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Children and Young People's Participation in the Community in Ireland: Experiences and Issues

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings of research into children and young people's experiences of participating in their communities in Ireland. Using a social and relational understanding of participation, the research found that children and young people are engaged in a wide range of activities in their communities. They are however often misunderstood in the community and have limited opportunities for participation in decisions affecting them. Despite these problems, they report positive experiences of participating in youth clubs and organisations, where their participation is supported by adults. The paper discusses the implications of these findings for research, public policy and community.

Key words: Children and young people, participation, community.

Introduction: The Right to Participate

Adopting a children's rights perspective, and with a particular emphasis on Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as a minimum legal standard, the research study on which this paper is based examined the extent to which children and young people have a voice and participate in their homes, schools and communities in Ireland (Horgan et al, 2015a). The research adopted a working definition of participation based on the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment No. 12 on the UNCRC. Referring to participation, the Committee states that the term

...is now widely used to describe ongoing processes, which include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009, p. 3).

Ireland ratified the UNCRC in September 1992, and in line with Article 12 the Irish State committed to including the voice of the child and children's views in policy-making processes. A key policy strategy aimed at meeting these commitments was the *National Children's Strategy 2000 – 2010*. The Strategy, which was the first policy document to set out children's rights in Ireland, made an explicit commitment to giving children a voice in matters that affect them. Since 2000, a number of initiatives have been undertaken to support children and young people's participation. These include the establishment of an office of an Ombudsman for Children (2003), a series of national consultations on issues concerning children and young

people, the development of the first full ministerial post and Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) in 2011, a national advisory panel of children and young people, and a national youth council and thirty-four local child and youth councils aimed at children and young people aged 12 to 18 years. *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, 2014-2020* (2014), the national policy framework for children and young people, established five national outcomes to make children and young people's lives better. Under the policy framework, Children and Young People Services Committees have been established in every county in Ireland. These committees seek to co-ordinate the work of statutory, voluntary and community bodies working with and for children and young people and to improve outcomes for children and young people, aged between 0 – 24 years, through local and national interagency activity (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2017).

In 2015 the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) published a national strategy on children and young people's participation in decision-making, 2015-2020. Ireland is the first country to produce such a strategy. The goal of the strategy is to ensure that children and young people have a voice in decisions about their individual and collective lives in their communities, in education, on their health and wellbeing and in legal settings (DCYA, 2015). The strategy contains a set of actions to encourage children and young people's participation in decision-making and states that government departments will 'consult with children and young people appropriately in the development of policy, legislation, research and services' (DCYA, 2015, p.17).

Much international and Irish research to date has focused on the opportunities for and drawbacks of children and young people's participation offered by formal participatory and decision-making structures (e.g. Davey et al, 2010; Fleming, 2013; Parkes, 2013; Martin et al, 2015b; Forde et al, 2016). Less research has emerged concerning the nature and extent of children's participation in the mundane everyday interactions in their everyday lives, the barriers and enablers to participation and what makes participation meaningful for them (Weller and Bruegel, 2009; Aston and Lambert, 2010); these areas are the focus of this paper, which specifically explores participation in the community.

Participation of Children and Young People in their Communities

Children and young people are involved in their communities in all sorts of different ways. Children play in the streets, playgrounds and spaces near their homes, while teenagers hang out in a range of public places, from green spaces to parks and playing fields, bus stops and shopping centres (Elsley, 2004; Weller, 2007). Large numbers of children and young people participate in organised community activities, including youth, sports and recreational clubs, groups and programmes. Some become involved in public life through engagement in decision-making fora in local youth organisations, voluntary and public bodies and local and national youth councils. Research has established that most Irish adolescents are socially active and engage in at least one sport and at least one hobby (De Roiste and Dinneen, 2005); sport is regarded by children as the second best thing about living in Ireland (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2012). These activities emphasise children and young people's status as active and engaged citizens who contribute to and shape community life in rich and diverse ways (Jans, 2004; Percy-Smith, 2010; Percy-Smith and Burns, 2013).

While there is a growing recognition of the benefits of children's participation (Davey , 2010;

The Children's Society, 2012; National Youth Council of Ireland, 2013), children and young people are sometimes undervalued and misunderstood in their own communities and their opportunities for meaningful participation in decisions that affect them and their communities are often limited (Theis, 2010; Kerrins et al, 2011). They may feel targeted and demonised in public, informal places and corralled by adult agendas in organised spaces (James and James, 2001). Many adults do not recognise children and young people as social actors and citizens in their own right (Lansdown, 2010) or seek to curtail or shape their participation in accordance with adult needs. Adult assumptions about the capacity of children and young people to form views have, in the past, resulted in a questioning of their ability to be deemed "rational and reliable" (Alderson, 2008, p. 155). Such a perception is disputed by research indicating that children are more capable than adults realise and that their capacity for decision making increases in direct proportion to the opportunities offered to them (Alderson and Goodwin, 1993; Freeman, 2011). Despite these problems, adults play a vital role in encouraging the meaningful expression of children and young people's voice. The roles of "adult allies" (Checkoway, 2011) like parents, teachers and youth workers include "reaching out to young people, nurturing their ideas, and building support for their work" (ibid, p. 342), as well as serving "as bridging persons across generational boundaries" (ibid, p. 342).

How to facilitate children and young people's participation in a meaningful way remains a significant challenge (McLeod, 2008) since representation and voice alone do not necessarily confirm the extent or quality of their influence on decisions. Percy-Smith (2010) and Percy-Smith and Thomas (2010) suggest that participation should be understood as embedded in children and young people's actual daily lives rather than in narrowly defined formal structures. Such an approach views participation as not merely taking part in existing decision-making structures, but as

having equal opportunities "to take part" and "be involved in" the life of the community, organisation or project and feel valued for that contribution (Percy-Smith, 2010, p.111).

Many of the decisions that affect people's lives are 'made within the course of everyday life rather than through political structures of government and governance' (Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010, p. 359). When value is placed solely on formal, public decision-making, young people's own valuing of being involved and present in other, less formal activities, is diminished (Percy-Smith, 2010). Everyday social participation represents a key form of active citizenship (Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010). It recognises children's capabilities (Leonard, 2016) and is inclusive rather than selective in nature because most children and young people participate every day in community life, unlike the relatively small numbers who take part in public or formal decision-making fora.

Methodology

The study focused on children and young people aged 7 to 17 years living in contemporary urban and rural Ireland, and on parents, teachers and key adults who work with children in youth work or local community settings.

The research was informed by a relational approach to children's participation. Central to this approach is a perception of children and young people as individuals, but individuals who live relationally, intergenerationally and in their communities (Mannion, 2007; Leonard,

2016;Horgan et al, 2017). Children are people who have relationships and are embedded in relational processes. The approach recognises the respective roles and positions of children and adults and that interdependence between adults and children is an important basis for participation (Wyness, 2012). Wyness points out that while “child” and “adult” are “distinctive categories” (ibid, p. 435),

each category presupposes the other: there is an important relational dimension to this theory with both adults and children developing and refining their generational identities in and through routine engagement with each other (p. 435).

A qualitative methodology enabled the researchers to tap into the unique knowledge and perspectives of children and young people as well as those of the adults to whom they relate on a daily basis.

Sampling

The three locations chosen for the primary research were in Cork City, Dublin City and County Sligo. The report *Measures of Affluence and Deprivation for the Republic of Ireland* (Haase and Pratschke, 2008), which draws on data from the 2006 Census of Population, was used to choose the locations. A multi-location approach facilitated capturing a diverse range of perspectives and the representation of urban and rural environments demonstrating a range of affluence and disadvantage.

Purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) was used to select primary and second-level schools and youth and community projects in the three locations. Three primary schools and three second-level schools participated in the research, one primary and one second-level school in each of the three research sites. Purposive sampling in schools, youth and community projects was used to recruit children and young people who fell within the specified age range. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was used to achieve participation by teachers, parents and community stakeholders.

The inclusion criteria for participation in the research were minimal. Participants were expected to:

- Live in or use the services within the three locations
- Be children and young people aged 7-17
- Be parents who had experience of children and young people aged 7-17
- Be community stakeholders who worked directly or indirectly with children and young people aged 7-17.

In total, 74 children and young people and 34 adults participated in the research.

Research Methods

Fieldwork comprised one-to-one semi-structured interviews and focus groups to obtain detailed narrative data that captured the experiences and views of children, young people and adult stakeholders on the participation of children and young people in decision-making. Focus groups were conducted with children and young people and parents, and semi-structured interviews were carried out with parents, teachers and community stakeholders in each of the three locations. Focus groups were used in the fieldwork with children and young people on the basis that they would

encourage open debate and shared recollection of participation in decision-making and thereby elicit rich data (Aston and Lambert, 2010).

Seventy-four children and young people participated in 10 focus groups while a further 20 were involved in the pilot phase of the fieldwork and in Children's and Young People's Advisory Groups that were established by the researchers (see Table 1 for details of numbers and research methods). The focus groups were conducted in primary and second-level schools and youth and community projects. Individual interviews were conducted with eleven teachers and principals, nine community stakeholders and four parents while three focus groups involved a further ten parents. The community stakeholders included professional and voluntary youth workers (six), a family resource centre manager, a Gaelic games coach and the co-ordinator of an area-based programme for social-economic development.

Detailed demographic and biographical data on the individual children, young people, teachers and principals and community stakeholders who participated was not collected. While efforts were made to achieve an overall gender balance, this was not considered to be essential.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University College Cork Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC).

Table 1: Summary of data collection methods and number of participants

Participants	Data Collection Method	Cork City	Dublin City	Sligo County	Totals
Children – 7-12 yrs	Focus Groups = 4	8	14	15	37
Young people – 12-17 yrs	Focus Groups = 6	15	8	14	37
Parents	Focus Groups = 3 Interviews = 4	5	2	7	14
Principals	Interviews = 6	2	2	2	6
Teachers	Interviews = 5	2	1	2	5
Community stakeholders	Interviews = 9	3	3	3	9
Total		35	30	43	108

Child-centred Research

The objective in the primary research with children and young people was to utilise child-centred participative research methods appropriate to their age and understanding, in accordance with Article 12 of the UNCRC, and to provide fun, safe spaces for the children and young people who took part in the research, following best practice (Barker and Weller, 2003). These methods included games, visual and verbal methods, drawings, and other interactive methods that helped capture their lived experiences of participation. For example, the focus groups with child participants (7-11 years) involved the use of three interactive floor mats in conjunction with a focus group discussion schedule. Each floor mat depicted one of the spaces of inquiry – the home, school and community. Using wipeable pens, the children were asked to draw on each mat places of importance in their daily lives within that space, and to

map where they spent time, where decision-making discussions happened, what kinds of issues were discussed, with whom the decisions were discussed, and how much of a say they had in decisions made or choices agreed. Photographs of the completed mats were taken and the main points of the discussion were noted on flipcharts.

Creative age-appropriate interactive data collection methods were also used with the young people (aged 12-17 years). The discussions with them focused on the three realms of home, school and community, and were guided using a focus group schedule. Each focus group began with an icebreaker, followed by a verbal explanation of the project supported by an information sheet and accessible description of Article 12 of the UNCRC.

Data Analysis

Five discrete datasets were generated from the primary research; these were children, young people, parents, principals and teachers, and adults working in the community. A thematic analysis of each dataset was conducted under the three locations of home, school and community. The qualitative data were interrogated using questions based on Lundy's (2007) conceptualisation of Article 12 of the UNCRC.

Spaces for participation, types of participation, enabling factors, barriers encountered and recommendations to facilitate participation in each location were identified through systematic working through the transcripts. The key findings for community are presented in the following sections.

Research Findings: Children and Young People

The findings discussed here are concerned with children and young people's activities in their communities, attitudes in the community towards participation of children and young people, barriers and enablers to participation in the community, and their experience of participating in youth and community organisations.

Children and Young People's Activities in the Community

The study found that children and young people were involved in a wide range of activities in their communities. Sport was one of the most popular activities, along with youth clubs and activities based in community centres, and "doing nothing" or "hanging out" with friends. Streets, civic and commercial areas, and indoor spaces like youth cafés or local youth/community facilities were where they tended to "hang around". These results agree with those from previous Irish research which found that space and the opportunity for socialising with peers are important to older children and young people and that most Irish adolescents enjoy "hanging around" with their friends (de Róiste and Dinneen, 2005). Hanging around in public spaces can however be symptomatic of insufficient provision of safe spaces and recreation facilities in communities. When questioned about other spaces for them in the community, young people interviewed for this study consistently replied "not much", "nothing", "there's zero things here" (Youth café, Sligo). Previous Irish research found that a minority (42%) of children and young people reported that there were good places in their area to spend their free time (Dempsey et al, 2012).

The rural young people frequently referred to public transport as a critical means of their engagement in local activities and youth fora. "There's no public transport", "There's 2

buses...”, and “It’s so expensive” (Youth Club, Sligo).

Attitudes in the Community towards Children and Young People

The young participants were asked about attitudes in the community towards children and young people. A number of issues were raised, including adult attitudes and behaviour and a lack of awareness amongst children and young people as to how to input into local decision-making.

Adult Attitudes towards Children and Young People

The children and young people suggest that adults tend to have negative attitudes towards them.

Adults dismiss what children say as silly, but when an adult says it, they take it seriously (Primary School, Dublin).

Most of the time children aren’t taken seriously when they have an idea, and it might be good (Primary School, Dublin).

Negative or dismissive adult attitudes were seen by the young people as a significant barrier to their present and future participation in their communities.

Adults’ attitudes towards young people can really affect whether young people take part or not. If they don’t take young people seriously, young people won’t engage in future (Second Level School, Cork).

Some young people in a disadvantaged urban area referred to being seen as a nuisance and being moved on by Gardaí and security personal in their local community:

The Gardaí tell us to move on. They (City Council) put a load of trees where we used to hang out. The Guards tell us to go to the green, which is supposed to be to play soccer, but the grass never gets cut and it’s too long to play in (Second Level School, Cork).

The security guards at the shopping centre always move us on “to prevent crime” just because of the way we look. They think we’re all scumbags. They judge us just by looking at us (Second Level School, Cork).

Weller (2007, p. 141) points out that a gathering of teenagers “is often seen as a criminal threat and demonized”, sometimes by other teenagers who may feel threatened or intimidated by groups or gangs. Some of the children reported that they found the presence of teenagers in parks and playgrounds threatening and that this restricted their use of these places, “[It’s] not safe on some estates ... teenage drinking” (Primary School, Cork).

Barriers and Enablers to Children and Young People’s Participation in Community

The young people spoke about the lack of consultation between adults and young people in the provision of local services and facilities. One group of participants spoke about how adults in

their neighbourhood had turned a green area where they used to gather into allotments “without telling anyone”:

We used to be able to have a bonfire, so we have nowhere to go (for) the bonfire now. The change was not for the benefit of everyone, there are only some people using the allotments. There should be more of a park for everyone to use (Youth Project, Cork).

Young people declared that they had no idea who to influence and expressed frustration about their poor level of influence in the local community. Some young people referred to local committees on which there were no youth representatives. When asked who makes the kinds of decisions that affect young people in the community, they did not know.

I don't think most people would even know who to go to...if they had an idea for something. Like I wouldn't have a clue who I'd go to talk to (Youth café, Sligo).

They displayed a nuanced understanding of why they were not being consulted.

...because at the end of the day young people aren't going to vote for you in an election. If you're building stuff like a pool or cinema or something you're not counting on young people to fund it. I suppose it's fair enough if you look at it from a business or a political point of view. Realistically, young people can't do much... (Youth Café, Sligo).

Age and its relationship with increased “say” and autonomy was identified by the young people as a key enabler of participation in the community.

As we get older and we take on/get given more responsibility, we get more respect and get listened to more by adults (Second-level school, Cork).

Experimenting with Voice in Youth and Community Organisations

According to the young people, they are involved in decision-making in all of the youth and community organisations involved in this study, although the level and extent of their involvement varies between organisations. In some cases young people are formally involved in the management of the organisation, while in others they are more informally involved in decisions about activities, planning and rule-making.

Formal and Informal Participation in Youth Organisations and Clubs

Young people evidenced some agency in the community in the context of local youth clubs and projects, which they identified as their “space”.

The following extracts highlight how young people involved in a youth café and youth clubs feel a sense of ownership of these spaces due to their involvement in key decisions about their design and the activities that take place there:

We designed this house ... we kind of run the house. We all discussed it together and we kind of went on a majority then. Like who picked the couch and what colour you wanted the couch. What food you eat in the house... Like, there was how to fund-raise (Youth Café, Sligo).

So we can see we are playing a part where we are making most of the decisions with the youth centre (Youth Club, Cork).

We get to decide what we do at the club (Youth Club, Dublin).

The importance of spaces in their local community where there is greater equality in the relationships with adults was discussed in a number of the group interviews:

You get to do what you want to do and you can joke around with them [adults running the clubs] and have fun. Everyone here is on a first-name basis. It's like breaking a barrier. Teachers you call Mr. or Mrs., but everyone here you call by their first name (Youth project, Cork).

They do actually listen to you ... if you have an issue here, it's 100% talk time, like (Youth café, Sligo).

If you make suggestions or you want to talk, they will listen (Youth café, Sligo).

Research Findings: Adults

This section presents the perspectives of adult participants on community support for youth work activity and the role of youth workers and other adults in encouraging participation by children and young people.

Community Support for Youth Work Activity

Adult community stakeholders reported varying levels of community support for organised activities with children and young people. One professional youth worker in a rural setting described how members of the local community were instrumental in securing from the County Council the building in which a youth café is held because there had previously been some anti-social behaviour by young people in the area:

...they knew the young people were getting into trouble for being bored...there was nothing for them to do...so the community really worked to get this place up and running and their support was outstanding (Youth Worker 2).

Another professional youth worker in an urban context described a similar level of support but suggests that her organisation had to build a relationship with the community, some members of which initially viewed the youth organisation and its activities with suspicion. This youth work organisation established an intergenerational group and this worked very well.

A family resource centre manager said that the centre has received very little support from influential local groups in its activities for children and young people. He cited the example of an idea for a street art initiative that would have given the children and young people a chance to draw murals and graffiti on the walls of derelict buildings in the town. The idea was discouraged by the local Chamber of Commerce, which was "very fearful that it would get out of hand". Devlin (2006) suggests that the construction of young people as problems or nuisances may be class-based in nature, but this contention does not appear to be supported by the experience of a voluntary youth worker who operates a youth club in a middle-class urban area. This volunteer points out that there is no community centre in the area and the youth club is not allowed to use the church hall.

...they wouldn't allow us in which really, really annoyed me at the time. There was no choice of letting us in but they were also charging quite a high rent because it was being let commercially. It didn't need the locals (Voluntary Youth Worker 1).

These descriptions suggest that adults tend to be more comfortable with organised activities for children and young people but are not always willing to provide them with spaces in which these activities can take place. Children and young people are usually "on the margins and are resource-poor compared to most adults" Shier (2010, p. 28); this may be the case in more affluent as well as poorer communities.

Previous Irish research suggests that there may be fewer participatory spaces for children and young people in rural areas, due to scarcer facilities and to transport issues (Byrne et al, 2006). The family resource centre manager points out that social policy tends to neglect children and young people in rural areas.

There is nothing for them to do. They get on the bus at 4 p.m., are home by 5 p.m., 5.45 p.m.; that is it. We talk about the rural buses and the rural programmes, that they are able to access buses...The younger person that has to access that bus has to pay for it. Where do they get the money? They go back to parents, parents are unemployed. They haven't got the money to give them.

These comments reflect those expressed by young people who criticised the infrequency and cost of rural transport in their area.

The Role of Youth Workers and Other Adults in Encouraging Participation

Supportive adults or "adult allies" (Checkoway, 2011) play a significant role in facilitating and encouraging the development of children and young people's voice and participation. This is clear in the responses of the parents and community stakeholders.

Professional youth workers acknowledged the importance of engaging young people in decision-making.

We really want them to develop as people as well, pick up all these different skills that they are going to pick up [in] doing an activity (Youth worker 2)
They were always consulted because we felt that if we didn't consult with them, if we just put something on, it doesn't work that way (Youth Worker 1).

A voluntary youth worker in an after-school club indicated that the children with whom she worked took some time to adjust to the idea of having a role in decision-making in the club, because they did not have significant experience of decision-making outside the club:

...because they are not involved in things outside of the group, it is difficult for them to switch on and say "We actually do have a say here. This is a new group we have – they are actually asking us what we would like to do" (Voluntary Youth Worker 1).

All of the organisations give children and young people opportunities to "experiment with and develop voice" (Kellett, 2010, p. 197). There are however significant variations between organisations in the nature and extent of children and young people's participation. In some

organisations participation is restricted to engagement in adult-led activities such as rule-making while in others, primarily the professional youth work agencies, children and young people are actively engaged in organisational management and decision-making about how the organisation or project will be run. An approach whereby adults gradually yield increasing amounts of decision-making authority to children enables the building of the “capacities, commitment, resources, standards and structures” (Theis, 2010, p. 352) necessary for representing children’s views and ideas in decision-making. Fleming (2013) suggests that children and young people need to be facilitated to build on basic participatory opportunities by participating in increasingly significant ways, including in youth-led activities, which are still quite rare.

Parent participants pointed out that the informal relaxed approach of youth clubs provides an environment that is conducive to open engagement by their children and young people. They cited the non-judgemental listening attitudes of the youth workers, the trusting child/youth worker rapport, and the overall expectation of their children that a youth club space is safe.

My daughter’s in X youth club and they talk openly about these issues (Cyber bullying); they listen to youth leaders a lot more in youth clubs than they would parents (Cork, Parent Advisory Group).

None of the community stakeholders had received formal training in participation and most advocated the provision of training for adults who work with children and young people. A youth worker in an after-school project suggested that adults need to be educated in hearing and enabling children and young people’s voices:

For the children to have their say, I think you are going to have to educate the adults that they are entitled to it and that, I think, is your first port of call (Youth worker 3).

These perspectives reflect the realisation that adults’ knowledge and understanding of how to involve young people cannot be taken for granted (Head, 2011).

Conclusions

Based on primary research in three locations in Ireland, the paper provides evidence that children and young people are active participants and meaning makers in the community. They are aware of and concerned about what is happening in their own communities and express interest in having a greater voice and influence there. They are often constructed as problems by local communities and, in their turn, children and young people recognise these “limiting mindsets” (Percy-Smith and Burns, 2012, p. 13). While they are generally dissatisfied with decision making processes in their local communities, those involved in youth clubs or projects are extremely positive about their experiences of voice in those specific settings. These experiences suggest that it is useful for researchers to understand participation as social and relational in nature, involving relationships both between children and between children and adults. A relational perspective provides insights into how children and young people participate, their capacities to participate, and the challenges and enablers they experience.

While youth clubs, youth projects and other community organisations that work with children and young people seek to provide spaces for participation and participatory mechanisms and opportunities, much remains to be done to enable children and young people's engagement in their communities. There is a need for more everyday spaces and places in communities where children and young people can benefit from the experience of participation and active citizenship and gradually take on more responsibilities and active roles. Public policy also needs to address the uneven enjoyment of children's rights and spatial disparities in youth participation that this and other research has highlighted (Kilkelly, 2007). Differences in children and young people's experiences of participation between urban and rural areas need to be addressed in the context of the revitalisation of rural areas. Finally, cultural change in adults' attitudes towards children and young people is required but before this can happen, there is a need for training in participation of adults working with children and young people in home, school and community settings. Lundy (2007, p. 930) refers to the recommendation of the UNCRC Committee on the Rights of the Child that "initial and in-service training" in understanding and respecting the provisions of the UNCRC should be provided for those who work with children. Meeting these challenges will help to develop and extend the exercise of children and young people's citizenship.

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