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Children's participation: moving from the performative to the social.

Abstract

The body of work on children's participation has been valuable in asserting its importance. Nonetheless, participation is a contested concept and key challenges arise relating to its emphasis on age and voice, its focus on socialising the participative responsible citizen, and its failure to sufficiently recognise the range of participatory activities of children in their everyday lives. This article presents findings of a study on children's experiences of participation in their homes, schools and communities including the importance of the relational context, how everyday interactions rather than 'performative', formal structures for participation are valued by children and how their participation is limited by adult processes based on notions of competence and voice. It concludes with an argument for recognising and facilitating children's informal and social participation as well as new forms of democratic processes being developed by children to ensure the possibility of governance and over-responsibilisation of children is reduced.

Introduction

Childhood studies contribution to the growing child participation agenda, particularly its framing of children as agents and relational beings has had a significant influence on the rise of the 'participative child'. However, participation as it is currently constructed is a contested concept on a number of levels. It is critiqued for being a limited construction dominated by a Global North concept which emphasises participation conditional on age, maturity and voice (Wyness, 2013); for being a politically oriented civic activity focused on socialising the participative responsible citizen (Smith, 2012); and for not sufficiently recognising the range

of participatory activities of children in their everyday lives (Percy-Smith, 2015). The dominance of the UNCRC in the discourse may have contributed to the lack of theorisation of child participation highlighted by commentators more recently (Alderson, 2012; Alanen, 2014).

The article presents findings from a qualitative research study on children's participation in their homes, schools and communities in Ireland. Much research to date has focused on the opportunities for children and young people's participation offered by formal structures and channels. Less has emerged regarding the more mundane, routine informal opportunities for meaningful participation in children's everyday lives, and very little research exists examining children's performative (Pells, 2010) as well as their lived, social participation across all spheres of their interactions. In this regard, Percy Smith (2010) argues for the need to rethink children's participation as a more diverse set of social processes rooted in everyday environments and interactions. Our study aims to address that gap in the Irish context, to some extent, by providing a snapshot of these social processes occurring in children's homes, schools and local communities. This article is also informed by Larkins (2014) contention that, rather than calling all of children's citizenship practices participation, children's citizenship studies could usefully focus on children's everyday practices and children's interpretation of these recognising the types of citizenship that children aspire to including those which children do not participate in the citizenship which they are offered.

Some findings from the study are that a multitude of spaces for children's participation are in evidence (institutional/private and formal/informal) each with their own dynamic. Opportunities for children's participation appear to be far more limited in public spheres, particularly in schools. Adult attitudes and processes dominate in all of the spaces with many child participation opportunities dependent on age and competence, focused on the voiced and not reflective of the diversity of children in the spaces. The article concludes that despite all of

the concerns about participation initiatives, the self-understanding and other skills developed by children through such mechanisms can be utilised in all aspects of their lives (Raby, 2014). The need to broaden our understanding of participation to encompass the informal and social and to ensure that children are facilitated in their participation in these horizontal spaces is critical to ensuring that formal structures of the participation agenda do not dominate and that the possibility for governance and over-responsibilisation of children does not occur.

The child participation agenda

Tisdall et al., (2009: 419) argue that children's participation is not a new phenomenon, in fact, "Their very behaviour – going to or absenting themselves from school, their activities in public space, their everyday actions within their families, with peers, with others in their communities – are all forms of participation, of influencing change, of expressing their views." Participation is variously referred to as 'voice' or decision making and routinely based on Article 12 of the UNCRC. The children's rights perspective has emphasised the individualistic perspective (Mason and Bolzan, 2010), 'focusing on personal well-being and often equated to rather individualized forms of self-realization through social engagement' (Lansdown, 2010: 11). Increasingly, however, definitions of participation stress the collective and relational aspects of the endeavour (CoE, 2012). Hart describes participation as, "the process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives" (1992: 5), Moosa-Mitha defines it as "the expression of one's agency in the multiple relationships within which citizens are present in society" (2005: 375).

Article 12 of the UNCRC does not require children's autonomy nor is it restricted to choice. Rather, it requires children's views to be considered in decisions that impact on them. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child argues that although the term 'participation' itself

does not appear in the text of Article 12 it “has evolved and 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.” (UN Doc. CRC/C/CGC/12, para.2, 2009). The Irish National Framework for Children and Young People similarly describes participation as “a process, a way of working that engages children and young people on matters that concern them, individually and collectively. The process itself is respectful of the dignity of children and young people and the contribution they have to make, based on their unique experiences and perspectives’ (DCYA, 2014: 31).

While children’s rights are conveyed upon them by national law and international conventions, these are realized in the spaces of interpersonal, as well as person–state, relations (Roche, 1999). The relational space in which children’s citizenship and participation is practiced includes the home, school, local area and leisure facilities as well as contact with, what Jans (2004) refers to as, ‘figures of authority in peripheral zones.’ Locating participation in these spaces moves the discourse to more horizontal dimensions of relations. Everyday acts of participation which are meaningful for children are important but often neglected (for example children’s play) or defined as placing children at risk (in the case of care-giving or involvement in labour (Wihstutz, 2011).

The concept of participation can be usefully described, then, as a democratic task which is difference-centred, acted out in private and public spaces individually and collectively but is essentially a relational space, where children’s play, education and work all are considered acts of participation. It encompasses a broad understanding of participation children’s recognising everyday experiences.

The child participation agenda has emerged from a number of key influences, notably the UNCRC emphasis on children as rights holders, childhood studies perspectives on children as social actors, and acknowledgement of the relational nature of children's lives. All of these influences have underpinned moves to promote children's inclusion as participants rather than 'apprentice adults' in society (Alanen, 2009; Smith, 2012). The UNCRC has put children on the social and political agenda, thereby giving added impetus to theoretical debates about children and childhood (Thomas, 2012). Through the rights articulated and the principles underpinning it, the UNCRC accepts children as citizens in their own right and recognises their capabilities to determine their own lives. It frames children's lives and well-being in the context of rights and requires children to be recognized as discrete social units with rights of equal value to adults including their parents (Hayes, 2002). The UNCRC, particularly Article 12 or the 'Participation Article', is widely recognised as the basis for the child participation agenda in recent decades. It has been the catalyst for developing policy and practice based participatory initiatives with children internationally (Landsdown, 2010; Percy- Smith, 2010).

Childhood studies key contribution was a social constructionist position acknowledging the capacity of children to shape their own lives, the lives of those around them and the societies in which they live (James and James, 2008; Percy-Smith, 2010) locating children as competent social actors and challenging adultism and thus challenging a view of children as passive objects, who are properties of their families, to be shaped and socialised by adult teaching (Holloway and Valentine, 2005). This approach has contributed to childhood being regarded as a structural category of society rather than simply a passing phase (Qvotrup, 1994). Childhood is seen as valuable in itself with an increasing focus on children's 'here and now' status, their 'being' as well as their 'becoming' (Uprichard, 2008).

At the same time, Oswell (2013) counters against an over-emphasis on the notion of the child as agent, arguing that such categorical thinking does not acknowledge the complexity of their

lives. Childhood is increasingly recognised as a social and relational phenomenon (Alanen, 2009) with children as context-dependent relational beings. Children are influenced by the structures and relationships in which they are embedded (Wihstutz, 2011). Central to this position, then, is a perception of children as individuals having responsibilities, living relationally, inter-generationally and in their communities. In other words, children are people who have relationships and are embedded in relational processes (Tisdall and Punch, 2012). Such recognition of the relational nature of children's lives requires their participation to be located within a framework of intergenerational dialogue (Wyness, 2012). This perspective emphasises the interdependency between children's participation and their socio-cultural environments and lived realities (Kjorholt, 2008).

Participation as a contested concept

Ironically, while the concept of child participation and the 'participatory child' have become inbuilt to policy they have been simultaneously subjected to increasing scrutiny in childhood studies and children's geographies (Wyness, 2013). As Tisdall and Punch (2012:16) write, "problematising children's agency illustrates the complexities and ambiguities of applying theoretical ideas in practice, particularly when social realities are complex and contradictory." Participation is critiqued for being a politically oriented civic activity with a focus on creating the participative, responsible citizen; for treating the child, 'the rights holder', as an individual entity; for being conditional on the age and maturity of the child and thus generally focusing on the older 'competent child' and on 'voice' raising issues of legitimacy & authenticity. Participation is further critiqued for being a unitary concept based on Global North, white,

middle-class norms and for being dominated by the UNCRC framework. Finally, participation is critiqued for being largely understood and located in the institutional context and focused on the formal so that, despite children carving out their own unique forms of participation, there is difficulty in recognising children's acts of citizenship in the everyday.

Using a governmentality framework, Tuukkanen et al. (2012) argue that child participation has developed primarily as a politically oriented civic activity. It is often associated with a future oriented citizenship curriculum comprised of policy and activities designed to mould future citizens, workers and voters (Tisdall, 2010). It is predominantly an educational initiative that provides children with the skills and knowledge required for a liberal democratic future (Wyness, 2013). Typical examples are student councils and youth parliaments which are modelled on adult representative structures. While these have an important socialising function, helping children to rehearse modes of political practice, concerns about the potential for a narrow governmentality framework have been raised. Smith (2012) argues that the idea of the competent, participative child opens up new opportunities for children while simultaneously facilitating forms of control which place potentially onerous responsibilities upon the young. Similarly, Hartas (2008) points out that children and young people's participation can be over-regulated and put too much pressure on them. Furthermore, governmental modes of regulating children via strategies of participation and 'responsibilization' privilege some children while ignoring the inequalities experienced by many (Black, 2011; Smith, 2012). Raby (2104) summarises the concerns as being that children's participatory initiatives resonate with a neoliberal economic and political context that prioritises middle class, western individualism and ultimately fosters children's deeper subjugation through self-governance. These arguments highlight the contradictory

interconnection between freedom and control which is central to the idea of governmentality (Rose et al., 2006).

Concerns have been expressed regarding the legitimacy and authenticity of dominant modes of child participation. As Wyness (2013: 344) puts it, this 'global conception of participation based on individual rights-based voice, adult regulation and future orientation connects quite powerfully with a twenty-first century model of childhood found in more-affluent northern contexts'. The model of the agentic and participating child of the UNCRC reflects the influence of liberal-democratic formulations which would appear to privilege the individual and individual rights over a more collectivist conception that views participation in terms of 'a social obligation to share the duties that contribute to the immediate well-being of the group'(Stoecklin, 2012: 445). It assumes Global Northern normative political and economic conditions regardless of the structural conditions that make such a normative requirement quite difficult to reach (Stoecklin, 2012; Cregan and Cuthbert, 2014). It, at the very least, ignores the very real participatory activities of children in a range of contexts and, in the case of labour in the marketplace or caring in the home, can construct them as deficit forms of participation (Wyness, 2013). These tensions led to the formulation of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990) which was developed to moderate the emphasis on individual rights of the UNCRC and to recognise and articulate a set of responsibilities for African children to family, community and nation (Twum-Danso, 2009; Tisdall and Punch, 2012).

This raises another issue with the concept of child participation - its treatment of the child as an individual rightsholder. The idea of children's connectedness and their complex nets of social ties raises issues of responsibilities to others as well as individual rights. Diduck (1999:

133) writes of the need to challenge 'the hegemony of notions of autonomy which exclude reciprocity or dependence, and of notions of welfare and dependence which exclude individual agency or political citizenship.' Wihstutz (2011:453) argues that the UNCRC does not incorporate the notion of the child as a member of a community and the recognition of their influence and embedment in the needs and interests of their community. She uses this in her analysis of care-giving children saying that such responsibilities are seen as an adult attribute and, thus, belonging to the public realm. However, the concept of responsibility is itself problematic and 'ethics of care' and other relational alternatives have been criticised for failing to ensure that children are not hidden in patriarchal households (Tisdall and Punch, 2012). In seeking an alternative which balances the access to rights enshrined within the UNCRC with consideration of children's responsibilities, some have argued for thinking in terms of reciprocity which connects responsibility, respect and entitlements (Twum-Danso, 2009).

A further issue with constructions of child participation is the conditionality of competency based on age, maturity and voice. Age and maturity are seen as basic standards for children's participation in Article 12 (1) of the UNCRC. Kjørholt (2002) maintains that it is primarily older children who are seen as participants in society. Similarly, Tuukkanen et al. (2012) contend that the concepts of participation and citizenship have not been established for children under age 13. Consequently, the challenges of participation are greater for younger children who have even less say in how their everyday lives are managed (Lansdown, 2005). In recent years a discursive voice-based form of children's participation and involvement in decision making processes and structures, influenced by the UNCRC, has become a global standard (Wyness, 2013; Alasuutari, 2014). This is problematic because of the fact that it excludes so many children due to their age and capacity to engage in discursive processes but

also because of the complexity of listening to children's voice and the fact that it ignores non-voiced forms of participation (Spyrou, 2011; Allasuarti, 2014; Amot and Ytterhus, 2014). Wyness (2013) argues for a more inclusive notion of children's participation. There is a growing body of research on the importance of avoiding pre-conceptions about what children can and cannot do at any given age (Clarke and Moss, 2001, 2011; Warming, 2011), the need for a wider interpretation of participation other than voice based, and for opening up opportunities for younger children to participate in decision-making processes through taking children's bodily and emotional expressions seriously (Amot and Ytterhus, 2014).

Participation has often been defined as civic participation, which can be problematic; firstly, because it locates participation in the public sphere and secondly, because structured public participation is often regarded as not sufficiently representative (Percy-Smith and Burns, 2013; Larkins, 2014). The focus of much child participation research has not been on children's everyday lives or the issues of importance as identified by children themselves (Tuukkanen et al., 2012) but rather on structured representative channels and participation in public spaces. A focus on participation as decision-making remains important, to ensure that political mechanisms respond to children's demands (Wall, 2012). However, recognizing aspects of children's everyday practices as citizenship is critical in challenging dominant definitions of citizenship, and claiming a new status for children. Participation, then, must be acknowledged as the everyday and diverse and as a process of engaging in matters related to children themselves in their daily lives. In this sense, we have many examples of children shaping their own forms of participation (Maxey, 2004) through education, playing, engagement with social media and virtual worlds and political protest (Roche, 1999; Jans, 2004; Stolle and Hooghe, 2005 ; Tuukkanen et al., 2012; Larkins, 2014).

Subsequent to a reliance on what Pells (2010) refers to as ‘performed’ rather than lived participation child participation has remained static and focused on formal initiatives (Fleming, 2013). The limitation of mainstream approaches to children’s participation in adult/service-led decision-making have been documented (Percy-Smith, 2015). While the past decade has seen significant developments in children’s participation in school with high numbers of student councils and student voice or democracy initiatives, recent research has highlighted a significant number of children still do not feel involved in school decision-making (Davey et al., 2010). The unrepresentative nature of formal public participation channels is well established. Turkie (2010), discussing children’s parliaments internationally, argues that some tend to favour select groups such as older children, those with a particular interest in politics, wealthier classes, or children who happen to attend a participating organization or school. Similarly, youth participation, as a form of consultation within policymaking processes in Australia, has been largely critiqued for its reliance on formal participation mechanisms that are rarely inclusive or representative of a range of children’s experiences (Vromen and Collin, 2010). While, Davey et al. (2010) find that children who are perceived as clever, popular, well behaved and good attendees tend to be disproportionately represented on school councils and that these high achieving ‘go-getting’ students were best placed to take advantage of additional opportunities to engage in decision-making related to their community. Cockburn (2010) speaks of participative democracy as being about the greater involvement of everyone and the democratisation of everyday life beyond assemblies, parliaments and councils and argues that participatory spaces from above (those instigated and defined by policymakers and practitioners) have not been able to adapt to the worlds of children and young people.

Research on children's participation

Research has been undertaken analysing the extent to which children interact with formal participation and decision-making structures such as youth parliaments (Cockburn, 2010; Wall, 2012; Tuukkanen et al., 2012) schools (De Castro, 2012; Fleming, 2013; Tisdall, 2013) and early education centres (Alasuutari, 2014; Åmot and Ytterhus, 2014) in community contexts (Percy-Smith and Burns, 2013) and the extent to which children participate or have a voice in the everyday activities of daily life in the home (Davey et al. 2010; Bjerke 2011) with some work on children's negotiations around food and consumption within families (Ralph, 2013; O'Connell and Brannen, 2014). However, very little research examines the multiplicity of opportunities and types of participation rooted in the organic practice of everyday life in children's homes, schools and communities (Davey et al., 2010). Percy-Smith (2010 and 2015) argues that we need to develop a more inclusive approach to participation – focusing on children's lives at home, in school and in their neighbourhoods in public spaces, associations and organisations – and bearing in mind that their participation in these settings is influenced by the composition of the spaces themselves. In this way, the structures, contexts, and relationships which can act as 'thinners' or 'thickeners' of individual's agency, by constraining or expanding children's range of viable choices (Tisdall and Punch, 2012) can be examined.

The Study

The study attempted to address this gap in research by examining the extent to which children and young people, living in Ireland, are able to participate and influence matters affecting them in their home, school and community. The theoretical basis of the study is child participation as a right, specifically utilising Lundy's (2007) conceptualisation of Article 12

of the UNCRC focusing on space, voice, audience and influence, participation as relational and as embedded in the everyday. Fieldwork comprised focus group interviews to obtain detailed narrative data that captured the everyday experiences and views of children on their participation in decision-making. In total, 74 children between 7 and 17 years of age participated in group interviews for the research with a further 20 involved as co-researchers in Children's and Young People's Advisory Groups and piloting. Acknowledging the relational and inter-generational nature of children's lives, 34 adult participants were interviewed comprising parents, teachers and principals and community stakeholders. Interview groups comprising 7-12 and 12 -17 year olds were conducted in primary schools, secondary schools, youth projects and youth clubs in urban, rural and suburban areas across three geographic locations in Ireland. The primary research utilised child-centred participative research methods appropriate to their age and understanding, in accordance with Article 12 of the UNCRC. The use of participatory methodologies can unlock children's potential to contribute rich and useful perspectives to inform research into their lives (Tay-Lim and Lim, 2013). Such research can better influence practices and policies which are child-centred and appropriate to children's contemporary circumstances. The participatory methods for this study included visual, verbal and other interactive methods that helped capture their lived experiences of participation. Games ('Human bingo' and ball-games), visual methods ('participation tree' and 'decision-making' interactive wall charts and home, school and community interactive floor mats) and child-friendly focus group guides. Children's and Young People's Advisory Groups were involved in the identification of research themes, development of research materials as well as initial analysis of raw data generated from the focus group interviews with children.

Findings and Discussion

While some excellent examples of collective decision-making fora such as student councils and local youth groups and of individual decision-making opportunities for children engaging with youth workers, teachers and parents emerged in this study, these opportunities were not the norm. The home was experienced by children generally as the setting most facilitative of their voice and participation in their everyday lives reflecting Mayall's (1994) finding that children were more likely to have their initiative and individual ideas encouraged in the family than in school or their wider communities. Key areas of decision-making included consumption activities such as food, clothes and pocket money as well as bedtime, leisure activities and friends. These findings concur with those of Bjerke (2011) in Norway, that consumption of various forms is a major field in which children talk about their participation. Many children were dissatisfied with their level of input into decision making processes in school. They had very low expectations of schools being participatory sites and recognised that they had little say in anything apart from peripheral matters in school. There is much literature on schools not providing opportunities for meaningful participation and that such denial of opportunities to influence decisions affecting them is a real cause of concern for pupils (Harris, 2009). Furthermore, the children in this study were either ambivalent or 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 voice in those settings due to their involvement in decision-making about the design of the space, the rules and the activities that take place there. Fleming (2013) suggests that children and young people need to build on basic participatory opportunities by participating in increasingly significant ways, including in youth-led activities, which is still quite rare.

Good relationships as critical to children's participation

Respectful and trusting family relationships were seen as key enablers of participation by children. Considerably more interaction and negotiation was reported with mothers than fathers by children, across genders. Relationships with individual school personnel also appear to be highly significant in terms of enabling children's participation and engagement. The characteristics of a good adult facilitator were described by child participants as someone who made them feel comfortable and was not judgmental, "if you already have a good relationship with a teacher, for example, if you are involved in a sport and one of your teachers is the coach, they will advocate for you" (Second Level School, Urban). The importance of spaces for equal relationships with adults in the local community such as youth leaders or sports coaches, who encouraged and supported children's engagement also emerged. "You get to do what you want to do and you can joke around with them [youth workers] and have fun. Teachers you call Mr. or Mrs., but everyone here you call by their first name" (Youth Project, Urban). "They [youth workers] do actually listen to you ... if you have an issue here it's hundred per cent talk time" (Youth Café, Rural). In cases where children reported positive experiences of participation, it involved facilitation by adults whom they respected and with whom they had developed some rapport. This locates children as relational beings, embedded in inter-generational processes and highlights the interdependency between children's participation and their environment (Percy-Smith, 2010).

Children's participation dominated by adult attitudes and processes

Negative or dismissive adult attitudes were seen by children as being a critical 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, Urban). Youth

workers in this study were of the view that parents are critical to facilitating children's participation, "If children are encouraged at school and at home to make these decisions, it will follow through to the community. I think most things start at home" (Voluntary Youth Worker). While generally of the view that the home was facilitative of their participation, children did identify instances of tokenism with regard to decision-making "My dad never listens, he always says, talk to me later, tell me about it later" (Primary School, Urban). The idea of the participative child was particularly challenging for schools with much evidence of, what De Castro (2012: 58) calls, conservative participation "a cluster of attitudes and behaviours such as involvement in school work, commitment to school rules, voicing one's opinion when asked for it and attendance to school events and activities which in different degrees help to maintain existing hierarchical positions leaving to the staff a clear role of command and control of school affairs and student behaviour." There was evidence of power inequities in the relationships between adults and children in schools which negatively impacted on children's participation: "We have no say in our timetable. In the classroom, it's mainly the teacher decides what lessons we do" (Primary School, Rural). We get told what to do! If we don't, or if we try to argue, we get punished with a 'step'. It's kinda like a warning" (Youth club, Urban). It seems that the traditional approach towards decision-making in schools is still very strong, where decisions are largely imposed on children. Within the community, there was evidence of children's participation in their local area being curbed by adult stakeholders including neighbourhood associations and police, "Adults, for example neighbours, don't ask us about anything, they just do what they want. Like we made a swing with a tyre and rope and they just took it down because they said it wasn't safe. They didn't ask us" (Primary School, Urban), with a particularly strong class dimension to the negative experiences of some children "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, Urban).

Focus on children's age and 'competence' by adults

This study found that younger children were amongst the most likely to miss out on opportunities to raise concerns that were pertinent to their lives and to have these addressed. Age and maturity were seen by both parents and children as important to increasing the participatory entitlement of children in family decision-making. "When you're very young they don't always explain their decisions because they don't think you'll understand it. I think they should always try to explain it, whether they think you'll understand it or not" (Second Level School, Urban). Child participants (under 13) felt they had less voice in decision-making processes, specifically in school. "In first year we have no say or way of getting our opinion across" (Second Level School, Urban). They spoke about a definite trend in their growing independence, autonomy and voice with increased age, reinforcing the findings in Bjerke (2011), "As you get older they [parents] expect you to get more mature and make your own decisions" (Youth Club, Urban) and "Older students have more of a say, the teachers know you better, they normally go to the 6th years for everything, they give them more responsibility" (Second Level School, Urban).Voice was seen as critical to demonstrating competency, "Age is important in having a say. And the way you talk – the more mature you sound, the more they [adults] will listen" (Second Level School, Urban). This is reflective of the failure to establish robust concepts of participation and citizenship for younger children (Tuukkanen et al., 2012) and the consequent challenges of participation for younger children (Lansdown, 2005) identified in the literature.

Focus on voice-based, representative and public spaces for participation

A focus on the more public, representative, voice-based structures for participation was evident within the schools and community settings in the study. Educators made reference to the more formal decision-making structures in existence in schools when discussing participation. School personnel also referred to once-off events where children would contribute their views (for example preparation for the school play), yet even these limited public participative processes were not mentioned by the young people themselves in the context of their experiences of participation. Less structured processes of participation did not receive much attention in schools generally and, where they existed, were limited. While most children are aware of the formal opportunities for participation that exist in schools, not all agree that they are beneficial to students with many stating that they did not offer a real opportunity for expression of views, "The Student Council tries to improve student life, small things, for example, having the water fountain fixed, but not big things" (Second-level School, Dublin). They don't really do much and we don't really talk to them" (Second-level School, Dublin). Indeed, many factors which influence a child's experience of school are not likely to get addressed at a student council (Percy-Smith, 2010). Some young people in this study questioned the representativeness of the school council and many expressed frustration at the lack of communication about decisions made and the powerlessness of the council to make any real changes in relation to how their school operates, as the following comment highlights:

> Only two people talking for 100 people. We never really get told about what decisions are being made. They [Student Council reps] don't feed back. People don't ask. They don't always go to the meetings anyway, even though they're voted in. But sometimes nobody votes, so they go straight in (Second-level School, Sligo).

Children referred to the need for 'informal' spaces for discussion in the school context, "[There is] no class where you can just talk, even if it's just after assembly" (Second-level School Dublin). However, there was also some recognition of the difficulties associated with such a space, "it's not always safe to talk about things in front of other people" (Second-level School Dublin). Tisdall et al., (2009), in this regard, urges a note of caution regarding creating a dogma that formal and technocratic forms of participation are 'bad' and that less formal approaches are all 'good.' Indeed, this study found that those children who did not have access to student councils, in the primary level sector, recognised their importance in facilitating participation. Efforts to establish and develop formal structures as well as the need for creating other new democratic spaces which facilitate meaningful participation in institutions such as schools would, then, appear to be the priority.

Similarly, criticisms were expressed about formal structures for youth participation in community contexts: "I wonder do Comhairle na nÓg [local youth councils] consult with a broader group of young people because we would deal a lot with younger people who don't attach themselves very easily to things like official structures … and those people rarely get heard" (Youth Worker). In particular these concerns focused on issues of representation and the section of young people for these forums. "I think it is very middle to upper class … how do you reach the hard to reach teens?" (Family Resource Centre Worker). These criticisms resonate with similar critiques of youth councils in the international literature, which it is argued may appeal to some young people but not necessarily to "outsider youth" (McGinley and Grieve, 2010) who may consequently be excluded. Interestingly, when children in this study were asked about ways in which they participate in the community, youth councils did not feature indicating that these formal participation structures may be isolated from the everyday experiences of childhood.

Importance of everyday participation

Opportunities for children's everyday participation in this study included choice of food and clothes, and use of social media at home; choice of books to read or what to do during PE in school; and play or 'hanging out' in the local area. However, everyday participation opportunities were far more limited in the public spheres of school and community. Discussion and participation in decision-making took place in the mundane everyday family spaces, primarily at dinner and while watching television in the evenings, but also on the way to and from school and travelling in the car emphasising the significance of routes and journeys in children's everyday life (Kernan, 2010). Negotiation with parents centred on issues such as food, clothes and use of leisure time highlighting how the banal affective spaces/ interactions including activities such as food practices constitute adult-child intergenerational relationships and help us to examine family relationships and children's agency (Mitchell and Elwood, 2012; Ralph, 2013). However, these material and concrete everyday forms of participation by children are areas much neglected in the research (Cook, 2013). The data from this study confirms that children have very limited influence over their day-to-day activities in school when it comes to questions about management and rules, or teaching and education processes. Where children did cite examples of involvement in decisions on school matters, these normally related to matters such as project work or, for younger children, choice of DVD for rainy days when they could not play in the schoolyard. However, on other matters of importance to them such as school tour locations, uniform, curriculum, timetabling, school reports, behaviour and discipline policies there was limited evidence of their participation. Some children evidenced agency in the community in the context of local youth clubs, which they identified as their 'space'. Youth workers identified how youth cafés or youth clubs represent spaces where young people can 'hang out' and do what they like, rather than being compelled to engage in particular activities, thus

emphasising the importance to children of opportunities for informal gathering. “I think the best thing is to have a space that they can call their own, somewhere they can go and from that I think they get a huge sense of security and they are willing to … make decisions for their community” (Youth Worker).

Conclusion

A body of work on children’s participation heavily influenced by childhood studies, the UNCRC and children’s rights discourse has developed. This has been valuable in asserting the importance of participation. Nonetheless, participation is a contested concept and key challenges arise relating to its emphasis on age, maturity and voice, its development as a primarily politically oriented civic activity focused on socialising the participative responsible citizen, and its failure to sufficiently recognise the range of participatory activities of children in their everyday lives. The findings of a research study on children’s experiences of participation in their homes, schools and communities in Ireland are presented which reflect many of the issues identified in the literature including the importance of the relational context in child participation, how everyday interactions rather than the more ‘performative’ formal, public structures for participation are valued by children and how their participation experiences are limited by adult processes, based on age, notions of competence, voice.

While there are many criticisms of current participation mechanisms, the self-understanding and other skills developed through thoughtful participation initiatives can be utilised in all aspects of children’s lives (Raby, 2014) whether it be on formal representative decision-making structures or in the banal routine experiences of participation and negotiations which happen daily. The need to broaden our understanding of participation to encompass the informal and social and to ensure that children are facilitated in their decision-making and

participation in these horizontal spaces is critical to ensuring that formal structures of the participation agenda do not dominate and that the possibility for governance and over-responsibilisation of children is reduced.

Some of this is already happening. Percy-Smith (2015) notes the shift in discourses towards the de-institutionalisation of children's participation marked by a focus on the everyday arguing that a new emphasis on social participation will bring possibilities for children to evolve their own new forms of democratic processes in new democratic arenas. This is a challenge to the professional led, service-driven agenda of public sector involvement. That children are already participating as active citizens within the spaces of their everyday lives is well established (Tisdall et al., 2009; Larkins, 2014). Young people often 'prefer participating in non-hierarchical and informal networks, in addition to a variety of life-style related sporadic mobilization efforts' such as email petitions and political protests and their networks and social engagement can be found in daily social interactions in schools and neighbourhoods (Stolle and Hooghe, 2005: 159). A commitment to social participation for children remains difficult, however, and needs to recognise and redress children's unequal status, accept that some children may not wish to participate and include an ability for children to disrupt established ways of doing things (Apple & Beane, 1995). The challenge then is to recognise and build on this in a reconceptualization of participation.

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