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Children's Right to be Heard: Identifying the Barriers and Enablers Within a Primary School Context

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Context

Within the three spheres occupied by children; the home, school and their local community, school is the arena in which children in Ireland feel least heard, with children having low expectations regarding opportunities to participate within this context (Horgan, Forde, Parkes, Martin, Mages, and O'Connell, 2015). The facilitation of children's participation has received considerable policy focus within the Irish context in recent years, however, there has been an emphasis on the development of structures and mechanisms that facilitate formal participation. An example of this can be seen in the *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015). This action plan focuses on the promotion of formal participatory mechanisms within the school context, such as a greater number of student councils and consultation with children within the school inspection process. Actions which aim to promote children's informal spontaneous participation within the school context are lacking within the strategy. While formal participatory mechanisms are essential in facilitating the collective voice of children, so too is the facilitation of individual children's meaningful participation within their everyday lives and interactions with others.

Aim

This research seeks to identify and explore the barriers and enablers to children's everyday participation within Irish primary school contexts, while also contributing conceptually to understanding the role of spatial and relational elements on children's informal participation, in particular the importance of socio-material factors.

Methodology

This qualitative research takes a rights-based approach to answering the research question, incorporating pockets of children's participation (Franks, 2011) - including a child advisory group - within the research process. Ethical approval was granted by the Social Research Ethics Committee, University College Cork.

Sampling -Employing purposeful sampling five primary schools were identified and included in this study. The participating schools reflect diversity in relation to gender, ethos, size, location, and socio-economic status. Participants include the students, teachers and principals of these primary schools. Children ranged in age from 5 to 12 years old.

Data Collection - Data was collected using semi-structured interviews with adult educators (n=12), focus groups with children (n= 9) and observations.

Data Analysis - Qualitative data analysis software (NVivo) was used to aid the organisation, management and analysis of data. Braun and Clarke's (2006) Thematic Analysis framework in conjunction with the author's theoretical framework outlined below were employed to guide the analysis of the data.

Theoretical Framework

Mannion (2010, p. 339) argues that "children and young people's participation is always unfolding as an intergenerational performance wherein identifications, spaces and power struggles are key". Viewing children as relational beings, and participation as a situated relational process, this study takes a spatial/relational approach to answering the research question. Spaces and people are in a constant process of co-specification through generationally structured relationships between human and non-human elements. The resulting specifications impact on, and are impacted by, whose voice is heard / what forms of participation are enabled. *Generation* is identified as a key social factor in mediating children's self-identification, relationships with both people and spaces, and their lived experiences (Alanen, 2001; Leonard, 2016), thus shaping the opportunities and barriers children experience regarding participation. Socio-material approaches allow us to explore "ways that human and non-human materialities combine to produce particular purposes and particular effects in education" (Fenwick and Landri, 2012, p.3). Examining the co-specification of

people and spaces from a socio-material generational perspective will serve to illuminate the barriers and enablers of participation.

Initial Findings

This research is ongoing. However, current analysis indicates that while school culture, educators' and students' constructions of self and other, and teaching styles, all play an important role, the nature of the relationship between educators and students is of paramount significance to the level and quality of participation children enjoy within various school spaces. The importance of the nature of these relationships to children's experience of being heard is illustrated in the following quote.

> Male Child 1 < With some teachers it's really good to like talk with those really nice teachers not to Miss (name) she's mean.
> Male Child 2 < WHAT? She's lovely! She's REALLY nice!
> Male Child 1 < She's mean! She's mean!
> Researcher < Tell me what makes a teacher really nice?
> Male Child 2 < If she listens to you
> (Focus Group, St Seán National School)

Where participation is evident in schools, it permeates both academic and non-academic spaces, while, in less participatory settings, educators view participation as an activity that sits outside the realm of the primary school curriculum.

> [T]hey [opportunities to participate] are all over the place and they are on different levels… they [the students] are always being invited into the decision-making space. (Principal, Springrock)

> I don't see it [children contributing to school decisions] as being hugely important in a primary school, I suppose because we start with four-year-olds and we obviously take into consideration I suppose what works, so I suppose we are incorporating their choices in that respect. (Principal St. Reginas)

The changes needed to ensure children's everyday lived participation within a primary school context are simple, given that they do not require changes to the curriculum, or timetable, yet tremendous, as they require attitudinal changes. In developing understanding regarding the barriers and enablers of children's informal participation within the school sphere, this research will contribute to addressing the current gap between policy and practice.

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