54 young people who had experienced challenges due to bullying, learning difficulties / disabilities, and caring responsibilities for family members with disabling conditions, and discussions about services and decision making on issues that affect their life were facilitated. The findings point to a sense of agency in young people's life with regard to evaluating and negotiating services and offering suggestions for their improvement within their family and peers. However, in their view, their decisions regarding bullying exerted limited influence within the school context. These results raised interesting issues about young people's capacity to evaluate services and the contextual influences on their involvement in decision making.

Key Words: Bullying; Youth Participation, Children's Rights, Young People's Voice

Young People's Involvement in Service Evaluation and Decision Making

Introduction

Increasingly, children's views are sought as users of services and consumers of products. Consultation has been the most commonly used mode for engaging young people in service evaluation. Consultation involves seeking users' views about the quality, structure and function of services often initiated and implemented by stakeholders. Consultation can be influential as long as it is not a one-off event but embedded in young people's contexts, and with transformative potential. At present, many voluntary and public sector organizations are keen on developing participatory consultation methods, and there is precedence for such methods that include young people in developing countries (see Ackerman et al., 2003 for a review).

Young people's involvement in evaluating the planning, delivery and effectiveness of services has multiple aims. First, it has the potential to enhance service accountability by improving services and ensuring that resources are deployed and allocated appropriately. Secondly, this form of involvement builds capacity for individuals to align themselves with the culture of an organization, e.g., school, and increase their sense of ownership. Thirdly, although instrumental in its value, rationality and purpose (Bragg, 2007), young people's involvement with service evaluation is likely to encourage them to take policy initiatives to seek to improve service effectiveness within their communities. This form of participation is characterised by pragmatism in the ways in which young people engage with schools, with the expectation that the more involved they are the more likely it is for the organization to work effectively (Du Gay, 1997).

Although current policy shifts are a positive step towards encouraging young people's participation, some are embedded in market and institutional cultures, stimulating a corporate interest in participation. Certain forms of user-led consultations have created a new culture of participation fuelled by market forces (Fielding, 2001). Placing an instrumental and market value on participation by situating it within a market culture is

likely to create a "hierarchy of rights" (Kobayashi and Ray, 2000: 402). This may result in some public institutions perceiving rights, such as engaging in decision making, as not being a priority.

Young People's Participation and Decision Making

Legislative frameworks such as the Children Act 1989, Health and Social Care Act 2001, Education Act 2002, Learning to Listen Core Principles (English Children and Young Persons Unit –CYPU-, 2001) and the Children's National Service Framework reflect a growing shift in UK policy to involve children and young people in decisions. The Core Principles of Participation offer guidance to governmental departments about participation, providing a framework for an effective involvement of children and young people in the design and provision of policies and services (CYPU, 2001).

The Green Paper Every Child Matters emphasized children's participation to express their views about developing policies and services (DfES, 2003). This has led local authorities and other public sector agencies to consult young people. For instance, the Children's Fund, aimed at children aged 5-13 at risk of social exclusion, sets participation as a requirement to ensure that children's views influence the shape, delivery and subsequent evaluation of services (Coad and Lewis, 2004). The Education Act 2002 places a duty on schools and Local Authorities to consult pupils about the decisions that affect them. The Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships are required to seek children and young people's preferences for childcare and other support services (Clark, McQuail and Moss, 2003). Finally, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) school inspection framework requires schools to seek the views of young people.

Although there is a surge in developing and implementing policies to support young people's participation, some policies may compromise it. Contradictory policies and practices around diversity, capability building and power inequality are likely to have a negative effect on young people's right to participation, which, under certain circumstances, may be used as a tool of social control, a way of disguising conventional

power relationships built around adult agendas (Fielding, 2001). Young people's participation as a means to promote adults' agendas should be transparent, especially when subsequent decisions have implications for children, their families and communities. As Stephens (1994: 12) states

> 'There are important critical questions to be asked about hidden forms of cultural imperialism underlying some children's participation models, for example those that would use children's participation projects as points of entry into and catalyst for change within families and local communities, without sufficient regard for the meanings and textures of local worlds.'

Similarly, Lansdown stresses that 'bringing children in to promote an adult agenda is at best tokenistic and at worst exploitative' (2001: 17). She argues that it is against the principles of participation for children to become involved in something without having taken part in formulating the agenda. Rather, children should be encouraged to participate and offer views about issues that are of direct interest and significance to them.

Are young people genuinely listened to?

Often, children's views are not sought and, when they are, they are not acted upon, highlighting the need for moving from 'just listening' to participative decision making where young people's voice influences decision making (Alderson, 2000). Article 12 of the United Nations Convention for the Rights of a Child (UNCRC) requires that children's views should be given 'due weight', stressing the 'right to participate' and 'the right to be consulted'. A semantic analysis of these terms and phrases highlights a number of inconsistencies, accentuating the controversy about its applicability and effectiveness.

Implicitly, the phrase 'due weight' suggests that children's voices may be heard but not genuinely listened to, particularly if they have a disability (Lewis, Parsons and Robertson, 2006). Moreover, the phrases 'right to participate' and 'right to be consulted'

are used interchangeably, without drawing a distinction between consultation and participation, and the ways in which they are shaped by power structures. The notion of children's views about 'all matters affecting the child' raises important questions about who decides what matters affect children and under what circumstances decisions are made and by whom.

Opportunities for young people to engage in decisions towards policy development require, as Article 12 states, 'consistent and on-going arrangements'. The procedures and the systems required to make 'consistent and on-going arrangements' are expected to be transparent and legally binding. Article 42 requires States Parties to 'make the principles and provisions of the convention widely known, by appropriate and active means, to adults and children alike'. However, raising awareness about the convention alone may not be sufficient to offer young people opportunities for participatory decision making.

Young people's participation reflects ambivalence in the ways it is negotiated through marginalization discourses or tokenistic gestures towards inclusion. The reasons for the limited influence of young people in decision making and policy development are complex, ranging from lack of resources and appropriate staff training to dominant views about children's lack of competence and invisibility (Lundy, 2007). Adults' uncertainty about children's competence may be due to a lack of procedural systems that incorporate children's views (for example, having a system in place to disseminate the minutes from school councils to the governors' meeting, as well as the actions taken). The key issue is not participation or no participation, but whether adults are genuinely attentive and responsive to young people's perspectives, and aware of the plurality and polyphony of their voices.

For the purpose of this study, young people, eg, young carers, individuals with disability, who had experienced many challenges in having a voice on issues that matter to them were recruited. Young carers, due to the daily pressures from their responsibilities, tend to have limited opportunities for decision making on services available to them. Young people's voice was examined by offering opportunities to them to evaluate services implemented at

school or in their communities to support them with the challenges they face. Specifically, young people expressed views with regard to evaluating existing services, eg, homework support for carers, anti-bullying strategies, and elaborated on the relevance of these services to their life. With regard to bullying, young people engaged not only in an evaluation of school-based strategies designed to tackle it but also in decision making to recommend strategies that were deemed to be effective by the young people themselves. The focus on bullying as an area for decision making was due to the centrality of bullying to most of these young people's life. Through initial informal conversations, issues related to bullying emerged, occupying a significant space among young people's concerns. Moreover, young people, who have experienced bullying in addition to other challenges such as disability or caring responsibilities, are likely to be 'doubly denied' in exercising their rights when adults question their competence and social / emotional maturity (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 1997: 334).

Methods

Sample

The project upon which this paper was based included fifty-four young people, aged between 11 and 16. The sample comprised 17 young carers (young carers group), 19 young people who had experienced bullying (had been bullied themselves and / or had witnessed bullying –bullying group) and 18 young people with learning difficulties / disabilities –LDD (LDD group). The LDD group comprised 15 children from special schools and 3 from mainstream schools. The majority of the young carers (12 out of 17) had caring responsibilities for siblings, with five of them looking after parents with disabling conditions. The young people who cared for siblings were part of a wider, informal support network, including parents and more able siblings, reducing their caring responsibilities. Among the five young people with caring responsibilities for their parents, two did not share responsibilities with siblings or their extended family, being the sole carers. Regarding the bullying group, 15 of the 19 participants reported having been bullied themselves.

The sampling technique used for this study was purposive, and the participants were recruited from youth centres in geographically diverse locations in the West Midlands (England). The organisers in several youth centres were contacted to negotiate access to groups that comprised randomly selected young people who faced certain challenges. Specifically, three groups of young carers, four groups of young people with experiences of bullying and four groups with children with LDD were formed in twelve different youth centres.

An informed consent from the participants was obtained before any data were collected. The young people were briefed orally offering a comprehensive description of the aims of the study, why they had been selected, what they will be asked to do, and what would happen to the findings, focusing on issues of confidentiality and anonymity. The informed consent was recorded by asking young people to sign a form stating the same information as that presented orally. Parental consent was not essential in this case in that the group organisers acted as *in loco parentis* and were present in the discussions. Moreover, the young people were competent to make a decision as to whether they wanted to be part of the group discussions.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were employed to collect qualitative data (see Appendix). An assumption that underlies focus groups is that knowledge is socially constructed, generated through social interactions, i.e., generative group interactions, where negotiating points of view and sharing perspectives take place (Punch, 2005). A major advantage of focus groups was that the moderator was able to observe the process whereby participants made private contributions public by formulating their views and attitudes through conversations with the rest of the group. The groups in this study were encouraged to engage in conversation with each other and, collectively, engage in discussions that took into account their diverse views about the issues raised. As such, participants' motivation was an important requirement to ensure that the contributions were genuine and sustained. Moreover, an atmosphere of mutual respect, where the individuals involved,

including the moderator, were non- judgemental was required. Consensus was never the goal of these focus groups.

Another advantage of focus groups was that it contextualizes the discussion and creates a public space by encouraging the participants to think beyond their own lives and thoughts. Participants were encouraged to move beyond the private sphere and, in so doing, were more likely to address possible inconsistencies in their thoughts and offer a better quality of data (Doble, 1987). Moreover, focus groups were considered to be an effective method for data collection on issues that affect young people who experience challenges in the form of caring responsibilities for family members, bullying or learning difficulties. By avoiding a question-response format, young people were offered the social and critical space to talk about their life in a non-judgmental way. This is particularly important in the light of concerns regarding the limited opportunities that young people have for genuine participation and involvement. Although not homogeneous, the focus groups were formed along certain characteristics of the participants, such as experiences of bullying, learning difficulties and caring responsibilities. Focus groups were deemed to be appropriate because they brought together young people who shared common experiences and were likely to be forthcoming and join the conversation. Because of the shared experiences, the interactions among the young people were not hierarchical but collaborative. Research shows that group conversations work best if members know each other and share similar characteristics and experiences, in that as the sociability among group members increases the tension is diffused (McNeish, 1999).

As a method of data collection, focus groups brought together around six people for approximately an hour and thirty minutes, depending on the needs of the participants. For children and young people who experienced complex needs, smaller focus groups of 3-4 participants were formed. The discussions started by setting the ground rules in terms of discussing issues regarding anonymity, stressing their voluntary nature. The discussions focused on issues regarding access to services and evaluation of their effectiveness, as well as young people's participation in decision making mainly regarding bullying. The

goals of the focus group were discussed, as well as the moderator's responsibilities and expectations from the participants. Moreover, the participants were informed that they were not expected to disclose anything above their comfort level, and that if they wanted to talk privately they could contact the moderator to discuss the issue further. As a moderator, it was crucial to ensure that everyone in the group had opportunities to express their views and was aware of the possibility of bias in implicitly or explicitly favouring certain responses over others, as well as considering the influence of group dynamics.

Results

The aim of this study was two-fold: to encourage young people to offer their views about the availability and effectiveness of services with regard to bullying, disability and caring responsibilities, and to explore their decision making on issues, bullying in particular, across the micro and macro contexts of their life.

Evaluation of Services

The young people's views about access, delivery and effectiveness of services were discussed by referring to the notion of children's services as 'children's spaces' because their input about services and access to resources was, in many ways, a discussion about spaces (Moss and Petrie, 2002).

Access to Physical Spaces

The young people stressed the need for safe and accessible physical and social spaces to meet with friends and form relationships. Half of the young people from the bullying group in particular stated that they do not find parks in their locality to be safe 'because there are gangs there and I cannot go, they ruin it', recommending that there should be parks that are 'guarded so you can go there' or 'parks for the gangs only and have cameras to watch them'.

The majority of children in the bullying group preferred activities that are not structured / supervised by adults, stressing the need for accessing local places. This concern is reflected in the following statement,

> 'I would like to go to local places like shops because nothing can happen in these places; I do not like structured activities all the time I would like to be free and go to shops and get chocolate and then walk home or go to my friends' house.'

In a similar vein, young people with LDD from a special school complained that there is 'too much safety at the school and some of the things are ridiculous', commenting that an overly structured and adult-supervised space poses restrictions on their enjoyment of activities or trips.

Community centres were seen by both young people and the centre organisers as playing an important role in young people's life and place in the community. Young people from the LDD group in particular enjoyed going to these centres in that they give them more confidence in their life, stating

> 'if I've had a bad day at school, at least I've got somewhere to go, I'm happy because you get to meet children who experience similar difficulties at school as you do. And this helps other people as well'.

The majority of young people from the LDD group expressed a preference for clubs over visiting neighbourhood areas and engaging in unstructured activities, stating

> 'well I like mostly clubs because you know you've got friends there where it's harder to make friends in the park'.

Access to Services of a Practical Nature

The young people criticised the effectiveness of existing services and relevance to their life. There was a consensus towards the provision of services of a practical nature. The young carers negotiated with various professionals who entered their lives and showed

resistance when they felt that the professionals' input was not relevant to their circumstances, stressing their need for practical support. Many young carers expressed uneasiness about 'people [professionals] visiting their house'. They offered statements such as

> 'They [professionals] come and talk and talk and they do not do anything and then they leave or we make them leave', or 'I do not want them around because they pick on you and how you do things'.

Young people, especially young carers and those from the bullying group, agreed that they did not need counselling-based services, where 'people do much talking' but practical services to help them with daily matters such as housework-related logistics, transportation and homework support.

> 'Counseling is not doing anything to stop bullying; at school, bullies are always sent to counseling and this does not do anything, they carry on behaving badly'.

Young people with caring responsibilities preferred to receive practical support such as help with housework and transportation to medical appointments. Ten young carers stressed that homework support would have been useful, as reflected in the young carer's comment:

> 'I just do my homework on my own, it would be nice to have a teacher to help me; a teacher can come for an hour at home to help us; a home teacher may be a good idea, so my brother can spend time with my mum and I can spend time with the tutor'.

Some young carers stressed the need to create free time by using school time to do the household chores, stating

> 'What I prefer is to help mum during the school hours and then be lazy after school hours do the things that I want. I do not mind help mum during school hours but I find it difficult after that. When I come back home this is pretty much my own time'.

Moreover, young people with LDD in a mainstream school, stressed the need for more learning support, especially as academic tasks become more demanding

> 'because they give you quite a lot of homework because it helps you learn more because the harder subjects that you're quite strong with because it gets in your brain more'.

Many young people expressed concerns about the lack of school-based services such as learning support for their brothers and sisters with disabilities. Their concerns were captured in comments such as 'school should support more children with disabilities, they do not do enough, help them one to one'. For another young carer, if he could change one thing that would have been 'school to help disabled people more, not just for 10 minutes only '.

The issue of flexible transportation was raised by many young people in all LDD groups, and their organisers, stressing that they rely on parents or staff for transporting them to clubs / centres. Young people who use a wheelchair require better transportation arrangements in that they rely on taxis (or cars with adequate inside space to fit the wheelchair), which is economically unaffordable. Lack of transportation was often cited as a reason for children not accessing after-school clubs or going places (e.g., cinema, trips). A special school staff member stated that certain after-schools clubs were not viable due to lack of transportation arrangements for a number of children, commenting

> 'we used to do a rugby club after school but not many people showed up; some parents live far away and it is not easy getting their children here'.

Young people who felt that they did not receive sufficient learning support at school stressed the importance of peer- mediated support:

> 'Sometimes when we need help we'll call and ask your friend if they can explain something to you outside the lesson so it helps, while.....some teachers will let the kids talk to you to understand the lesson a bit more sometimes. Most teachers won't allow it. It depends on how swift you are, it depends on who the teacher is'.

Participatory Decision Making

The young people in this study were involved in evaluating needs-led services, and offered interesting views about opportunities for decision making and its potential to transform policy and practice across different contexts. However, they expressed concerns that their decisions were less likely to translate into practice in their schools. For example, almost all young people felt that their views and experiences with regard to bullying were not taken into account, reflected in the following statement:

> 'I say things, I come with an idea but they do not listen. Teachers have an idea and do not listen to anybody else... If something happens at the playground and you go and tell them they tell you to come and tell them if it happens again, but they still do not do anything.'

Through conversation in focus groups, the young people engaged in decision making with their peers and jointly developed strategies to resolve conflict at classroom and school level, and communicated these strategies to their schools. Specifically, they stressed the need for effective methods to combat bullying:

> 'It is important to come up with one method that works. It is like the mythical creature with many heads that you cut one and another is popping up. You have to cut things from the root.'

To this end, the young people recommended a better regulation of the current detention system to ensure that the type of detention offered matches the intensity and implications of bullying.

> 'It is lunch- time detention, and then it is after school and then it is internal and then it is external for 2 weeks and then you are kicked out. But then it is difficult to know what type of detention should match bullying.'

Moreover, systemic changes such as transparency in rules (e.g., 'more openness and discipline is needed so people know how to behave') and modification of the nature of reward to offer competitive rewards for good behaviour were recommended.

'There are a book token, a sticker or a certificate but these are not really good stuff, I would rather have an iPod; There must be a prize not just a piece of paper that is meant to look nice; A reward that means something to you.'

Expansion of the curriculum was also deemed necessary to raise awareness about the implications of bullying.

'Instead of having too many literacy lessons just have a bullying lesson, and ask children to write down their thoughts about how bullies think; It is only in assembly that we talk about bullying but they do not stop bullying; During PHSE we mostly talk about how to be safe and drugs but not about bullying - need to include more about bullying.'

To tackle bullying, the young people stressed the need to involve parents (e.g., 'If a boy was a bully, bring his parents and if he keeps doing it, go through again until he gets the idea'), ease the transition to secondary school (e.g., 'Y7 should have more freedom in that they need time to settle down') and set expectations for good behaviour from the start of the secondary school (e.g., 'apply more discipline, be harsh to Y7 to set things straight from the start').

Action at a school-staff level was also recommended to ensure that teachers and mentors get involved with tackling bullying. Specifically, young people agreed that teachers should act quickly (e.g., 'you move out of the class to another classroom, and this should happen right away instead of waiting at the end of 12 weeks'), record instances of good and bad behaviour (e.g., 'get a clipboard and follow him for 2 weeks and report good and bad behaviour') and offer mentorship (e.g., 'a mentor is important because speaking to one you trust is easier than speaking to your teachers').

Finally, the young people warned against using bullying as a 'blanket' term, stressing the importance for school staff to understand the behaviour of bullies and the social / emotional circumstances that surround their life, as reflected in the following statements:

'Sometimes people go over the top, for minor things; in an all-boys school everybody throws an apple, this is not bullying. If the school had both boys and

girls, boys may change the focus to other things like cigarettes or beer to make the girls like them'; 'Some people seem quite rough and they get upset and hide their emotions, so they need to talk about to understand their emotions so they do not take it on others. Need to take into account background circumstances: if the parents have divorced that may make a good person behaving bad, it should be a bit light handed then, for a short time until it goes away.'

<div align="center">Discussion</div>

The purpose of this study was to explore young people's involvement in evaluating needs-led services, and their decision making on bullying issues for the purpose of exerting influence and stimulating change in schools. The findings pointed to a continuum of decision making opportunities, as a way of exercising powers of representation and having a voice, interpreted through the lens of social capital and systemic challenges. Through a discussion of the extent to which young people showed agency in evaluating the efficacy of existing services and engaging in decision making regarding bullying, issues regarding the nature and levels of participation and the content of decision-making were explored. Young people's participation in evaluating existing services and decision making regarding tackling bullying in the school served as a platform to express views about matters that affect them and also make recommendations to stimulate action at a school level (Palikara, Lindsay and Dockrell, 2009).

A Continuum of Decision Making

The young people in this study displayed agency in the context of their family and peer interactions (micro settings) with regard to evaluating services and recommending improvements, especially with regard to bullying. Agency was reflected in their capacity to act with intent and awareness in taking initiatives, offering solutions and influencing action within the constraints of their social settings. The young people showed determination and were active in making recommendations thought to increase the quality of their experience at school and their community. They emphasised the importance of accessing services of a practical nature such as learning / homework

support, transportation and access to physical spaces in their communities. These findings are consistent with previous research, pointing to a preference in young people for practical services such as learning / disability support, improved leisure and sports facilities within their locality and access to physical environment (e.g., parks) in their neighbourhood where they feel safe (Borland, Hill, Laybourn and Stafford, 2001).

In their interactions with family and peers, the young people acted powerfully and competently. Outside the sphere of their family and peer culture, however, the young people felt that their agency was compromised because, in their view, their suggestions regarding services and ways of tackling bullying were not genuinely taken on board and thus did not influence policy and practice with regard to bullying at school. Although the majority of young people in this study showed competence in making decisions about ways of resolving bullying, they felt that they lacked formal powers to influence policies on bullying at a school level. Moreover, across groups, many young people stressed that they were offered limited opportunities for decision making about services such as respite care, a 'buddy' system and advocacy support to facilitate their and their family's planning and accessing of services, as well as about the usage of public space in their neighbourhood, which was already restricted due to community degeneration. Their capacity for agency and negotiation, as manifested in their family and peers interactions, was not always extended to macro contexts such as schools.

In this study, a continuum of decision making emerged: at the one pole of the continuum (micro context) young people's decision making with their family and peers was perceived to be influential, whereas, at the other pole (macro context), their decision making did not appear to influence policy and practice at school. This highlights the multi-layered nature of young people's participation in decision making and the complexities that underpin it. Young people's decision making in micro-macro contexts is discussed along levels of participation; focus of decision-making; content of decision-making; and the nature of participation activity, including frequency and duration of participation (Kirby et al, 2003: 22). A discussion of these dimensions is crucial when evaluating young people's decision making in terms of its capacity for change. Variations in the influence of young people's

decision making have a contextual and structural basis, which is likely to shape the ways in which choice and power operate towards policy and service development.

Levels of Participation

This dimension refers to the 'levels of empowerment afforded to young people' (Kirby, et al, 2003: 22). Within their micro contexts, the young people showed resilience and displayed agency in making decisions on matters that affect their life. In macro contexts, however, they talked about fewer opportunities to share power and exercise choice to access resources, services and places in their neighbourhood and influence school policy about bullying. The relationship between power and decision making is complex. Power shapes participation and decision making in many ways, and 'articulations of power in participation are very often less visible, being as they are embedded in social and cultural practices' (Cooke and Kothari, 2001: 14). This raises issues regarding the nature and role of the cultural and social practices in empowering children to participate, as well as children's internalisation of certain assumptions that are not challenged (Foucault, 1980).

Focus of Decision Making

Focus here refers to whether decisions take place within private or public spaces. In private (micro) settings, the young people felt confident to negotiate and challenge the assumptions made by professionals, showing a preference to engage in joint decision making with their parents about family issues (e.g., housework, transportation, homework). Young carers in particular talked about negotiating with their parents the degree of their involvement with household chores and other caring responsibilities. Du Bois-Raymond (2001) coined the phrase 'negotiation families' where the patterns of interaction between parents and children are subject to negotiation rather than authoritarian structures and relationships. Also, with their peers, another micro setting, young people negotiated and ascertained their right to be respected and not discriminated against, especially in relation to bullying and in ascertaining the rights of their siblings with disability. Within macro settings, young people's recommendations about ways to tackle bullying at school and the

need for advocacy services were made public. Young people could shift the focus of their decision making from the private to the public; however, in their view, their decisions in certain public contexts, such as school, lacked influence.

Content of Decision Making

Content refers to the issues that stimulated young people's involvement, such as bullying, access to neighbourhood spaces and the nature of support and roles of professionals. Young people were involved in evaluating these services and made decisions about tackling bullying at school. In the focus group discussions, bullying was a key topic due to its nature and impact upon young people's academic and social life, offering the potential for young people's involvement in decision making within micro (e.g., peers) and macro (e.g., school) contexts. For many young people, bullying is an emotive issue that stimulates an interest in its implications. Also, caring responsibilities and disability issues prompted decision making in that young people engaged actively with the social and cultural changes in their role as carers and individuals with disability within what was perceived by them to be a care-deficit context.

The Nature of Participation and Decision Making

This refers to the extent to which participation activities are embedded in the context where they occur and the degree of formality that characterises them. Within the family and peer contexts, involvement with services, professionals and bullying issues was an on-going and integral part of the young people's life, conducted in an informal manner. In contrast, within school, decision making about bullying was a formalised, one-off process, not embedded in young people's life. As such, it offered limited opportunities to enable young people's choices. Formal procedures for participation place demands on young people, especially those who have experienced challenges due to disability or bullying, and who may lack self esteem or verbal fluency necessary to articulate their views and harness the power of representation.

Young People's Decision Making: Social Capital and Systemic Challenges

Moving negotiation and decision making to a macro level to influence policy and service provision is challenging for many young people, because it requires the co-ordination of factors such as space, voice, audience and influence (Lundy, 2007: 933). Space refers to the opportunities to express views, and this requires access to physical, social and critical spaces. These offer diverse fora where young people meet and, through dialogue with peers and adults, create opportunities for participation. As this study suggests, access to physical and social spaces was compromised for some young people. Voice refers to children being genuinely supported to express their views or remain silent if they wish by taking into consideration their best interest, and avoiding coercion or tokenistic approaches to participation and decision making. The young people showed competence in voicing their views; however, they felt that the audience beyond their family and peers was not receptive.

Reflecting on Lundy's model, the existence of 'space', 'voice' and 'audience' is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to ensure that children's views influence policy and practice in schools. Influence, a fourth dimension of the model, is manifested by acting upon children's views and, when appropriate, transforming them into practice. With their family and peers, young people exercised choice and exerted influence. However, for some young people, choice and influence for matters such as access to advocacy services or policy development regarding bullying had not been part of their experience.

The discrepancy in the influence of young people's decision making within families / peers (micro context) and that at schools (macro context) may be explained by deploying social capital theories to understand the systemic / organisational structures that influence participation in general. In so doing, explaining the gap in young people's participatory practices requires an understanding of the relations between individuals and networks or institutions. Social capital underpins social relations and practices that occupy the spaces between micro and macro systems in young people's lives, and is manifested as: bonding,

bridging and linking capital (Putnam, 2000). Bonding capital emanates from within-the-family social experiences and interactions and refers to emotional and practical support provided by members of nuclear and extended families and small close-knit communities. Bridging capital refers to "heterogeneous horizontal social networks" that support individuals to access information, advice and services from an array of professionals and organizations. Linking capital refers to links between communities "upwards to powerful people, institutions and agencies" (Gewirtz et al, 2005: 668).

Social and cultural capital influences young people's participatory practices. Within a micro context, the young people in this sample showed competence in generating bonding social capital, through family interactions and peer interactions. However, for involvement in macro contexts, the capacity to deploy bridging and linking forms of social capital is required, in that a young person would need to negotiate within a context of unequal power relationships, identify formal participation and decision making processes and create opportunities for involvement.

Although the young people in this study were neither voiceless nor lacking in assertiveness and resilience, their influence within school was limited. The reasons behind a less influential decision making are complex. One reason may be lack of social capital, and the opportunities that come with it, to engage in decision making beyond young people's immediate family. Another reason may be systemic obstacles in schools that may constitute decision making as not an integral part of the school. Young people's involvement is meaningful when their decisions are taken on board and influence policy and practice in schools because 'effective participation is likely to mean that the involvement of children actually leads to change (when they identify change is needed)' (Kirby et al, 2003: 12).

The implications for respecting children's voice and supporting their genuine involvement are both pedagogic and legal in nature. Within the wider UNCRC framework, the Article 2 (non-discrimination), Article 3 (best interest), Article 5 (right to guidance from adults), Article 13 (right to information) and Article 19 (right to be safe)

are likely to offer a structure to enable young people's decision making. The Article 3 of the UNCRC, which states that children's best interest should be 'a primary consideration', does not clarify who decides about children's best interest, and whether children should express their interests or rely on adults to do this for them. Article 3 and Article 12 can be in conflict because an emphasis on expressing views may not always be in the best interest of a child. This is particularly true in situations where children are pressurized to participate without respecting their right to silence and privacy, or in cases where they feel demoralized when their views are not genuinely listened to.

Conclusion

Young people are expected to exercise democratic responsibilities as citizens; however, they need to be nurtured to develop the intellectual, social and emotional maturity to participate in decision making. Lack of influence in decision making at school can be counterproductive in that young people may lose faith in democratic procedures and feel disempowered to participate in civic matters. Schools and other institutions need to make the process of participation and decision making transparent, and become accountable for the ways they support young people's voice. The scope for young people's participation and decision making regarding policy and service development is huge, affecting all facets of their life at school and local community. Young people have first-hand experiences on issues that matter to them and, when supported, they can make significant contributions to decision making. Although young people can be effective in evaluating services within micro contexts, they were less likely to engage in decision making regarding policy developments. Participatory decision making requires legal and organisational structures to be in place to support it, and a 'capacity building with child-led organizations and training for adults to overcome their resistance to child involvement' (Lundy, 2007: 935). Most crucially, it requires a better understanding of the multi-layered nature of participation, the purposes it serves and the power balance and opportunities offered to young people, especially those with limited powers for representation.

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Appendix

Focus Group Guiding Questions

Service Access and Improvement

1. What services do you access? (e.g., GP, respite care, a 'buddy' system, counseling / coaching, advocacy support, mentoring at school)
   - Do your caring responsibilities allow you to take care your health? How? (young carers group)*
   - Do you have respite / time to eat properly, exercise and attend GP appointments? (young carers group)

2. What services would you like to access but you are unable to?

3. What services would you like to access but are not currently available?

4. Are you aware of services, including advocacy services, available for young people with disabilities? (LDD group)

5. Do you have access to
   - physical spaces (parks, local shops, buildings, trains, buses)?
   - a 'buddy' to accompany you to social events (e.g., cinema, museum)?
   - online facility to provide information about local social events?
   - clubs to develop / expand your hobbies and indoor / outdoor activities? (LDD group)

6. Are there any sports facilities (e.g. fitness centre, gym) in your neighborhood that you would like to access?

7. Where do you informally hang around with your friends?

8. Would you like to expand these by creating non-commercial spaces that young people can come together to socialise?

9. Do you belong to any organisations for young people (e.g., scouts)?

Participation in Decision Making

1. Are there opportunities for you to participate in decision making about your life (and the life of the person you care for; young carers group; bullying group)?
   - Access to health services
   - Having your views taken into account
   - Engage in decision making about personal issues
2. Are you being supported to participate at school and the community, in terms of
   - Being given time and coaching to respond to the issues raised
   - Receiving feedback about outcomes
3. Are your interests, wishes or fears taken into consideration by the support agencies / schools?
4. Have your caring responsibilities had an impact on your school work?
5. Do you have opportunities to engage in decision making (in the context of your school) about bullying, or ways of responding to bullies?
6. Does your school take on board your views about how to respond to bullying (e.g., punishment or exclusion of the bully)?
7. Are there any systems for reporting bullying at your school, and are you involved in these?
8. What facilitated your access to these systems?
9. Have you contributed to any changes at school with regard to reducing bullying or helping victims of bullying?
10. Do you exercise choice about what and where to learn (e.g., mainstream, special school), and who to socialise with? (LDD group)

* Note: Questions that referred to a particular group only.