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Article

Consultations with Children and Young People and Their Impact on Policy in Ireland

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Abstract

This article will examine the participatory structures for consulting with children in Ireland. It provides a background with reference to the National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-making (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015)—the first of its kind in Europe—its key objectives, and recent progress in meeting these. Examples of two consultations with children, on health and afterschool care, and their impact on policy, will be discussed. The potential for consultations of this kind to influence and child-proof policy will be reflected on; the argument in this article is that there are different levels of participation for different purposes. The author worked with colleagues on two national consultations in 2015 and 2016 involving children between 5 to 17 years of age utilising a variety of child-centred activities. The methods are strengths-based consultative approaches that allow children to identify and explore issues based on what they know and experience in their everyday lives. Initial reflections indicate that consultations with children can be an important and challenging tool in accessing their views on policy issues of importance to them which help to child-proof policy and ensure it is in the best interests of children.

Keywords

child participation; children’s rights; consultations; Ireland; policymaking

Issue

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1. Introduction

The Committee on the Rights of the Child suggested that the ways in which policy is developed and implemented is reflective of children’s place in society and the political priority accorded to their rights (United Nations, 2003, para. 10). This article aims to show the potential of children’s participation in national policymaking to mobilize policy change and to contextualize policy discussions.

The article briefly examines the child participatory agenda with a specific focus on consultation exercises. The policy context for children and young people’s participation in Ireland is discussed including the participatory structures and mechanisms established in the past 25 years since Ireland’s ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Child ‘voice’ in policy in Ireland is then reviewed through examination of two recent government consultation exercises with children and young people—consultations with 7 to 17 year olds on healthy lifestyles to inform the National Obesity Policy and Action Plan (Department of Health [DoH], 2016) and consultations with 5 to 12 year olds to inform the Action Plan on School Aged Childcare (Department of Children and Youth Affairs [DCYA] & Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2017). The contention is that that there are different levels of participation for different purposes and that consultations, even as one-off exercises, can be an effective form of participation. The article concludes with some thoughts on auditing children’s participation in consultation.

2. Child Participation

2.1. Influences on the Child Participation Agenda

The child participation agenda has been influenced by the UNCRC emphasis on children as rights holders,
Participation Article is widely recognized as the basis (2014) outlining that, in the case of children and young people (2003) puts it, how to include children as real partners in social inclusion, 2017, Volume 5, Issue 3, Pages many ways, such as: Policymaking is one of the most challenging arenas in which children’s participation rights are implemented (Perry-Hazan, 2016). Barriers to securing children’s rights through policy include significant power gaps between children and policymakers (Nir & Perry-Hazan, 2016). Government-led or official processes may function as a form of social control rather than empowering child participants (Cele & van der Burgt, 2015; Nolas, 2015). In this regard, Nir and Perry-Hazan (2016) refer to ‘framed participation’ which grants children decision-making power, but constrains this power to within confined boundaries where adults determine the scope of participation. This requires us to question who controls the space, who sets the agenda, who decides who to invite, who con...
trols the resources and above all, who decides what children and young people are allowed to do and what is prohibited (Shier et al., 2014). Further related to power issues, adultism or discrimination based on stereotype has been well documented in descriptions of participatory initiatives with children (Sinclair, 2004). For example, Perry-Hazan (2016) documents reactions of adult officials to children in committees in the Israeli parliament as fawning and infantilising. Exclusion of children who come from disempowered or minority families, younger children, those less academically and socially successful, and ‘ordinary children’ (Collins, Augsberger, & Gecker, 2016; Nairn, Sligo, & Freeman, 2006; Perry-Hazan, 2016) is another potential problem with participatory initiatives. Other barriers include institutional and procedural constraints (Adu-Gyamfi, 2013; Faulkner, 2009); and difficulty in guaranteeing the accountability of the participation process (Shier et al., 2014). Finally, Cele and van der Burgt (2015), discussing children's participation in physical planning in Sweden, point out that participants in their study comprising local planners, landscape architects, and researchers equated participation with consultation projects, but, few knew how to actually integrate the results of these methods into planning practice.

Co-operation between children and experienced adults can go beyond individual personal gains for the children involved (Kjørholt, 2002), with the potential to translate innovative ideas to effective practices and policy developments (Perry-Hazan, 2016). For this to happen, however, there must be consideration of what can make participation in policymaking meaningful and impactful for children and young people. Locating children's views alongside the views of the stakeholders is critical. Children's participation is often removed from the time and space where decisions are ultimately taken (Tisdall, 2015). When children's participation platforms are separated from those of adults, it is more likely to be tokenistic and to lack any impact, whereas joint projects have the potential of being more influential on policy (Gal, 2015). Marshall, Byrne and Lundy (2015, p. 378) in their study of children's direct contacts with policymakers in Northern Ireland concluded that this type of engagement enabled policymakers to understand children's lived experiences of their decisions more fully and resulted in these 'duty bearers' being more likely to follow up with meaningful actions in relation to the issues expressed by young people. Requirements for engagement of children in public decision-making include transparent and informative processes, in which children are informed regarding the scope of their potential influence and feel that their views have been acknowledged, valued, and taken seriously (Marshall et al., 2015). Research appears to indicate that most children and young people are more concerned that participation is meaningful and that decisions are explained to them rather than that their views are always acted upon (Davey, Shaw, & Burke, 2010, in Horgan, Forde, Parkes, & Martin, 2015). However, in public matters their participation may come from a desire to make a difference (Gal & Faedi Duramy, 2015) and so can they often be disappointed with a lack of real change. Assessing the impact of children’s participation, then, is an important step in including children in the policy conversation. Yet, the field of participatory policymaking is marked by a lack of evaluation, effective monitoring and follow-up on the impact of children's views on decisions (Shier et al., 2014).

3. Policy Context for Children and Young People's Participation in Ireland

In many countries, recent policy frameworks for addressing the well-being of young people have increasingly adopted a social inclusion approach and emphasise more avenues for the voices of young people (Head, 2011, p. 541). Article 12 of the UNCRC and its incumbent obligations has resulted in the Irish Government developing policies and practices that support the participation of children in decision-making across issues that affect their lives. The commitment to involving children and young people in decision-making became national public policy in 2000 with the publication of the National Children's Strategy which states: ‘children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity’ (Department of Health and Children, 2000, p. 11). Its successor, the National Framework for Children and Young People, commits to ensuring that ‘Children are respected, connected and contributing’ as one of its national outcomes and sets 'Listen to and involve children and young people' as a transformational goal (DCYA, 2014, p. 7).

3.1. The Participatory Structures for Consulting with Children in Ireland

Following the adoption of the UNCRC, various countries including Australia, Israel, Sweden, the Netherlands, and the UK established mechanisms facilitating children’s participation at multiple governmental levels from local and regional to key government departments through child and youth councils, advisory boards, summits etc. (Perry-Hazan, 2016). In the Irish context, a Citizen Participation Unit, established within the DCYA in 2011, has been key to the development of participatory mechanisms and initiatives for children and young people. The role of the Unit is to ensure that children and young people have a voice in the design, delivery and monitoring of services and policies that affect their lives, at national and local level (DCYA, n.d.). Key structures for achieving this include Dáil na nÓg (national youth parliament), Comhairle na nÓg (local youth councils), and a children and young people's participation support team. All of the work on Article 12 since Ireland's ratification of the UNCRC has culminated in the publication in 2015 of the National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-Making (DCYA, 2015), the first of its kind in Europe.
The strategy is rooted in Article 12 of the UNCRC, and informed by Laura Lundy (2009)'s non-hierarchical, rights-based model of participation, emphasising space, voice, audience and influence elements to involving children in decision-making. The goal of the strategy is to ensure that children and young people have a voice in their individual and collective everyday lives and it prioritises key spaces and places where children are entitled to have a voice including their local communities, education, health and well-being, and the courts and legal system. A key objective of the strategy is central to the focus of this article, namely, ‘mainstreaming the participation of children and young people in the development of policy, legislation and research’ (DCYA, 2015, p. 4). Importantly, it highlights the role of policy-makers in realising this goal, committing Government departments and agencies and other stakeholders to involve children and young people in the development of policies, legislation and research.

4. Child Voice in Policy—Consultations

4.1. Recent Consultations with Children and Young People and Their Impact on Policy

The Irish government has conducted numerous consultations with children since the early 2000’s on a range of policy issues. The DCYA claims that ‘several of these consultations have resulted in significant developments in public policy and services, aimed at improving the lives of children and young people’ (DCYA, n.d.). The author was part of a team recently commissioned by the DCYA to attend, record and write reports of two such consultations for government departments. The following discussion provides an overview of these consultations and briefly examines their initial impact on policy.

4.2. Consultations with Children and Young People on Healthy Living

One of the commitments of The National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-Making (DCYA, 2015) was that the Department of Health would consult with young people as part of the development of a National Obesity Policy and any health promotion campaigns arising from that strategy. The consultations were conducted by the DCYA at two events, one with 48 children aged 8 to 12 and another with 34 young people aged 13 to 17, in city centre locations in Dublin. Children were recruited through the Irish Primary Principals’ Network (IPPN) with efforts made to include a range of primary school types including Catholic, non-denominational, Irish language, co-educational, single sex, urban and rural schools. Young people were recruited from the 31 Comhairle na nÓg throughout the country. Considerable focus was placed on ensuring that good representation was achieved among participants regarding socio-economic status, gender, ethnicnicity and geography. Methods used were innovative, age-appropriate and strengths based including warm-up exercises such as listening games, lifelines divided into key childhood stages in which children and young people reflected on their life experience to date regarding supports and obstacles to a healthy lifestyle, body mapping where the outline of one of the children’s body was drawn onto a large sheet of paper and the children were asked to draw/write on the outline the things that make them healthy, floor mats divided into three sections: ‘at home’, ‘at school’ and ‘in your area’ where children were asked to think about what can make a child healthier in each of these contexts, world cafe workshops where key topic discussion zones were created to obtain more detail, and voting on the most important issues identified as barriers and facilitators of healthy living. These exercises were all done in small groups of six to eight with adult facilitators. The Healthy Lifestyles Have Your Say consultation report (DCYA/DoH, 2016) was published and launched alongside the National Obesity Policy and Action Plan (DoH, 2016).

The children (8 to 12 year olds) voted on the issues they felt were most important to a healthy lifestyle. They identified the following themes, in this order: choice of food, in particular more fruit and vegetables, drinking milk and water, getting enough vitamins and going to healthy restaurants; getting sufficient sleep; exercise and activity; not smoking; and supporting parents in enabling their children to be healthier. The following factors, listed in order of popularity, were identified by the young people (13 to 17 year olds) as facilitating a healthy lifestyle: magazines identifying images that have been photo shopped; good mental health and support; nutrition clinics; PE in schools that suits everyone’s needs; school canteens selling healthy options; parents providing healthy food choices; listening to children; good teachers who guide students and relieve stress; and youth clubs.

The consultations impacted on the National Obesity Policy in a number of ways. The views of the participants assisted in framing the multi-dimensional approach incorporating the family, as well as the broader health environment of school, health services, local area planning and other determinants of health. Some specific actions in the policy which were informed by the views of children and young people include developing a ‘whole of school’ approach to healthy lifestyles programmes including the curriculum, on nutrition, physical activity and exercise, smoking, alcohol and mental wellbeing; developing and implementing training programmes for and by teachers on overweight and obesity, including anti-stigma; provision of potable water in schools; expanding parenting programmes that incorporate healthy lifestyle and behavioural change; development of guidelines and support materials for those working in urban development and planning in relation to reducing the obesogenic environment; and providing clinical services specifically for children. Overall, however, it is difficult to know what
the process was in terms of utilising and prioritising children’s views from the consultations given that some issues of importance to them, including PE in schools and issues related to mental health, are not fore fronted in the Action Plan.

4.3. Afterschool Care Consultations

Following commitments made in A Programme for Partnership Government (Department of the Taoiseach, 2016), and informed by consultations with a number of key stakeholders including children, the DCYA and the Department of Education and Skills published the Action Plan on School Age Childcare setting out actions to lead to a quality affordable system of ‘out of school hours’ childcare with a range of choices for parents and their children. Children were recruited by the DCYA from primary schools, as before, through the IPPN. Consultations with children were held as six one-off events lasting approximately three hours in a number of neutral settings around the country with 177 primary school children in total comprising 81 children aged 5 to 7 years and 96 children aged 8 to 12 years. The consultations with 5 to 7 year olds were conducted in their schools to enable smaller group work in a more familiar environment and were shorter in duration. The aims were to identify what children like and dislike about their current afterschool care arrangements and the places where children would most like to be cared for after school. Methods were strengths-based consultative approaches that allowed children to identify and explore issues based on what they know and experience in their everyday lives and on what they would like to change or improve on those issues. The consultations consisted of Ice-breaker games, a ‘Post-it’ activity to identify where children are currently cared for after school, a Placemat exercise where children were asked to draw/write what they do and what they like to do after school on specially designed large floor mats, a Timeline activity with children asked to design their ideal after-school experience on rectangular mats with a number of clouds depicting stages of the day after school, and Voting where children were given coloured cards to draw/write what they don’t like about their day after school and put these into a ballot box. The consultations were subject to the standard ethical guidance and procedures for research with children (DCYA, 2017). All of the DCYA facilitators were very skilled and experienced in participatory work with children and young people and were police vetted.

The findings from the consultations with children commissioned for the Action Plan indicate that children want to be able to relax and feel comfortable after school. A home-like environment was preferred, with outdoor and indoor play identified as a priority of the afterschool experience by children of all ages. Relationships with family, extended family, friends, childminders and other carers were noted as being very important to children. Eating and cooking were also identified as important activities for children after-school. Children expressed a dislike of being in structured environments with rules. Other dislikes included not being treated appropriately for their age along with lack of food choice.

The consultation report (DCYA, 2017) was extensively referred to in the Action Plan and impacted on it in a number of ways. In terms of overall approach, the Action Plan states that the school age childcare model developed recognises the rights of children under the UN-CRC and that the voice of children is critical to informing policy in this area. The Programme for Government, 2016, which prompted this policy contained proposals to support and expand quality after-school care based on utilising existing primary school buildings. While perhaps addressing issues related to locality and costs, this clearly would not address the limitations of such a direction as identified by children. The Action Plan (DCYA & DES, 2017, p. 7), while still committed to the maximising the use of schools and existing community facilities which have suitable environments available for SAC ‘where demand exists and where it can be facilitated by the school patron/ trustees’, acknowledges that a home-like environment was preferred by many of the children consulted. ‘If children’s preference is to go home after school and enjoy certain patterns and activities, and it is not possible to facilitate this, then the system of SAC must seek to reproduce their preferences in a variety of settings, other than their home’ (DCYA & DES, 2017, p. 62), including exploring the potential role of the youth sector and ensuring quality standards in physical environment, adult/child ratios, the provision of appropriate food and nutrition, access to outdoor play, inclusion, and the health, well-being and protection of the child in all settings used. However, as with the previous consultation discussed, there are some aspects which did not find their way into the Action Plan. For example, while homework emerged strongly in the older children’s timelines and reflects the reality of children’s educational experiences and the practice of homework in the Irish education system, this is not dealt with in the Action Plan.

5. Auditing Children’s Consultations

Drawing on the literature and the author’s own experiences of participatory research and policy consultations with children and young people, the following are a number of issues which give some sense of how meaningful for children and how impactful on policy the consultation experience is. Together these could comprise some of the elements of an audit on children’s participation in policy.

5.1. Timeliness

The timing of consultations with children can be critical. Children are often brought into the process too late and are only asked to comment or critique existing plans (Cele & van der Burgt, 2015). Yet, Tisdall (2015) notes that
while a last minute consultation may be pointless, too
early may also be futile and theoretical in nature. A fur-
ther problem that has been identified is the difference
in time perspectives between children and adult stake-
holders. Cele and van der Burgt (2015) argue that chil-
dren need to see a result of their participation as soon
as possible. As planners and policy-makers often have
perspectives that reach over years, there must be some
more immediate change to show children that they have
been listened to. In this regard, the National Obesity Pol-
icy and Action Plan and the Action Plan on School Age
Childcare were both published relatively quickly (within
nine to ten months of the consultations with children be-
ing completed) which, on the surface at least, appears to
indicate to those children involved that they had fed into
and informed national policy issues.

5.2. Participants

The mix of participants in terms of background, age and
whether or not they were regularly consulted children is
an important consideration (Lansdown & O’Kane, 2014).
One of the consultations included Comhairle participants
who could be considered ‘youth leaders’ (Checkoway,
2011), but both consultations invited participants who
were involved as a one-off exercise and were from a
variety of school types, geographic locations and socio-
economic backgrounds. With regard to the age of par-
ticipants, Irish government departments have tended to
consult with older children aged 8 years and upwards.
This partly reflects a general societal view of younger chil-
dren as less competent (Ahsan, 2009; Lansdown, 2005)
and demonstrates that a child’s participation is often val-
ued in terms of how well she can adapt to adult prac-
tices (Ceile & van der Burgt, 2015). The afterschool care
consultations, representing a new departure in practice,
included children from 5 years of age with DCYA adult
facilitators who had received specialised training from
Early Childhood Ireland in age-appropriate creative en-
gagement with younger children.

5.3. Child-Friendly

The consultation process was child friendly using a va-
riety of age appropriate methods, including visual and
verbal games, facilitated by trained staff, with plenty of
breaks, and with refreshments provided for longer ses-
sions with older children. While consultations generally
took place in neutral venues, in some cases this was con-
strained by practical issues. For example, the deci-
sion to consult with younger children (aged 5 to 7) in
smaller groups meant that these consultations had to
take place within the children’s school settings because
of their earlier school finishing times. The potentially
negative impact of the more structured and highly con-
trolled space of the school on children’s participation
has been explored in research (Horgan, 2016; Spyrou,
2011). However, findings from these consultations indi-
cate that the spatial context did not silence their opin-
ions but also reflects the fact that most of the consulta-
tions were conducted outside of school settings to bal-
ance this potential. Children and young people are of-
ten dependent on whether or not child friendly versions
of consultation documents are produced, and the ways
in which these are made available by adult gatekeepers
(Byrne & Lundy, 2015). While, no children’s version of the
consultation reports were produced, the reports them-
selves were written in an accessible way with short sum-
maries, key messages and lots of use of children’s own
words and drawings.

5.4. Audience

Ensuring that children’s views are communicated to
those with the responsibility to listen is critical. The
Lundy checklist on audience in the National Strategy on
Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-
making (DCYA, 2015) asks, ‘is there a process for com-
municating children’s views? do children know who their
views are being communicated to? and, does that per-
son/body have the power to make the decisions?’ Chil-
dren were told at the outset of each consultation of
the purpose of the exercise and the government depart-
ment and Minister with responsibility to produce the
policy informed by their views. In some cases officials
from the relevant government departments attended
part or all of the consultation. The process for commu-
nicating children’s views was in the form of a report of
the consultations written by academics, who attended
the consultations and are familiar with participatory re-
search/consultation work with children, for the DCYA and
presented to the government departments responsible
for the relevant policies on school age care and obesity.

5.5. Information Gained

In some cases what is considered to be ‘good’ informa-
tion gained from children is information that ‘can be
used’ by professionals and is ‘planner-friendly’ (Nairn
et al., 2006). In these consultations, the team of fa-
cilitators were all trained in strengths-based participa-
tory approaches with children, so that while discussions
were fun and quite broadly based, they were also ‘pol-
icy friendly’ in the sense that they asked children about
their experiences and opinions on healthy living includ-
ing barriers and contributors or what they liked and dis-
liked about their current afterschool care and their views
on an ideal afterschool care experience.

5.6. Dissemination

‘Deep participation’ could be defined as that which in-
volves young people in formulating the research ques-
tions right through to dissemination of the findings
(Ansell, Robson, Hajdu & van Blerk, 2012, in Horgan,
2016). Children’s involvement in disseminating the find-

ings of the consultations varied. Representative children and young people involved in the Healthy Lifestyles consultations were invited to the launch of the National Obesity Policy and asked to present a brief overview of their views and experiences. The DCYA prepared the children by briefing them on the consultation report findings and getting them to prioritise what they wanted to say. The launch of the school-age care policy did not involve the children. The process appears to be very much led by the Department which is developing the policy and has commissioned the consultation report. The DCYA sent copies of the consultation reports to all the schools that took part and asked them to let the children who participated see the reports.

5.7. Impact

Lansdown and O’Kane (2014) refer to wider external outcomes as those which indicate that a concrete change has happened in the community, or at local or national level, as a consequence of children’s participation (including increased resources, regulation in an area). Returning to Lundy’s checklist on Influence (DCYA, 2015): were children’s views considered and taken seriously by those with the power to effect change? and, have the children been provided with feedback as to the reasons for decisions taken? There is evidence of children’s views being incorporated into the final policy statements and Action Plans as discussed earlier, although the process as to which issues were prioritised is unclear. However, it appears that there is limited feedback to children involved in the consultations other than the policy reports themselves and media coverage surrounding the launches.

5.8. Continuity

Tisdall (2015) and Marshall et al. (2015) identify peaks with regard to children affecting public policy in contrast to ongoing sustainable inclusion of children in public policy formation. It is quite early in the process to evaluate this with regard to the Irish context given that the National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-making was published only two years ago, although activity since the publication has been strong. For practice to be meaningful, however, engagement with children must not end at the consultation, but requires ongoing dialogue.

6. Conclusions

Children’s right to participate in public decision-making is increasingly being translated into practice in Ireland. Yet, we are only beginning to mine the potential of consultation as an aspect of child inclusion in public policy-making in Ireland. Reflection on the implications of such consultation practices for policies and services, drawing on recent results and analyses, is apposite. Generally, the consultations discussed appear to achieve in terms of timeliness, participant mix, child-friendly methods, connection to policymaker audience, and quality of information gained. However, real progress must be made in the areas of dissemination, impact and continuity. Policy development addressing the priorities of children, as discussed by them in consultations, could be viewed as child-proofed and child-informed policy. Given the arguments proposed in this article, that there are different levels of child participation for different purposes and that deep participation is not required for every purpose, consultations can be an important tool of the participation process. They contribute to policy grounded in children’s realities and produce more responsive policy and services. However, to achieve this such consultations need to be organised and facilitated with knowledge, skill and respect for children’s competencies as social actors, as well as with clear ideas on how to include the results from consultations in policy. There is considerable potential for child participatory policy development by embedding consultations of the kind discussed in this article as an integral part of policymaking, along with built in assessments of the long-term impact such views have on government delivery for children.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

References


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