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Research Development Initiative

Research Briefing Note

Promoting the participation of seldom-heard young people: A review of the literature on best practice principles

1. What is the study's background?

This study was commissioned under the Irish Research Council's Research Development Initiative, in conjunction with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. The study was undertaken by Cathy Kelleher, Dr. Mairéad Seymour and Dr. Ann Marie Halpenny, Dublin Institute of Technology.* The report was independently peer-reviewed and published in 2014.

2. What is the study's purpose?

The purpose of the study was to review national and international literature on the participation of seldom-heard young people and to identify best practice principles in the field. It is concerned with their participation within formal structures and initiatives in the context of public participation, such as youth councils and school/student councils. The outcome will inform policy-makers, practitioners and others in the statutory, community and voluntary sectors who wish to engage with young people whose voices are seldom heard.

The specific objectives were:

- » to provide a detailed account of what is meant by 'seldom-heard' young people;
- » to examine the core aspects of participation as well as the barriers and challenges to participation for seldom-heard young people;
- » to identify approaches that can improve the inclusion of seldom-heard young people in decision-making that affects their lives.

This briefing note summarises the method of research, key findings, conclusions and recommendations of the study.

The full report is available on www.dcy.a.ie

3. How was the study undertaken?

The methodological approach involved a three-step process: (1) literature selection; (2) critical engagement and synthesis of the literature; and (3) thematic structuring of the review.

The strategy for the identification and selection of literature involved desk-based research, drawing on:

- » a range of social sciences, psychology and legal databases and citation indexes, including PsycInfo, SocIndex, and the Social Sciences Citation Index;
- » research repositories such as RIAN, the ESRC social sciences repository, the Children's Database and the National Children's Board child data database;
- » Internet search engines;
- » online resources of organisations such as UNICEF and the Council of Europe.

In addition, targeted e-mail requests for information on participation initiatives for seldom-heard young people were made to statutory and non-statutory organisations working with or on behalf of children, young people, their families and communities in Ireland and the UK. The aim was to identify published information and unpublished 'grey literature' on participation with seldom-heard young people.

Findings from the literature review were then structured according to central themes, including: the heterogeneity of seldom-heard young people; the meaning of participation; barriers and challenges to participation; the question of representativeness in participation; improving the inclusion of seldom-heard young people in formal participation; perspectives on meaningful participation; methods and approaches to participation for seldom-heard young people; and outcomes from participation.

4. What are the key findings?

4.1 Defining 'seldom-heard'

The term 'seldom heard' is an umbrella term used to denote young people from a variety of backgrounds and life experiences whose voices are not heard in decision-making processes that affect their lives. They may be seldom heard in multiple, overlapping and diverse ways in accordance with their gender, religious beliefs, social class or ethnic identity, as well as in relation to the issues and needs that are specific to their situation. Seldom-heard young people exist within wider 'seldom-heard'

* The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

groups (such as an ethnic minority group) or as groups in their own right (e.g. young carers, young people within new family forms or young people with a parent in prison).

Given the complexity of the 'seldom heard' designation, it is preferable to consider seldom-heard young people primarily as young people with additional support needs. Being 'seldom heard' does not imply that there is something inherent to certain subgroups of young people that precludes them from participating. Rather, it signals that existing participation structures or supports do not adequately facilitate their voices being heard in decisions that affect their lives.

4.2 Defining 'participation'

Participation in this context means more than young people simply 'having a voice'. It includes enabling or empowering them to have a real influence in decision-making on matters that directly and indirectly affect their lives, and thereby to facilitate transformation of their life situations. It may involve the use of different approaches, which reflect differences in the distribution of power between young people and adults, including, for example:

- » **consultative participation**, an adult-led activity where information is exchanged and/or the views of young people are sought on specific issues, but are not necessarily incorporated into decisions and subsequent actions;
- » **collaborative participation**, whereby young people share responsibility to varying degrees with adults at any or all stages of decision-making and can influence both the process and the outcome;
- » **child or youth-led participation**, where young people are supported to pursue their own agenda and make decisions autonomously.

No one approach is deemed superior to another, but should instead be determined on the basis of the needs and circumstances of the young people involved and the types of decisions being made.

In defining 'participation', the literature identifies a wide range of methods used to involve young people in public participation activity. These include surveys and focus groups; councils, forums and committees; public meetings; youth conferences; youth advisory groups; user panels; online technologies, e-mail and text messaging; youth-friendly literature; activity-based workshops; informal 'chats' and discussion; ongoing informal consultation; games; and writing. Less apparent in the literature is the specific detail about the nature of the methods used, the types of young people involved or how the methods are employed to engage them in participation activity.

4.3 Barriers and challenges to participation for seldom-heard young people

A number of reasons are identified to explain why the interests and perspectives of seldom-heard young people are inadequately represented in formal public participation structures.

- » **Practical and personal barriers:** Challenges to participation often relate to the particular circumstances of seldom-heard young people's lives, such as young parents or young carers who may not have access to childcare or respite care. Furthermore, membership of formal participation structures sometimes requires that young people nominate themselves for election, making participation a formidable challenge for those who lack the necessary interpersonal skills and confidence to do so.
- » **Perceptions of participation:** Barriers to participation exist where seldom-heard young people, or the organisations that represent them, view formal participation structures as having limited relevance or none at all to their lives.
- » **Recognition of young people's agency:** Lack of awareness on the part of adults or unwillingness to recognise young people's agency in decision-making leads to restrictions on the extent and nature of their participation experiences.
- » **Proximity to decision-makers:** Young people's participation mechanisms are not always integrated into adult decision-making structures at local and central government levels, thereby creating distance between young people and key decision-makers.
- » **Gaps in knowledge and skills:** Organisations representing seldom-heard young people, although well-positioned to support their participation, may lack awareness or the skills required to include young people in meaningful participation. Skill deficits also exist on how information about the issues concerning young people is gathered and how the knowledge generated from young people's participation activity is utilised.
- » **Resources for participation activity with seldom-heard young people:** Securing and sustaining young people's participation requires the involvement and commitment of trained staff, as well as the costs associated with providing access to youth-appropriate locations, training, transport, and other supports. Insufficient resourcing is one of the most significant barriers to engaging young people from diverse backgrounds in decision-making.
- » **Legislative and policy barriers:** The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which includes the right for children to participate in matters that affect their lives (Article 12), has not yet been adopted into Irish law. The absence of a national participation strategy to date has also potentially hindered the development of effective and consistent practice.

4.4 Promoting the inclusion of seldom-heard young people in participation

Where a generalised view of young people's perspectives is required, statistical representativeness in participation activities may be centrally important. If, on the other hand, the purpose is to expand the range of perspectives informing decision-making, then the emphasis should be on openness and inclusiveness in the decision-making process. Strategies to improve the inclusion of seldom-heard young people include:

- » **Directly targeting the involvement of seldom-heard young people in mainstream participation structures:** The most common strategy identified in the literature relates to the reservation of seats on youth and school/student councils for seldom-heard young people. Other strategies include the use of a 'buddy system' and co-option whereby student representatives are co-opted from voluntary groups or specialist councils operating within the school. A shortcoming of this type of strategy is that it risks drawing attention to the differences between seldom-heard young people and others. In this regard, transparency of process is required for quotas to be accepted and for labelling and stigmatisation to be avoided.
- » **Building partnerships with organisations representing seldom-heard young people:** Partnership approaches between those tasked with the development of participation activity and the organisations representing seldom-heard young people may take the form of targeted initiatives (e.g. the DCYA Inclusion programme), the inclusion of organisations on the steering groups of youth councils or the development of professional collaborations at local level. Where young people are not engaged with services, establishing contacts with other front-line individuals (e.g. outreach workers with knowledge of the group in question) is advised.
- » **Supporting young people through capacity-building and overcoming obstacles to participation:** Best practice suggests that the optimal approach to improving seldom-heard young people's inclusion in participation structures is to support them in ways that enable them to come through the standard process of recruitment, thus avoiding the use of potentially stigmatising non-standard mechanisms. Capacity-building measures focusing on building confidence and communication skills have been identified as effective in increasing seldom-heard young people's access to mainstream participation structures. Furthermore, the identification and removal of practical obstacles to participation are a fundamental necessity in providing equality of opportunity across the diversity of seldom-heard young people.

4.5 Improving participation experiences for seldom-heard young people

Approaches identified in the literature for improving participation experiences for seldom-heard young people include:

- » **Making participation meaningful:** The available literature suggests that from young people's perspective, meaningful participation involves focusing on issues that have personal relevance to them, provides them with opportunities to 'make a difference' and to 'give something back', and culminates in improvements for other young people and their communities. It also involves having a sense of ownership of the process.
- » **Participation methods that are appropriate and responsive to their needs:** Young people express different preferences for the mediums through which they communicate their feelings and perspectives. For some, verbal and written communication are favoured, while others prefer drawing, painting, song or drama. Methods that align with the preferences and needs of the specific young people involved are also a key component in engaging and sustaining their involvement in participation.
- » **Informal participation approaches:** Participation approaches that offer more informality and flexibility are especially attractive to young people from more diverse backgrounds. Such approaches include informal chats and discussion, and online interaction. While informal participation may operate as a standalone approach, informal activities may be used within existing formal participation structures to create an environment that is conducive to young people's style of engagement.
- » **'Youth involvement' approach to participation:** A 'youth development' approach places strong emphasis on skills development and individual change in young people's cognitive, emotional and social competency. In contrast, a 'youth involvement' approach extends the focus beyond individual change and links the process of participation with outcomes for young people and their communities. It is also more closely aligned to the perspective that young people are capable of exercising agency about decisions that affect their lives.
- » **Outcomes from participation:** Young people report that they want the outcome from their involvement in participation activity to make a difference to their lives, the lives of other young people and their communities, leading commentators to recommend that participation activity is not only purposeful and linked to outcomes, but that these outcomes are demonstrated to young people. Outcomes from involvement in participation are unlikely to be immediate and as a result there is a need for mechanisms to provide incremental feedback to young people as an important strategy in sustaining their confidence in the process.

- » **Improving review, monitoring, evaluation and dissemination of participation activity:** A major challenge to the development of effective participation practice with seldom-heard young people relates to the scarcity of evaluation research undertaken in the area. Participation initiatives often do not build in processes of review, monitoring, evaluation and dissemination, thus restricting the potential to identify the effectiveness of process, method and outcome.
- » **Embracing a 'whole-systems' approach:** Participation must be embedded within the infrastructure of an organisation if participation is to be effective. Without a 'whole-systems' approach that is committed to participation (*culture*), an adequate level of planning, development and resourcing of participation (*structure*), the methods, skills and knowledge to engage young people (*practice*) and a system to monitor and evaluate participation activity (*review*), the likelihood of organisations creating opportunities for effective and meaningful participation are greatly reduced.

5. What are the conclusions?

The heterogeneity of what constitutes seldom-heard young people requires diverse responses to promote their inclusion and involvement in meaningful participation activity and points to the need for *principles* to guide practice, rather than uniform, prescriptive approaches that are unlikely to enable young people to participate in ways that are appropriate to their unique circumstances. The principles of best practice identified by this study include:

1. Improving seldom-heard young people's access to participation opportunities

The review draws together the following approaches for improving seldom-heard young people's access to participation opportunities:

- » adult recognition of seldom-heard young people's capacity to act as agents of change;
- » removing or minimising practical and personal barriers to their participation;
- » skills training and support to enable them to take part in decision-making, with an acknowledgement that as their confidence and skills develop, so too will their ability to make decisions autonomously;
- » viewing seldom-heard young people as experts in their own lives, participating in relation to their own experiences, rather than on behalf of the wider population of young people;
- » directly targeting the involvement of seldom-heard young people in mainstream participation structures and mechanisms, such as reserving seats and co-option;
- » developing partnerships with organisations and front-line practitioners who represent or work directly with seldom-heard young people.

2. Enhancing participation experiences for seldom-heard young people

Improving the quality of seldom-heard young people's participation experiences necessitates:

- » approaches that are moulded by young people's preferences and needs;
- » being afforded opportunities to participate in relation to matters that are relevant to their lives;
- » access to different forms of participation (e.g. consultative, collaborative or child or youth-led) tailored to their preferences and the type of decision-making involved;
- » opportunities to act as agents of change in bringing about improvements in their own lives and the lives of others, if they so wish;
- » having a sense of ownership of the participation process;
- » flexibility and creativity with regard to the types of participation methods offered;
- » the provision of opportunities for informal as well as formal participation;
- » an approach based on the principles of 'youth involvement';
- » demonstrated outcomes from participation activity that make a difference to their lives and the lives of others;
- » facilitators and practitioners being aware of what constitutes meaningful participation for seldom-heard young people and what their expectations are in terms of the participation process.

3. Adopting a whole-systems approach to participation

The development of quality participation opportunities for seldom-heard young people must be located within the broader context of a whole-systems approach that encompasses:

- » the development of a culture of participation within organisations that work directly with seldom-heard young people through awareness-raising and skills training;
- » expansion of the research base on participation;
- » further integration of young people's participation structures within existing political structures;
- » adequate resources to fund the enhancement of participation practice.

6. What are the recommendations?

This section presents the key recommendations emerging from the study.

1. Training for practitioners

Provision of comprehensive training and support for organisations working with seldom-heard young people is recommended, focusing on the development of skills to promote meaningful participation practice and to utilise the output or knowledge generated from young people's participation activity.

2. Research and dissemination

Participation initiatives need to incorporate processes of review, monitoring, evaluation and dissemination so that elements of effective practice can be identified. Evaluation methodologies need to address both the process and the outcome of participation, and where possible to trace the impacts of participation on decisions using indicators developed together with the young people involved. Furthermore, knowledge-sharing and development is vital if national capacity for participation by seldom-heard young people is to be strengthened.

3. Resources

Resources are essential to create meaningful participation opportunities for seldom-heard young people in order to overcome barriers to participation, to raise awareness and to develop organisational and national capacity in the field of participation.

4. Integration of young people's participation structures with mainstream structures

While this occurs to some degree within existing participation structures for young people in Ireland, there is considerable scope for further integration.

7. What are the benefits of the study?

The findings of this review highlight the complexity inherent in the term 'seldom-heard' young people and the corresponding requirement to incorporate flexibility, diversity and creativity in promoting and enhancing their participation experiences. A synthesis of the available information from the national and international literature provides the basis from which best practice principles may be developed in the field of participation with seldom-heard young people.

8. What are the challenges and limitations of the study?

The challenges of this study arose from the dearth of documented evaluations of participation initiatives specific to seldom-heard young people, both in the published literature and in the unpublished 'grey' literature. Documented accounts of participation initiatives tend to be confined to descriptions of the activity undertaken, with less information on the types of young people involved, the processes employed to recruit and engage them, and details of the outcomes from participation. The absence of a solid knowledge base means that the impact of public participation on young people's lives is not always clear.

Note No. 6 Research Briefing: Promoting the participation of seldom-heard young people: Review of literature

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