



An Roinn Leanaí
agus Gnóthai Óige
Department of
Children and Youth Affairs



IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL
An Chomhairle um Thaighde in Éirinn

Research Development Initiative

Research Briefing Note

Children and young people's everyday experiences of participation in decision-making at home, in school and in their communities

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 and the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government. The study was undertaken by Dr. Deirdre Horgan (Primary Investigator) *et al* of University College Cork.* The report was independently peer-reviewed and published in 2015.

2. What is the study's purpose?

The aim of this study is to explore the extent to which children and young people, aged 7-17 years, living in contemporary urban and rural Ireland are able to participate and influence matters affecting them in their homes, schools and communities.

The investigative focus of the study is shaped by Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), more generally referred to as the Participation Article, which states:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

The specific objectives are to:

- » consider the extent to which children and young people have a voice and influence in matters affecting them at home, in their school, and in the community where they live;
- » identify the facilitators and barriers to giving children and young people a voice and influence in matters affecting them in each of these settings;
- » examine the type of participatory approaches used in each setting and identify examples of good practice;
- » distil key messages for consideration by parents and families, teachers, schools, communities and policy-makers in Ireland.

This briefing note summarises the method of research, key findings, conclusions and recommendations of the study. The full report is available on www.dcyia.ie

3. How was the study undertaken?

This project employed a mixed methodology, comprising a review of the literature on children and young people's participation and qualitative fieldwork involving a variety of creative oral and written methods. The methodologies developed were child-centred and engaged children and young people as partners in the research process from the outset. Key stages were:

- » A project Steering Group was established at the outset to guide the research. It comprised the project team, members of the DCYA Participation Unit, a representative from the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, a number of key stakeholders from schools and youth and community settings, and a parent representative from a parent advisory group.
- » A children's advisory group (comprising children aged 7-12) and a young people's advisory group (comprising young people aged 12-17) were established to ensure that the project maintained its focus on issues that children and young people considered to be of importance to them in their everyday lives. Moreover, they assisted in the development of the data collection instruments, ensuring that they were age-appropriate and relevant for use in the data collection, and undertook some initial data analysis.
- » Children and young people participated in 10 focus group interviews. In total, 94 children and young people were involved in this study as respondents and advisory group members.
- » The adult sample consisted of 34 parents, teachers, school principals and community stakeholder participants, and involved 24 one-to-one interviews and 3 focus groups interviews.
- » The study employed purposeful and convenience sampling. Children and young people were recruited through schools and community settings. Principals and teachers were recruited from the primary and second-level schools that agreed to participate. The remaining adult stakeholders were recruited through networking by the research team and by direct contact with leaders of community-based organisations. Efforts were made to achieve an overall gender balance in the research sample.

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

All participants were recruited from the 3 designated geographic locations of Dublin City, Cork City and Sligo County, thus representing urban and rural environments with a diversity of backgrounds.

- » The study utilised child-centred participative research methods, in accordance with Article 12 of the UNCRC, and sought to provide fun, safe spaces for the children and young people who took part in the research. The research instruments were all developed specifically for this project and included visual methods, verbal methods and other interactive methods that helped capture their lived experiences of participation. These included games; wall charts; floor mats; child-friendly leaflets on the UNCRC and the project itself; and semi-structured focus group/interview schedules specific to children aged 7-12 and young people aged 12-17.
- » Analysis of data used a systematic thematic method. Both the children's and young people's advisory groups contributed to the analysis process by identifying important participation issues from the raw data generated from the focus group interviews with children and young people.

4. What are the key findings?

4.1 Key messages from children and young people

- » Children and young people felt that adults should listen to them because of their status as citizens, their unique perspectives and their specialist expertise and knowledge on matters related to their lives.
- » Children and young people generally accepted the authority of adults regarding decision-making, although they were more likely to negotiate the adult-child power difference as they grew older. What they found frustrating and unfair was the low status adults often accorded to their opinions and the lack of explanation and feedback on how children and young people's opinions had been taken into account during a decision-making process.

4.2 Key findings relating to each of the domains

Home

- » There was a general sense from children and young people who participated in this study that they had a voice and some level of influence in their homes.
- » The key areas of decision-making that children and young people appear to be involved in included consumption activities such as food and clothes, leisure pursuits and friends.
- » Generally, children and young people felt that it was legitimate for parents to have greater influence over some issues, although they were more likely to negotiate these as they grew older.

- » Barriers to their participation and decision-making at home, as highlighted by the children and young people, included:
 - › parents not listening to them effectively;
 - › adults' views on age and maturity/capacity;
 - › lack of parental trust;
 - › tokenistic practices regarding participation at home.
- » Enablers of children and young people's voice in the home included:
 - › spaces where discussion can happen at home;
 - › good family relationships;
 - › being listened to and encouraged by parents;
 - › trust and growing levels of independence with age;
 - › decisions being perceived as fair and having the rationale for decisions explained to them by parents.

School

- » Most children and young people who participated in this research were generally dissatisfied with their level of input into decision-making processes in school.
- » Schools were mostly viewed as hierarchical institutions where even formal participation structures, such as student councils, were experienced as undemocratic and ineffective.
- » Interestingly, however, student councils were recognised by some children and young people in this study as facilitating participation in the school context, particularly by those who did not have access to them (e.g. primary school children or young people in the Junior Cycle at secondary level).
- » Barriers to children and young people's participation in the school context, as identified by them, included:
 - › age and maturity;
 - › the autocratic and hierarchical nature of the school system;
 - › the lack of opportunities and space in the school week for their voice to be heard;
 - › lack of or poor relationships with key personnel in schools;
 - › poor information systems in schools, whereby policy changes or decisions regarding disciplinary procedures are not effectively communicated to children.
- » Enablers of children and young people's participation in school settings included:
 - › adult recognition of their agency with increasing age and maturity;
 - › access to scheduled and unscheduled structures for participation;
 - › appropriate spaces in the school timetable for discussion;
 - › positive relationships with school personnel;
 - › a school culture that is facilitative of student voice.

Community

- » Children (aged 7-12) found it difficult to envisage what was meant by their 'community' and tended to refer to 'community' as something that is 'outside of home and school'. One way of focusing on their experience of community was to explore the activities in which they engage in their local areas.
- » 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.
- » Children and young people were generally dissatisfied with their input into decision-making processes in relation to their local community.
- » However, those involved in youth clubs or projects were extremely positive about their experiences of having a voice in those specific settings.
- » Barriers to their participation in the community, as identified by children and young people, included:
 - › negative adult attitudes generally towards young people in the community;
 - › children and young people's lack of awareness of how decisions are made at local level and how they could engage with decision-making processes;
 - › the lack of identified 'spaces' for children and young people in communities;
 - › poor access to facilities and activities in which young people are interested in engaging and the impact of the economic recession on this.
- » Enablers of children and young people's participation in the community included:
 - › adult recognition of their agency with increasing age and maturity;
 - › the existence of some dedicated 'youth spaces' in the community for them, such as youth cafés and youth projects;
 - › readiness of adults in dedicated 'youth spaces' to listen to them;
 - › sport as a key site of participation in the community.

5. What are the conclusions?

The study reached the following overall conclusions:

- 1.** The research indicates that children and young people have varying levels of space, voice, audience and influence from one sphere of their lives to another.
- 2.** The findings indicate that a significant majority of those children and young people who participated in the study feel that they are heard and do influence decisions in day-to-day decision-making within the family.

- 3.** School is the area that emerges as least conducive to listening to children and young people. While many participants highlighted very positive relationships with individual school personnel who encouraged and supported their engagement, there were an equal number who did not have such positive experiences. Children and young people had very low expectations of schools being participatory sites and recognised that they had little say in anything apart from peripheral matters in their school.
- 4.** The experience of children and young people, while positive in structured projects in the community, was very negative where there was no forum for them to gather and spend time with each other in youth-friendly public spaces in their local area.
- 5.** Children and young people in this study identified important decision-making issues relating to their everyday experiences. For example, they wanted to have places where they could gather and spend time with each other or 'youth-friendly' public spaces; to have decision-making power in relation to school uniforms and more information on school disciplinary policy; and to make policing practices fairer in disadvantaged areas. These 'wants' point to a need to focus on the more 'organic' spaces within everyday settings where children and young people can benefit from the development of a culture of participation and active citizenship, and gradually take on more responsibilities and active roles according to their abilities and inclinations.

6. What are the recommendations?

The key recommendations emerging from this study are as follows:

1. Recommendations for parents

Parents should consider the need to:

- » create times and spaces for discussion in the family;
- » listen actively to children and young people;
- » explain the rationale for decisions that are made.

2. Recommendations for schools

Children and young people identified the importance, for them, of:

- » ensuring their genuine involvement in decision-making in the school context;
- » a participative school culture;
- » positive teacher attitudes towards children and young people;
- » an appropriate learning environment with good facilities;
- » a more flexible and creative curriculum.

For more information, please contact: Dr. Deirdre Horgan, School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork.
Tel: (021) 490 2869; E-mail: d.horgan@ucc.ie

Check out www.dcy.gov.ie for full report of study

3. Recommendations for community stakeholders

Stakeholders in the community should consider the need to:

- » facilitate children and young people's access to the community, including through the location, timing of and information about activities and facilities;
- » use informal, fun and flexible processes of participation;
- » include youth representation on local committees;
- » gather children and young people's views on issues of importance to them locally in their communities;
- » listen to the views of children and young people.

7. What are the benefits of the study?

To date, much national and international research on children and young people's participation and decision-making has focused on the opportunities for participation offered by formal channels and analysed the extent to which children and young people interact with formal participation and decision-making structures in schools and communities. Far less investigation has been done on their more everyday interactions and the routine, informal and unstructured opportunities for meaningful participation in their everyday lives. Furthermore, there has been a scarcity of research on the extent to which children participate or have a voice in the home.

The strength of this study lies in its focus on children and young people's participation in decision-making in their everyday lives. It seeks to elicit their views on what might improve their opportunities for voice and participation, as well as the level of influence they could effect within their home, school and local community. The study begins to address the gap in the Irish and international context, to some extent, by providing a snapshot of the nature and scope of children and young people's participation in Ireland today and by suggesting areas that require further research. Such research can help to produce participative practices and policies that are child-centred and appropriate to children's contemporary circumstances.

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

Some methodological limitations and challenges presented during the planning and conduct of the study. Firstly, due to the constraints of the daily school routines and the demands of curriculum delivery, it was not possible for the research team to build a rapport with the children and young people prior to data collection. However, the research team made every effort to ensure that the time spent with the children and young people during focus group interviews was both an enjoyable, relaxed and productive experience.

Secondly, the length of the project did not facilitate the possibility of return visits to conduct a validation of the findings with the participants. However, the data were reviewed with the children and youth advisory groups in order to test their validity.

Finally, while this research provides a detailed snapshot of three geographic areas in Ireland, it does not purport to represent the entire country or the good practice that is happening throughout Ireland, particularly in schools.