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Youth and adult perspectives on representation in local child and youth councils in Ireland

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Abstract

When we consider young people's participation in democratic societies, we have to ask to what extent young people are or should be representative of the communities they are active within. This paper is based on findings from a participatory research project which examined young people's perspectives on taking part in Comhairle na nÓg, the local youth councils in Ireland. The article considers how differing understandings of the concept of representation may impact on the experiences, provision and structures of participatory initiatives for young people. The findings reveal differing attitudes between youth participants and adult support staff towards the meaning of representation. Many of the adult personnel refer to representation in terms of accessing and retaining younger age-groups and "seldom heard" young people, while significant numbers of youth respondents indicated that they understand representation as having a voice, being heard, and making a difference, rather than necessarily about representativeness and they view themselves as being representative of other young people.

Key words: youth councils; youth participation; representation.

Participation and Representation

When we look at children's and young people's participation in democratic society, we have to ask to what extent they are, or should be, representative of the communities they are active within (Sinclair, 2004: 112). Faulkner (2009) highlights the fact that the issue of representation has previously been considered in relation to both the types of young people who tend to be involved in participation initiatives and their links to other young people in their community. Representativeness within youth participation is affected by issues such as 'race', disability, socio-economic class, education, and family and community context (Checkoway, 2011). Head highlights the concern that:

> *The already confident young people (i.e. those who have knowledge, communication skills, and organisational navigation skills) are more likely to become involved, and the vulnerable or hard-to-reach groups may be overlooked. There is little research on how to promote a culture of inclusion among organisations and in the community, where young people's participation can then more meaningfully influence public decision-making.*
> (Head, 2011: 546).

However, profile data is hard to come by as most projects seem to feel that it is inappropriate to monitor who takes part (Sinclair, 2004: 112). Representativeness raises issues such as young people sometimes being expected to speak on behalf of other young people, which Cairns and Brannen argue has inhibited both young people's voices and their influence (Cairns and Brannen, 2005 cited in Willow, 2010: 52). As well as this, seeing young people as representative of other young people by virtue of their shared age and location can allow authorities to claim to have consulted young people after consulting just some young people, without critically considering the standpoint of the group as a whole (Cairns, 2006: 224–225). Such a conceptualisation of consultation may also mistakenly assume that all young people can participate equally without the kinds of local and structural supports they might need to do this effectively (Sinclair, 2004: 112). When such a partnership model is applied with children and young people, it risks creating a class of children who, in order to participate in decision-making structures, are taken away from the familiar environment of their communities and their peers and placed within pre-existing, centralised structures that may or may not reflect or address the concerns of those they leave behind (Lansdown, 2006: 145).

> *Whilst wholly worthy, the push towards developing youth-centred spaces of participation has resulted in the development of a distinct set of political institutions, which generally operate outside of the adult realm. In these terms children and teenagers are merely afforded the status of 'taking part'.* (Weller, 2009: 15)

Participation structures emerging across Europe in response to UNCRC Article 12 are frequently based on adult democratic institutions, such as local councils or corporations, which can have the effect of inhibiting the involvement of young people who do not or will not conform to adults' expectations of behaviour or interactions (Tisdall and Bell, 2006). There has been ongoing criticism that formal participation initiatives such as the UK Youth Parliament are populated by articulate middle class young people and lack representation for lack of socially excluded young people (Landsdown, 2006). Tisdall and Bell argue that civil servants are firmly in control of who participates, how they participate, and what they participate in, and it is they who also ultimately decide which voices will be prioritised in formulating policy (Tisdall and Bell, 2006: 119). Some notable trends are that older young people and females are more likely to participate and the minority who do get involved are not always representative of the target population (Kirby and Bryson, 2002). Checkoway (2011) asserts that the most active young people in formal participation activities tend to be those from higher socio-economic groups and with higher levels of education than the general population. Children who have few dealings with local youth organisations too, are often left out of consultations (Sinclair, 2004). Indeed, project-based models of participation can overlook non-mainstreamed forms of participation, such as local community-type involvement more common among lower socio-economic groups:

> *Differential participation by low-income youth does not mean that they are disengaged from*

> *democracy. On the contrary, they do participate in public affairs, but rather in activities which are more appropriate to their situation, and which mainstream social scientists find difficult to document*. (Checkoway, 2011: 342)

Although Article 12 of UNCRC and Article 7 (3) of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) have incorporated children's right to be heard,[1] younger age groups and those young people who have disabilities are frequently seen as having diminished "capacity" to make informed choices, and as such, their views are not sought, or are overridden by adult gatekeepers.

In relation to the representation of young people on youth councils in the US, Taft and Gordon (2013) assert that some young people involved do not actually represent other youth as they are appointed by adults as opposed to democratically elected by other young people. Taft and Gordon present evidence that other 'youth activists' question the authenticity of this 'representation'.

> *... the youth involved do not necessarily represent other youth nor engage with other youth in their schools and communities to create collective ideas about solutions to community problems. Arguing for more horizontal forms of democratic engagement (Taft, 2011), they reject the youth councils as a form of participation that produces a few student 'leaders' rather than empowering many youth for political action*. (ibid: 95)

The rejection of these youth councils as unrepresentative sites by other youth in the same communities raises the important issue of selection processes for participatory initiatives. Gatekeepers can severely limit or expand who participates, and can be formal or informal, including parents, youth workers, and other adults in positions of authority over children and young people. Schools are often the primary sites of information about and recruitment into participation initiatives, and their role as gatekeepers has been the focus of attention by a number of theorists. Cairns argues that in most cases students have no legal right to be involved in decisions in their schools, and this makes schools the worst equipped structures to enable young people's meaningful participation (Cairns, 2006: 223-224). In a UK study which explored teenagers' spaces of citizenship Weller found that while the 'school council was regarded ideologically as good practice, there was some degree of ambivalence over whether it constituted a *meaningful* space of participation' (2009: 21). Wells explores the role played by schools in creating children and young people as a kind of class, as schools reproduce the kinds of nationalism and the types of citizens required by their particular society (Wells, 2009: 32–33). As schools are the arm of the state entrusted with reproducing conservative civic values, this results in a scenario whereby only those students who will best maintain the status quo get selected for participation. A recent study by Gilleece and Cosgrave (2012) on civic participation in schools in Ireland found that the home background of students influenced their participation activities and that students from homes with large numbers of books had higher levels of civic participation. Gender differences also emerged in their research and they found that boys' civic participation was substantially lower than girls when the boys perceived that

they have a low level of influence on decision-making. The authors conclude that this: (i) reflects 'the reciprocal relationship between motivation and action' for participation and (ii) highlights the need for 'meaningful opportunities for student engagement' (Gilleece and Cosgrave, 2012: 237). It is also important to acknowledge that while the focus of this article is on a formal participation structure further analysis of youth participation unveils a complex landscape of informal and formal participation and civic engagement. Young people are more likely to be engaged in non-traditional forms of political participation such as activism, boycotting and protests and there is evidence that young people are moving towards new forms of civic engagement rather than complete rejection of traditional democratic practices (Horvath and Paolini, 2013). These new forms of participation illustrate the growing centrality of participatory actions that are 'less institutionalised and more flexible' such as anti-globalisation protests (Forbrig, 2005: 141). These activities are a response to social, economic and political turbulence and evidence of young people's desire to have their voices heard within local, national and transnational politicised spaces that transcend their physical and virtual social worlds. For example, young people have been active initiators and participants of sometimes radical or even violent political movements around the world (Wells, 2009). Forbrig (2005) cautions us that the participation of young people in these sometimes radical contexts such as anti-war rallies and anti or alter-globalisation movements demonstrate that young people are not apathetic about political participation and civic responsibility, but instead these participatory actions can form the basis of new cultures of political participation and the reinforcement of civil society (Forbrig, 2005). Horvath and Paolini (2013) also suggest that new forms of political participation are not in contradiction to traditional forms such as voting but can be viewed as complementary.

Background to the Study

Ireland ratified the UNCRC in September 1992, and since then the Irish State has made a number of commitments to give credence to the voice of the child and to include children's views in policy-making processes. In line with Article 12 of the UNCRC, the Irish Government committed itself to promoting the participation of children and young people in civic society. A key policy strategy aimed at meeting these commitments is the National Children's Strategy 2000 – 2010. The National Children's Strategy makes an explicit and central commitment to include the voice of the child, and Goal 1, in particular, states that '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'. Since 2000, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) (formally the Office of the Minister for Children) has established a number of participatory initiatives to support the implementation of this goal through children and young people's participation including the establishment of local and national child and youth councils in 2002. This article is primarily concerned with Comhairle na nÓg, the local youth council. Local youth councils, known as Comhairlí na nÓg, represent an important element of these collective decision-making processes. Comhairlí na nÓg are a structured forum for children and young people to input into decision-making in the development

of local services and policies and act as a consultative and participative forum for children and young people. They are funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs through the thirty-four local authorities throughout the country with the support of national voluntary youth organisations such as Youth Work Ireland and Foroige. The lifecycle of each Comhairle na nÓg council is two years and in 2013 the total membership of the thirty-four local Comhairlí was 1,021 children and young people. This article is based on a larger study comissioned by the DCYA and the Irish Research Council to examine the experiences and outcomes of participation for children and young people who have been involved in participatory initiatives of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs since 2000. While the overall study investigates the perceived impacts of participation for children and young people this discussion focuses on the findings related to young people's understandings of representation.

Research Methods

The research design consisted of a number of stages and the participation of children and young people was central to this research project. Children and young people's lives need to be better understood and, crucially, by involving them in research, we can improve the chances of their views being used to influence policy (Kellett, 2009: 52; Graham and Fitzgerald, 2010: 137). The project utilised participatory research methods, which treat young people as experts and agents in their own lives and allow for reflexivity in the research process. This investigation encompasses a holistic conception of participation that is underpinned by four realms of impact – personal, familial, communal and institutional (Ackermann et al, 2003). A project Steering Group was established at the outset of the project and included six youth participants from DCYA initiatives, the project team and two members of the DCYA Participation Unit. In addition to the inclusion of young people in the project Steering Group, an important part of the study has been the training of young people as researchers involved in data collection and analysis for the project.

The research methodology was iterative in nature and used a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods. Methods included surveys of past and current participants of Comhairle na nÓg, focus groups and in-depth interviews with participants and decision-makers at all levels in order to generate, modify and approve content. The survey of present members was administered by the youth participants of 17 Comhairlí who distributed the questionnaire to their members. Four focus groups with young people were carried out by Young Researchers. The open response format of a focus group provides an opportunity to obtain rich data in the children's and young people's own words and can capture perspectives, original ideas, and insights which are often neglected in more traditional research. The questionnaire data were entered into SPSS for analysis.

The research sample of young people in this study is a purposeful sample and contains both a sample of young people who participated in the surveys (237 current and past participants) and a smaller number who participated in focus groups (27 participants) and in-depth interviews (8

participants). Random sampling was conducted to identify seventeen of the thirty-four Comhairlí to take part in the survey of current participants and to identify a further seventeen Comhairle facilitators/coordinators for interview. The average age of the current respondents was 15 years and the majority were attending second level education. The average age of the past participants was 19 years and the majority were attending third level education. Research findings need to be mindful of the fact these are the views of the young people who are involved in participation structures and do not include young people who chose not to participate in formal participation structures. The adult sample consisted of 17 in-depth interviews with Comhairle na nÓg coordinators and six key national support staff connected to the DCYA participation structures.

Findings

Young people's views on representativeness of participation structures

It is important to consider the issue of representation because Comhairle na nÓg is considered the main contact point for any consultation with children and young people by the majority of local authorities in Ireland and therefore plays a very important role in representing the views of children and young people to decision-makers. An adult participant stated that Comhairle na nÓg was 'very much now in the minds of local decision-makers...they see them as a vehicle for getting things for young people' (Adult Participant 4). While this is positive for the participants in Comhairle na nOg in relation to recognition of their voice it also presents a challenge in terms of representation of children and young people not involved in Comhairle Na nÓg. If local decision-makers consider Comhairle na nÓg to be a key contact point with children and young people, those not involved may be excluded from having their voices heard. This also demonstrates the prioritisation of formal participation spaces in allowing decision-makers access to children and young people.

The study found that young people felt strongly that they were positioned to represent the views of other young people through their participation activities. Over three-quarters of youth participants indicated that they consider Comhairle na nÓg to be broadly representative of young people in Ireland. Participants were asked to identify any potential impacts their participation in Comhairle na nÓg had on their wider community or wider society and from this a strong sense emerged that they viewed themselves as representing other young people in their communities.

> *I feel it's representative; because I feel that it's, like, run by the young people and that it's all our opinions and ideas. Whereas if it was run by like, politicians or something, it would be what they would think is wrong for young people, rather than young people figuring out the solutions themselves.* (Youth Participant 5)

When looking at the impact of participation on their local communities youth participants identified the two most positive areas as:

(i) their ability to bring ideas and problems from young people in their community to their Comhairle na nÓg meetings
(ii) the increased awareness of children and young people's issues in the young person's own community.

Significant numbers of past and present members indicated that they joined Comhairle na nÓg to have a voice, be heard, and make a difference. For some this means actively representing other young people:

> *I took it as an opportunity for my voice to be heard, to represent young people and help to make a change. It made me feel like an important citizen and that I now finally have a role in my community.* (Youth Participant 23)

Over a third (38%) of respondents identified this as the main reason for their involvement as an opportunity to have a say in young people's issues and in decisions that affect their peers. In relation to this theme respondents wished to 'voice my opinions and see what other people have to say', '... [it is] important for those who don't have a vote to still be heard', and a 'chance to speak out for people my age'. Respondents felt that exercising their opinions was '...a chance to make a difference' and 'to help bring change to the lives of young people including myself in my area and in Ireland'.

Several of the adult interviewees suggested that many Comhairle members see their role as acting as a voice for other young people. These results echo the aims of state-led participatory initiatives, which seek to give children and young people 'a voice in the design, delivery and monitoring of services and policies that affect their lives, at national and local level' (DCYA, 2011: 8). It also echoes the findings of an Australian Study on young people's views about their motivations for participation which found that the most frequently cited reason for engagement in youth participation was 'the desire to contribute to a process of change which would result in improved outcomes for young people and the community' (Vromen and Collin, 2010: 105).

Youth participants were also asked about their ability to bring issues to the media. A slightly lower percentage of present participants compared to past participants were positive about their ability to bring issues to the media from Comhairle na nÓg meetings (53% responded positively). However a much higher percentage (67% responded positively) felt that the media listened to Comhairle na nÓg as being representative of young people. While the survey results from the young people suggest that they view themselves and the participation structures as representative a more nuanced understanding of the issues affecting representation emerges from the qualitative data collected in the study, particularly the views of adult facilitators.

The mechanics of representation – who shapes youth participation?

Participation practitioners have to ask how the processes and mechanisms that they use can influence who gets involved and who is excluded from the selection processes, can significantly impact on who takes part in a particular project and can access certain skills and resources (Sinclair, 2004). The role of adult allies (Checkoway, 2011) or participation champions such as youth workers or teachers in encouraging young people to become involved with Comhairle na nÓg was the strongest motivating factor for youth participants to initially join Comhairle na nÓg. The majority of Comhairle na nÓg members are elected at an Annual General Meeting. Young people are invited to attend these meetings by the local Comhairle na nÓg coordinators through local schools and local youth organisations. According to the official Comhairle na nÓg literature the 'aim is to have a broad representation of the young people of the area as possible. At the AGMs, a large number of local young people come together to discuss the issues that are of importance to them'.

This process of election at the AGMs presents both challenges and opportunities in the context of representation. The selection and election process raise a number of key issues related to representation. It is clear from the survey results and from the interviews with adults that the membership of Comhairle na nÓg is mainly drawn from older teenagers between the ages of 15 and 16 (see also McEvoy, 2011). This suggests that despite DCYA guidelines that specify a membership between 12 and 18 years, much of the membership is drawn from young people doing Transition Year in the senior cycle of school. This reflects more general trends in youth participation where the voices of younger children are often excluded. Younger age groups are frequently seen as having diminished 'capacity' to make informed choices, and as such, their views are not sought, or are overridden by adult gatekeepers. Creating an appropriate balance in the selection of young people for participation initiatives was something with which many of the adult Comhairle Co-ordinators were concerned. Many felt that this is an important focus of their work and the links with youth work organisations and other children and young people's support groups were seen as central to creating a more diverse population of child and youth participants.

The role of schools in shaping participation

There is evidence that schools play a key role in shaping who participates in the selection process for Comhairle na nÓg and this can be a barrier to some children and young people, particularly those who feel shy, in putting themselves forward for Comhairle na nÓg. Schools are often the primary sites of information about and recruitment into participation initiatives, and their role as gatekeepers to initial involvement in participation initiatives was highlighted by almost all of the adult participants in this study. Many of the youth participants came to be involved in Comhairle na nÓg because of their prior involvement in their school student council. A number of youth participants mentioned being nominated by their school for attendance at the Comhairle na nÓg AGM but not being clear why they were nominated. In other cases, the students heard about the

AGM through their CSPE (Civic, Social, and Political Education) teacher or their Career Guidance teachers. The relationship with schools was viewed by the adults interviewed for this research as very important in accessing young people, particularly in the initial recruitment of children and young people to attend Comhairle na nÓg AGMs which are often the initial point of contact between participation initiatives and young people. As an example of gatekeeping by schools, some adult participants felt that it is difficult to access the students directly and information about Comhairle na nÓg often stays with the school secretary or the school principal and is not filtered down to students. Relationships with the school were often dependent on individual good-will and some Comhairle Co-ordinators were not clear who they should be contacting in the school as there was no consistency between schools. School principals tended to give the information on Comhairle to just the Transition Year Co-ordinators and Comhairle was consequently viewed as an initiative only suitable for Transition Year students. As a result students from other years, particularly younger students, may not be informed about Comhairle which reinforces the exclusion of younger children from participating.

Some of the adult and youth participants indicated that schools sometimes tell students to attend the Comhairle na nÓg AGMs without giving them any information on what is required of them or the types of activities in which they will be involved. Moreover, as agents of socialisation and as hierarchical entities schools are likely to select young people who manifest conservative values and who are therefore less likely to challenge existing arrangements. The youth participants in this current research felt that there is a perception that young people must be on school student councils to be involved in Comhairle na nÓg and suggested that the strong links between Comhairle na nÓg and student councils might put other young people off joining Comhairle na nÓg. Some respondents suggested that the perceived weakness of the student council model as a participative structure within the school environment may have an impact on the perception of other youth participation initiatives by children and young people. School councils are susceptible to adult manipulation and methods of pupil selection may well not meet standards of democratic representation (Hill et al, 2004; Keogh and Whyte, 2005).

A related issue is schools' tendency to put forward high achievers or 'star' pupils. These 'super participators' (Cockburn, 2010: 315) may be involved in a number of social, youth and community activities and are often both experienced and confident. There is also a tendency among schools to send students who are seen as high academic achievers or who are 'model participants' to represent the school rather than representing the views of other young people. Some participants were critical of this selection process and felt the schools are 'not sending a fair, a broad representation of the population of young people':

> *The schools send their A students, student council or debating team but they are the top notch; they are what the school would like to see the school as being viewed as. No matter what I say, we always get the cream of the crop which is unfortunate as I am sure there are*

other kids there with opinions. I think they see it as status, if we are going on a youth council we have to have our A students. (Adult Participant 7)

They always send you the best student, when you contact the school they say 'oh I know who I will send' which we are trying to get across is it's not always the best person. The school wants to show off. They might choose the best student in the school but they might be very quiet. (Adult Participant 1)

Student councils in schools were viewed as a key site for recruitment of young people for participation initiatives but many of the adult participants were critical of the school authorities in only putting forward school council members for attendance at the Comhairle na nÓg AGMs. The pattern of sending student council members to the AGMs confines selection of youth participants to young people who are already active in participation initiatives and might narrow the youth voice. Also, this method of recruitment means that local Comhairlí na nÓg 'very rarely would get a seldom heard young person in through the school' (Adult Participant 14). This reflects findings from research on children's views of participation in the UK (Davey et al, 2010) that children who were clever, popular, well-behaved and good attendees were disproportionately represented on school councils and other children felt this was not representative of the school community.

Child and youth power within schools is itself a challenging topic for youth participation to focus on. Members of the focus group of adult Comhairle no nÓg Co-ordinators felt that young people in the school system are not often encouraged to question, think critically, creatively or challenge and that there need to be changes in the education system to prepare children and young people for participation. Some participants viewed the youth participation agenda as at odds with the school environment and the passive role of young people within educational settings. Also a number of participants felt that there are limited mechanisms in place for members of Comhairle na nÓg to feed back to other young people on their work or to influence change within their own schools which has a negative impact on representation.

In relation to alternative methods of recruitment that were less dependent on the student councils, participants made a number of suggestions. These included more official recognition of participation initiatives by the Department of Education and Science and the development of guidelines to recruitment to these initiatives. There is evidence that a cultural change is slowly occurring which may be due to recognition from the Department of Education and Science that time spent with Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg is regarded as 'official' school-time. It was suggested by adult participants that in order to achieve a broader representation of young people co-ordinators need to work with a network of staff within the school, including Home School Liaison Co-ordinators, PE teachers, Transition Year Co-ordinators and the School Completion Programme, which operates throughout the country as a key support agency in supporting seldom heard young people and assisting through the funding of transport and support for young people who are participating,

where available. Also, it was suggested that teachers and school support staff receive training on child and youth participation to support them. The recruitment of young people through other organisations such as youth clubs or agencies which support seldom heard young people was seen as critical to providing a wider representative group of children and young people.

Seldom heard young people

A key area concerning representation is the participation of seldom heard young people.[2] According to McEvoy (2011) on average 21% of young people involved in Comhairle na nÓg are from seldom heard groups. Comhairle na nÓg co-ordinators in this study were very aware of the importance of involving seldom heard young people. Some of the adult and youth participants pointed out that participation can initially be easier for young people from middle-class backgrounds. For example one adult participant felt that some of the young people participating in her Comhairle na nÓg were initially intimidated by the confidence levels of two members who attended a private school. Similar sentiments were expressed by some of the youth participants in the research and one of the focus groups with youth participants conducted by the Young Researchers in an urban area discussed the role that socio-economic class plays in membership of Comhairle na nÓg. They discussed the perception that it is viewed as a middle class organisation and that schools from the more affluent parts of the city tend to send delegates to the AGMs. Turkie (2010: 262) contends that young people who have higher levels of educational attainment/success in the school system can dominate youth participation. Over-representation of middle class children was also identified in an audit of child and youth participation in Ireland:

> *Some organisations argued that the majority of children and young people involved in participation at regional and national level are well-educated, articulate, middle-class children and young people, who do not necessarily represent those in Irish society who are most in need of supports and services....'Formal children and young people's participation at regional and national level almost always consists of young people well on their way to making a career in decision-making!'* (Roe and McEvoy, 2009: 38)

While this view was also held by many of the adult participants there was also a consensus among adult participants that Comhairle na nÓg created a safe space for some seldom heard young people and a safe space to discuss issues of difference and social justice. An adult respondent described a young person who 'was struggling with his sexuality and half-way through the year he came out to all the lads and since then has been setting up a LGBT group in the county' (Adult Participant 15). Participation spaces can provide a young person with not only a safe space but also with an opportunity to advocate for other young people and to provide support to others. Many of the adults interviewed discussed the extensive work which they do to recruit and prepare young people from seldom heard backgrounds for participation in Comhairle na nÓg.

> *We do go to the disability group and Travellers groups and say to them if you want to get involved send people on the day. The work in those groups is in the preparation. I go out to the groups three to four times before they go to Comhairle, to their own groups to where they feel safe and talk them through the day ...* (Adult Participant 7)

Much of this work is done in partnership with agencies which support the participation of seldom heard young people including youth groups, Youth Reach, and Garda Diversion Projects. When adult participants were asked about participation of seldom heard young people they tended to focus on the Traveller community.

Adult participants highlighted some of the challenges in recruiting and maintaining participation by seldom heard young people and in particular members of the Traveller community. Children in care and young people from the Traveller Community were identified by adult participants as two groups who were more likely to drop out of participation initiatives before projects were completed. In relation to the participation of young people from the Traveller community a number of issues emerged. There is often a high level of interaction between Comhairle Co-ordinators and Traveller support workers. The role of the Traveller support agencies is crucial in supporting the young person's involvement and many of the adult participants interviewed have a strong working relationship with local agencies to support Traveller participation. The experiences of some of the Comhairle Co-ordinators are that young people from the Traveller community tend to come initially to meetings with a lot of support but then leave. Literacy issues were also perceived as a barrier for some members of the Traveller community. However there were also a number of examples of very successful participation experiences of members of the Traveller community.

> *Last year's theme was social inclusion and the girl from the Traveller group stood up and said her name and said she was from the Traveller group and said I live social inclusion and then sat down. You wouldn't hear a pin drop and she came in second highest in the voting... her first couple of meetings were wobbly, she wasn't sure of herself but now she is coming in to her own.* (Adult Participant 17)

A small number of participants spoke about trying to create the conditions for participation for young people with disabilities:

> *The Disability sector is one that we have found challenging to get. There are physical challenges but we have always had a venue that is suitable but there are other challenges as well, the confidence isn't there or they don't feel comfortable being there on day one with 100 young people and you have to be there on the big day. We do endeavour through the steering group to have links to them, personnel from the HSE (Health Service Executive) are on the Comhairle Steering Group.* (Adult Participant 9)

A number of other adult respondents described initiatives that their Comhairlí were involved in to support the participation of young people with disabilities through partnerships with disability groups and organisations.

Participation of seldom heard young people appears to be dependent on networks of support from other organisations and involves multi-agency work as evidenced by the work with Traveller organisations and Disability groups. Other activities linked to the recruitment of seldom heard young people included seeking language support from the local Vocational Education Committees to address language barriers for Eastern European young people who are interested in attending Comhairle na nÓg. A number of participants also mentioned the role of the School Completion Programme as being particularly instrumental in accessing young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and young people at risk of school drop-out. These young people in particular are unlikely to be put forward by their schools for participation in Comhairlí AGMs.

In general, the adult participants were very enthusiastic with the role that participation initiatives have played in involving seldom heard young people and allowing them to have a voice and engage more with their wider community. Recruitment and retention of seldom heard young people requires support from other organisations working with these groups and many of the adult participants spoke about the positive relations they have with organisations such as local Traveller youth groups and disability support groups. Participation on the Steering Group Committee of Comhairle na nÓg by professionals working with seldom heard young people was viewed as a way to target these groups. The involvement of seldom heard young people appears to be dependent on the availability of networks of interagency support. Accessing young people through existing organisations raises issues concerning who is included or excluded in youth participation; some children and young people risk being 'over-consulted' while other young people are never asked for their views because they are not involved in any participative organisations (Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, 2011). This risks creating a class of children who, in order to participate in decision-making structures, are taken away from the familiar environment of their communities and their peers and placed within pre-existing, centralised structures that may or may not reflect or address the concerns of those they leave behind (Sinclair, 2004: 112; Cairns and Brannen, 2005 cited in Willow, 2010: 52; Lansdown, 2006: 145). Also, there was a concern among some adult participants in this study that seldom heard young people might not want to represent or feel that they can represent all other seldom heard young people.

Increasing representation in local youth councils

A number of strategies could be adopted to increase the diversity of representation in Comhairlí na nÓg and in particular to increase wider peer engagement with children and young people and connect to a wider youth audience. The use of peer research which is already being utilized in some of the Comhairle na nÓg presents positive opportunities to engage with young people outside

of the youth council structures and provides an avenue for their voices to be heard by decision-makers. There is some emerging evidence that differences in participation levels across gender and socio-economic class are less 'pronounced in the case of new forms of participation' (Sloam, 2013) and this raises the possibility of a more egalitarian form of participation and representation occurring outside of structured participatory spaces. Flanagan and Levine (2010) found that there were less differences in educational attainment among young people who participated in digital civic and political forums compared to more traditional forms of engagement. The authors suggest that research needs to consider the role of digital media in encouraging participation, particularly because of the lower barriers of entry to digital participation compared to traditional forms of participation, including spatial barriers, and because of the diverse communities and interest online. The challenge then for political and civic institutions is to merge traditional and new forms of political participation and allow them to work in a complementary manner to support young people's political engagement and participation. The establishment of online voting and digital participation forums by Comhairle na nÓg might help to merge these separate participatory spaces and increase the wider impact of the work of Comhairle na nÓg.

Conclusions

Representation in child and youth participatory initiatives is multi-layered and may be interpreted in different ways according to the social actor involved. Differing attitudes emerge between young people and adults towards the meaning of representation. Many of the adult personnel refer to representativeness in terms of accessing and retaining younger age-groups and 'seldom heard' young people, while the youth participants themselves view the participatory structures they are involved in as highly representative because they feel that they address issues that are both identified by and very relevant to young people in Ireland.

Representation is a difficult issue in children and young people's participation, as the discussion in the literature review has revealed. Children and young people may feel pressured by adults' expectations that they represent their peers, while these expectations may not take account of differences between young people. Assumptions are made that all young people have equal opportunities to participate, but agencies such as schools may adopt a gate-keeping role in determining which children and young people are selected for participation.

Many of the young people in the study were involved in other participation initiatives such as student councils which places them in positions where they have their voice listened to more frequently than other young people who are not directly involved in participation initiatives. They are, in effect, what have been called 'networked young persons' reflecting the multiplier effect of participation which 'grows exponentially once someone becomes connected to one network' (Brodie et al, 2011: 42) and participation activities increase the individuals' wider social network. In Comhairle na nÓg adults do maintain some control over who becomes a member but the

majority of members are voted on by other young people at the AGMS. This adult control is often about including participants who are deemed seldom heard and this attempts to create a more representative balance of children and young people.

Further analysis is required to identify the reasons for the under-representation of young people under 15 and how this issue may be addressed. Participation initiatives need to be more active in engaging children and younger teenagers as currently this group are under-represented and are less likely to participate. The ongoing challenge for Comhairle na nÓg is to balance the recruitment of these young people with others who may have fewer opportunities to participate and may lack the confidence to put themselves forward.

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Notes

1 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (13th December 2006) U.N.T.S. 44910.

2 'Seldom heard' young people is a term used to describe young people who tend not to have many opportunities to have their voices heard, including young people with disabilities, from an economically disadvantaged or culturally different background, young people in care, lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered (LGBT) young people, as well as those from more rural backgrounds and ethnic minorities (McEvoy 2011: 13).

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