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

DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH AFFAIRS
2015

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

Members of the Research Team for this study were:
Deirdre Horgan (Principal Investigator), **Catherine Forde**, **Aisling Parkes** and **Shirley Martin**, and research assistant **Linda Mages** and previously **Angela O'Connell**, all of University College Cork.

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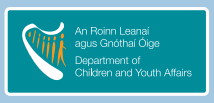

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Contents

Acknowledgements v

About the authors vi

Executive Summary 1

1. Introduction 9
   - 1.1 Overview of study 10
   - 1.2 Policy context in Ireland 10
   - 1.3 Objectives of study 12

2. Literature Review 15
   - 2.1 Theoretical underpinnings 16
   - 2.2 Current research 17
   - 2.3 Current empirical and qualitative research 21
   - 2.4 Summary 28

3. Methodology 29
   - 3.1 Purpose of study 30
   - 3.2 Operational phases of the project 31
   - 3.3 Recruitment and sampling 34
   - 3.4 Data collection methods 37
   - 3.5 Transcription 43
   - 3.6 Analytical approach 44
   - 3.7 Credibility and trustworthiness 44
   - 3.8 Limitations of the study 45
   - 3.9 Ethical considerations 45

4. Findings: Participation at home 47
   - 4.1 Introduction 48
   - 4.2 Children and young people's views on participation 48
   - 4.3 Experiences of participation at home 48
   - 4.4 Types of decision-making in the home 49
   - 4.5 Enablers of participation in the home 56
   - 4.6 Barriers to participation in the home 60
   - 4.7 Parenting style 62
   - 4.8 Children and young people's suggestions 65
   - 4.9 Summary 65

5. Findings: Participation in school 67
   - 5.1 Introduction 68
   - 5.2 Views on children and young people's participation 68
   - 5.3 Student participation in schools 70
   - 5.4 Enablers of participation in school 78
   - 5.5 Barriers to participation in school 78
   - 5.6 Children and young people's suggestions 84
   - 5.7 Summary 85

6. Findings: Participation in the community 87
6.1 Introduction 88
6.2 Forms of participation in the community 88
6.3 Participation in local decision-making 89
6.4 Decision-making in youth and community organisations 90
6.5 Decision-making in Comhairle na nÓg 93
6.6 Enablers of participation in the community 94
6.7 Barriers to participation in the community 95
6.8 Children and young people's suggestions 100
6.9 Summary 103

7. Key Messages and Conclusion 105
7.1 Introduction 106
7.2 Key messages 106
7.3 Conclusion 110

Bibliography 111

Appendices
Appendix 1: DCYA/OMCYA Consultation Initiatives 124
Appendix 2: Informed Consent Form for Adult research participation 125
Appendix 3: Informed Consent Form for Parents of research participants 127
Appendix 4: Informed Consent Form for Young Participants, aged 7-17 years 129
Appendix 5: Children's Focus Group Schedule 131
Appendix 6: Young People's Focus Group Schedule 133
Appendix 7: Information sheet for children and young people 135
Appendix 8: UNCRC Information Sheet for Young People's Focus Groups 136
Appendix 9: Interview Questions for Organisations and Groups working with children and young people 137
Appendix 10: Focus Group/Interview Schedule for Parents 138
Appendix 11: Written Survey Questions for Parents 139
Appendix 12: Summarising Parent Written Survey 140
Appendix 13: Profile Survey for Schools 142
Appendix 14: Agenda for Children's and Young People's Advisory Groups Meeting 143
Appendix 15: Agenda for Steering Group 144
Appendix 16: Posters of Children Participant Quotes for the Children's Advisory Group 145
Appendix 17: Posters of Young People Participant Quotes for the Young People's Advisory Group 151
Appendix 18: Children's Advisory Group – Summary of important decision-making issues 157
Appendix 19: Young People's Advisory Group – Summary of important decision-making issues 158
Appendix 20: Showing samples of the Young People Participants' Internet trees 159
Appendix 21: Recommendations from children and young people for facilitating their voice and participation 160
Appendix 22: Gantt Chart Research Phases – October 2012 to September 2014 161

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Executive Summary

Since the 1990s, children and young people's participation has been increasingly acknowledged due to the global rights agenda, with much of the research on children's participation structured around Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Wyness, 2013), which Ireland ratified in 1992. Accordingly, the Irish Government has placed greater emphasis on understanding the lived experiences of children and young people, conducting consultations with them, developing formal structures for their participation and developing evidence-based policy. There has been an exponential growth of participatory initiatives, mechanisms and structures for children and young people in Ireland.

Adopting a children's rights perspective, with particular emphasis on Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as a minimum legal standard, this research aims to examine the nature of and extent to which children and young people, aged 7-17, have a voice in their homes, schools and communities in Ireland.*

The research adopts a working definition of 'participation' from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009, para. 2) General Comment No. 12 (entitled *The Right of the Child to be Heard*), which argues that although this term 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'.

Furthermore, our approach is influenced by the understanding of participation as described in *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020* (DCYA, 2014, p. 31), which states: 'Participation is 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.'

The research uses a relational approach to children's participation, by recognising the respective roles and positions of children and adults and establishing interdependence as a basis for children and young people's participation (Wyness, 2013). Within this framework, the study examines the lived realities of children and young people's participation in Ireland by tapping into their unique knowledge and perspectives, as well as engaging with key adults who live or work with them in education or local community settings.

Much international and Irish research to date has focused on the opportunities for children and young people's participation offered by formal structures and channels, and analysed the extent to which they interact with formal participation and decision-making structures (Parkes, 2013; Martin *et al*, 2015). Some studies attempt to understand children and young people's participation in schools (Devine, 2002; Lundy, 2007; De Castro, 2011; Cosgrove and Gilleece, 2012; Fleming, 2013) as well as in community contexts (Percy-Smith, 2010; Percy-Smith and Burns, 2013; Kerrins *et al*, 2011). However, far less has emerged concerning the extent to which children participate or have a voice in the home (Davey *et al*, 2010a; Bjerke, 2011) and more generally on the more mundane everyday interactions and the routine informal and unstructured opportunities for meaningful participation in children and young people's daily lives. Moreover, while much existing research has tended to focus on the opportunities for children to participate in decision-making structures, there is a modest body of material on how children and young people feel about the nature and extent of their participation in decision-making, what makes participation meaningful for them and how things might be improved (Aston and Lambert, 2010).

* In this report, when we refer to 'children' and 'young people', we utilise the UNCRC's definition of 'a child' as a person under the age of 18, unless the laws of a particular country set the legal age for adulthood younger.

Aim and objectives of study

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

The investigative focus of the study is shaped by Lundy's (2007) conceptualisation of Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which focuses on space, voice, audience and influence. With this in mind, the objectives of this research are:

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

Methodology

This one-year research project employed a mixed methodology. A review of the literature was undertaken on children and young people's participation and voice, and on creative participative methods of research with young people. The project's primary research employed a variety of creative oral and written methods, which were predominantly qualitative in nature. Fieldwork comprised one-to-one semi-structured interviews and focus groups to obtain detailed narrative data that captured the experiences and views of children, young people and adult stakeholders on the participation of children and young people in decision-making.

In total, 74 children and young people participated in group interviews for the research, with a further 20 involved in the Children's and Young People's Advisory Groups and the pilot phase of the fieldwork. In addition, 34 adult participants were interviewed, comprising parents, school principals and teachers, and community stakeholders. The research was guided by an Expert Steering Group and three Advisory Groups of participants (one made up of children, one of young people and one of parents).

The objective of the primary research with children and young people was to utilise child-centred participative research methods appropriate to their age and understanding, in accordance with Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and to provide fun, safe spaces for those who took part in the research (Barker and Weller, 2003; Miller, 2003). These methods included games, visual and verbal methods, drawings and other interactive methods that helped capture their lived experiences of participation. Certain games (such as 'Human bingo' and ball-games), visual methods (such as interactive wall charts and floor mats) and child/youth-friendly interview and focus group guides were all developed specifically for this research.

Key findings on children and young people's perspectives

Children and young people are experts on their own lives. Findings from the research clearly show that they felt adults should listen to them because of their status as citizens, their unique perspectives and their specialist expertise and knowledge on matters related to their lives.

Children and young people generally accepted the authority of adults regarding decision-making, although they were more likely to negotiate the adult–child power difference as they grew older. What they found frustrating and unfair was the low status adults often accorded to their opinions and the lack of explanation on how their opinions had been taken into account during a decision-making process. Young children can take a very rational and reasoned approach to decision-making. This finding reiterates the importance of engaging children in participatory processes from a young age. Despite this, we found that younger children were among the most likely to miss out on opportunities to raise concerns that were pertinent to their lives and to have these concerns addressed as a result.

Most of the young participants were dissatisfied with their level of input into decision-making processes in school, in relation to the area where they lived and, to a lesser extent, in the home. While there were some excellent examples of proactive engagement of children and young people in decision-making processes by student councils, youth forums, local youth and community groups, and individual parents, these opportunities were not the norm.

Findings from each setting – home, school and community – are discussed in more detail below.

Home

The home was experienced by children and young people as the setting most facilitative of their voice and participation in their everyday lives. There was a general sense among children and young people that they had a voice and some level of influence in the home, while also an acceptance that their parents had the ultimate authority. There was evidence of some tokenistic practices as well as limited participation at home. The key areas of decision-making included consumption activities (e.g. food and clothes), leisure and friends. Generally, children and young people felt that it was legitimate for parents to have greater influence over certain issues, although they were more likely to negotiate these as they grew older.

Barriers

Some of the significant barriers to participation and decision-making at home highlighted by children and young people were:

- parents not listening to them effectively;
- age and maturity;
- lack of parental trust;
- tokenistic practices regarding participation at home.

Enablers

Key enablers of children and young people's voice in the home included:

- spaces where discussion can happen at home;
- good family relationships;
- being listened to and encouraged by parents;
- trust and growing levels of independence with age;
- decisions being perceived as fair;
- having the rationale for decisions explained to them by parents.

School

Most children and young people who participated in this research 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.

Barriers

Some of the key barriers to participation and decision-making in school highlighted by children and young people were:

- age and maturity;
- the autocratic and hierarchical nature of the school system;
- the lack of opportunities and space in the school week for their voice to be heard;
- lack of or poor relationships with key personnel in school;
- poor information systems in schools, whereby policy changes or decisions on disciplinary procedures are not communicated effectively.

Enablers

The children and young people identified enablers of their voice in school settings as:

- adult recognition of their agency with increasing age and maturity;
- the availability of and access to scheduled and unscheduled structures for participation;
- appropriate spaces in the school timetable;
- relationships with key school personnel;
- a school culture that is facilitative of voice.

Community

Children and young people in this research were either ambivalent or dissatisfied with their input into decision-making processes in relation to their local community. Those, however, who were involved in youth clubs or community projects were extremely positive about their experiences of voice in those specific settings.

Barriers

The children and young people identified barriers to their voice and participation in the community as:

- negative adult attitudes generally towards young people in the community;
- their own lack of awareness about how decisions are made at local level and how they could engage with these processes;
- the lack of identified spaces for children and young people in communities;
- poor access to facilities and activities in which young people are interested in engaging and the impact of the economic recession on this.

Enablers

However, children and young people did identify some important facilitators of their voice in the community, including:

- adult recognition of their agency with increasing age and maturity;
- the existence of dedicated youth spaces in the community for them, such as youth cafés and youth projects;
- readiness of adults in dedicated youth spaces to listen to them;
- sport as a key site of participation in the community.

Key findings on adults' perspectives

Home

The views of parents reflected much of what the children and young people had to say about participation in the home. Parents participating in this study appeared to be genuinely engaged in trying to listen to their children's views and to involve them in decision-making in the home. They felt that their children have never had more freedom to be heard in this setting and explained that this is the product of changing childhood expectations and parental encouragement of their children to participate in domestic decision-making. In contrast, parents themselves had experienced a more authoritarian form of parenting as children, where they felt they were 'seen and not heard'. Their own childhood experience was the main motivation and influence on their parenting style, as well as factors such as their stage of parenting, energy levels and societal expectations. Parents presented themselves as the gatekeepers of the nature and extent of their children's decision-making through clear boundary-setting. Ultimately, the parents indicated that they generally had the final say.

Community stakeholders discussed the importance of parents encouraging children and young people's participation outside the home and referred to how parents' capacity to facilitate this is being undermined by family problems and today's busy pace of life.

School

The participation of children and young people in the school context was the one area in the research where the reality experienced by children, young people and adults was often at opposite ends of the spectrum. While recognising the need to involve them in decisions, school principals and teachers genuinely felt that there already existed adequate spaces for children and young people's voice in the school context, primarily through formal representative structures such as student councils. In contrast, the children and young people generally viewed schools as hierarchical institutions where even formal participation structures (including student councils) were experienced as undemocratic and ineffective. Interestingly, however, student councils were recognised by some children and young people in this study (particularly by those who did not have access to them, such as primary school children or some young people in the Junior Cycle at second level) as actually facilitating participation in the school context.

Generally, school principals and teachers were positive about school being a facilitative space for children's voice, with plenty of time and opportunity for young people to contribute to decisions affecting them. Interestingly, they tended to refer mainly to the more formal, representative decision-making structures in existence in schools rather than the opportunities and spaces for everyday participation by children and young people.

Parents who participated in the study appeared to have limited knowledge of their children's school experience, indicating a lack of communication between home and school settings, and otherwise expressed scepticism about the extent of their children's involvement in decision-making and scope to influence change within their school.

Community

There was a degree of consensus among the adult community stakeholders and the children and young people about the lack of consultation between adults and young people in the provision of local services and facilities. Both raised the issue of negative adult attitudes and a lack of awareness among children and young people on how to make an input into local decision-making. However, those adults and young people involved in youth projects locally felt that the young people have a sense of ownership of these spaces due to their involvement in key decision-making about their design and the activities that take place there.

The community stakeholders recognised that children and young people have the right to a voice, to be heard and to be involved in the decisions that affect them in clubs and communities. However, they acknowledged that other adults, who may not share their understanding of child participation, often have a negative view of young people 'hanging out' in community spaces. They also thought that the youth organisations they were involved in did seek to realise voice and participation of children and young people through their structures, activities and processes, and that they were successful in this to varying degrees. Some engaged children and young people in decision-making through formal involvement in the management of the organisation, while others involved them through more informal channels in making decisions about activities, rules and planning.

Parents had little to say about their children's participation in the local community apart from valuing their involvement in sports and local activities. This compares to the knowledge vacuum parents had of their children's school experience (*see above*). However, those parents whose children were involved in specific youth clubs or community projects felt that the informal and relaxed approach of such settings is conducive to providing an environment where children can talk openly and where youth workers can wield an influence over and above their own as parents.

Summary

Informed by Lundy's (2007) model of participation, the research indicates that children and young people have varying levels of space, voice, audience and influence from one sphere of their lives to another. In day-to-day decision-making at home, a significant majority of children and young people felt that they are heard and influence decisions. The only area that appears to meet Article 12 of the UNCRC in facilitating the right of the child to express their views (and it is not possible to make a generalised statement here) is within the home and family. Conversely, school is the area that emerged as least conducive to listening to children and young people. While many children and young people highlighted very positive relationships with individual school personnel or adults in the community (such as youth leaders or sports coaches) who encouraged and supported their engagement, there was an equal number who did not have such positive experiences.

The experience of children and young people in this study, while positive in structured projects, was very negative where there was no forum in which they could gather in the community. They often identified issues that related to their everyday experiences, such as wanting to have places where they could gather and spend time with each other (youth-friendly public spaces); wanting to have decision-making power in relation to school uniforms; and wanting to make policing practices fairer in disadvantaged areas. These issues point to the need to focus on what Percy-Smith (2010) calls the more 'organic' spaces within everyday settings, where young people can benefit from the development of a culture of participation and active citizenship, and gradually take on more responsibilities and active roles according to their abilities and inclinations.

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview of study

This study was commissioned by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (DECLG), and conducted by a research team led by Dr. Deirdre Horgan from the School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork. It is a qualitative study which seeks to explore the extent and nature of children and young people's participation in decision-making in matters affecting them in their homes, schools and communities.

Since the 1990s, children and young people's participation has been increasingly acknowledged due to the global rights agenda, with much of the research on children's participation structured around Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Wyness, 2013), which Ireland ratified in 1992. Accordingly, the Irish Government has placed greater emphasis on understanding the lived experiences of children and young people, conducting consultations with them, developing formal structures of participation and developing evidence-based policy. However, as noted by Davey *et al* (2010a) in the UK context, there has been less of a focus on children's participation in decision-making in their everyday lives.

More recent studies have been grounded in empirical research to which children and young people contribute with their knowledge and understanding of their own position as participants (Bjerke, 2011; Davey *et al*, 2010a). Similarly, the intention in this research is to start from children and young people's own accounts of participation in order to analyse their social position as participants in decision-making processes with adults within the context of the home, school and community.[1]

1.2 Policy context in Ireland

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) requires that in order for participation in decision-making to be meaningful for children, they must not only be given adequate information concerning the decision being made, they must also be provided with a meaningful opportunity to be involved. This includes being facilitated in expressing their views freely, in relation to all matters affecting them, and for their views to be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity. Commitment to an attitude of respect for the '*unique and important knowledge*' of children and young people is required (Alderson, 2008, p. 141). Implicit within the notion of due weight in the UNCRC is the fact that children have a right to have their views listened to (not just heard) by those involved in decision-making processes. This means that such processes must be open to children and that mechanisms are established that ensure children have active and inclusive participation at all levels in the home, school, community and wider society (as stated in para. 12 of General Comment No. 5 by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2003).

The Irish Government committed to promoting children's rights when it ratified the UNCRC in 1992. Article 12 of the UNCRC represents '*one of the fundamental values of the Convention as well as one of its major challenges'* (Parkes, 2013, p. 2). Its incumbent obligations has resulted in the Irish Government developing policies and practices that support the participation of children and young people in decision-making across issues that affect their lives. Nonetheless, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2006, para. 25a) in its report *Concluding Observations: Ireland* recommended that the State Party (i.e. Ireland) '*strengthen its efforts to ensure, including through Constitutional provisions, that children have the right to express their views in all matters affecting them and to have those views given due weight in particular in families, schools and other educational institutions, the health sector and in communities'*.

[1] In this report, when we refer to 'children' and 'young people', we utilise the definition of 'a child' in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as a person under the age of 18, unless the laws of a particular country set the legal age for adulthood younger.

Involving children and young people in decision-making is national public policy in Ireland since 2000, when it was set out as Goal 1 of *Our Children – Their Lives: The National Children's Strategy* (Department of Health and Children, 2000). Although the strategy was not legally binding, it marked a shift towards consideration of children's rights in policy development by strongly reflecting key principles and provisions of the UNCRC. The Report of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship (2007) also promotes the need for all citizens, including children and young people, to become involved in social and community life. A recent review of the policy framework adopted in relation to Goal 1 of the National Children's Strategy by Kilkelly *et al* (2015) demonstrates that children and young people's participation has been acknowledged and supported at the highest political level. Article 12 of the UNCRC (often referred to as the 'Participation Article) has been reiterated and incorporated into several major national policy instruments (*see Appendix 1 of this report*). The exponential growth of participatory initiatives, mechanisms and structures for children and young people has been rapid. These include the National Children's Advisory Council; Children and Young People's Forum; Children and Young People's Participation Support Team/Young People's Participation Partnership Committee; Children's Advisory Forum for the *Growing Up in Ireland* study; and Student Council Working Group.

Dáil na nÓg[2] and Comhairle na nÓg[3] were established to provide a structure through which children and young people could influence national and local policy, planning and services (Kilkelly *et al*, 2015). The establishment of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) in 2011, headed by a dedicated Cabinet Minister, increased the visibility of children and young people within Ireland's political sphere. The establishment of a Citizen Participation Unit within the DCYA has been at the forefront of many of the initiatives to implement Goal 1, providing leadership to agencies and organisations in this area, principally through collaboration on specific participation and consultation initiatives.

Another key mechanism in the public sector to achieve participation was the establishment of the Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO) under the Ombudsman for Children Act 2002, which obliges the OCO to consult children and young people and highlight their concerns in executing its three main functions of independent complaints handling; policy and legislation advice; and promoting children's rights through participation and education. In the voluntary and private sectors, a range of child and youth participative structures and initiatives have also been developed (Kilkelly *et al*, 2015).

Furthermore, in April 2014 the DCYA published the successor to the National Children's Strategy, entitled *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020*. In it, the Government commits to developing and implementing a *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making, 2015-2020* to strengthen efforts to ensure that children and young people are supported to express their views in all matters affecting them and to have these views given due weight, including those of 'seldom-heard' children and young people. The DCYA published this strategy in June 2015.

In November 2012, the referendum to amend the Constitution of Ireland to include a new Article 42A relating to children was approved by the country's citizens. It specifically states that legislation will be drafted to ensure that children will have a voice in guardianship, child care and adoption proceedings where they are affected by any decisions being made in that

[2] Dáil na nÓg is the national youth parliament for young people aged 12-18. The DCYA funds and oversees Dáil na nÓg, which is hosted biennially by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. Delegates are elected to Dáil na nÓg by the 31 Comhairle na nÓg. *See* http://www.dcya.gov.ie/viewdoc.asp?fn=%2Fdocuments%2FChildYouthParticipation%2FDailnanog.htm&mn=chin&nID=4

[3] Comhairle na nÓg are local youth councils in the 31 Local Authorities of the country, which give children and young people (aged 12-18) the opportunity to be involved in the development of local services and policies. *See* http://www.dcya.gov.ie/viewdoc.asp?fn=%2Fdocuments%2FChildYouthParticipation%2FComhairlenanog.htm&mn=chin&nID=2

context, mirroring Article 12 of the UNCRC. Following a challenge to the High Court and an appeal to the Supreme Court, the Thirty-first Amendment of the Constitution (Children) Act 2015 was signed into Irish law on 28th April 2015.

However, it has been acknowledged that despite developing many formal structures for participation, in reality children and young people may not actually feel empowered (Percy-Smith, 2010). For example, Cosgrove and Gilleece (2012), in their analyses of questionnaire data from 14-year-olds in Ireland as part of the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS), indicated that just one-fifth of 2nd year students in Ireland had participated in decision-making about the running of their school in the year prior to the ICCS. Fewer students had taken part in discussions at assembly or been a candidate to represent their class or year on the student council. This recognition of the limitations of formal structures has led to calls to widen debates to encompass participation as active citizenship in everyday life, encompassing informal and formal spaces in schools, communities and organisations.

1.3 Objectives of study

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

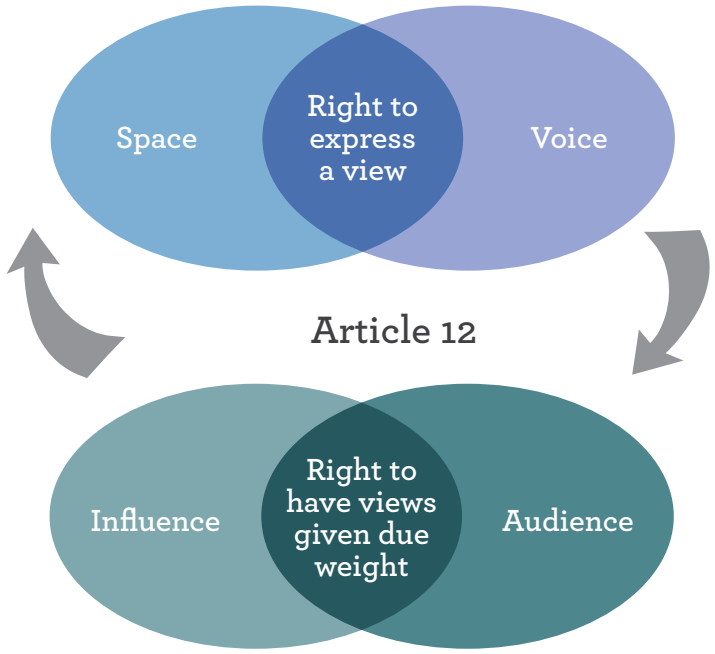
The investigative focus of the study is shaped by Lundy's (2007) conceptualisation of Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). In seeking to understand the interrelated elements that contribute to the conditions necessary for effective participation of children and young people in decision-making in the education context, Lundy asks four key questions that are central to this project:

- What **spaces** allow children and young people to participate?
- Do opportunities exist for children and young people to have a **voice**?
- What **audience** listens to the views of children and young people?
- Can their views **influence**?

This model underpinned the design of this study, as well as a thematic analysis of the data (Lundy, 2007). It reflects the fact that all four elements – space, voice, audience and influence – are interrelated; in particular, there is significant overlap between (a) space and voice, and (b) audience and influence (*see Figure 1*). It also illustrates that, despite the fact that decision-making processes are rarely static, Article 12 of the UNCRC has a clear sequence, the first stage of which is ensuring the child's right to express a view, followed by the child's right to have the view given due weight. It is also clear that given the holistic nature of the UNCRC, Article 12 can only be understood fully when it is considered in the light of other relevant participatory provisions, in particular Article 2 (non-discrimination); Article 3 (best interests); Article 5 (right to guidance); Article 13 (right to seek, receive and impart information); and Article 19 (protection from abuse) (Lundy, 2007, p. 933).

While Lundy's model was designed specifically for an examination of children's participation in the education context, it is capable of wider application to children and young people's experiences in those other contexts where they live their lives. It offers a model for informing understanding, developing policy and auditing existing practice related to participation with children and young people in schools, community contexts and in the home.

Figure 1: Adapted from Lundy's Model of Participation (2007)



In addition to Lundy's Model of Participation, key considerations that influenced the design of this study and data collection include:

- **A rights-based view of children as social actors in shaping their own lives:** This study recognises children and young people as social actors and holders of rights (Tisdall and Punch, 2012). This concept of children and young people as social actors, as 'beings' rather than 'becomings', is articulated in the 'new sociology of childhood', countering traditional views of them as less competent and complete (Uprichard, 2008). The concept of agency is complex and contested, and Oswell (2013, p. 50) warns against emphasis on categorical thinking regarding childhood, arguing that the notion of child as agent has all the hallmarks of a social universal. Nonetheless, there is a general acceptance of children and young people as social actors.

  From a human rights perspective, it is vital for research about the lives of children and young people to include their self-reported lived experiences (Hill, 2005; Nic Gabhainn and Sixsmith, 2005). The experiences and perspectives expressed by the children and young people involved in the present research were sought in order to maximise insight into the reality of their participation in their homes, schools and communities.

- **Perspectives of key adults:** Acknowledging the relational nature of children's lives means relocating children and young people's participation within a framework of intergenerational dialogue, which incorporates a range of distinct forms of participation between children and adults in a range of diverse settings (Wyness, 2013). Taking this understanding, the views on the extent and nature of children and young people's participation in their homes, schools and communities were sought from a range of key adults in their lives, including parents, school principals, teachers, community workers and other professionals working directly with children and young people.

- **Use of qualitative methods:** This study uses qualitative approaches since its aim is to obtain in-depth narrative on the experiences of participation that children and young people have. Focus groups with the children and young people utilised creative interactive methods, including ball games, human bingo, decision-making game, mapping work and discussion (Kellett, 2010). Individual face-to-face interviews and a small number of focus groups were used with the participating adults, consisting of parents, school principals, teachers and community stakeholders.

- **Participatory research:** Influenced by Article 12 of the UNCRC and Goal 1 of the National Children's Strategy, participatory research with children is a key approach of this study. Children and young people were involved at all stages of the research in their capacity as advisors (through the use of children's and young people's advisory groups), consulting them on matters of research design, data collection methods and instruments, analysis and validation of findings and dissemination. In addition, those children and young people interviewed in the focus groups were regarded as partners in the research process based on the view that such participative approaches in research with children and young people help them to set the agenda, have greater control and participate on their own terms (Tisdall *et al*, 2009a; Kellett, 2010).

With this in mind, the objectives of the research are:

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

2. Literature Review

This chapter provides a brief review of the existing qualitative and quantitative research that considers child participation in various contexts. In particular, it focuses on three main areas:

- the theoretical underpinnings of the concept of participation as it applies to children and young people in this research;
- current literature on the participation of children and young people, including definitions, models and the benefits and challenges of participation;
- the limitations of existing research and a review of current empirical and qualitative research on children and young people's participation in the spheres of home, school and community.

2.1 Theoretical underpinnings

The literature on children and young people's voice and participation has been informed by a range of theoretical perspectives dominated by children's rights and the new sociology of childhood, but increasingly by a more relational approach to understanding the issues.

Children's rights

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), through the rights articulated in the document and the principles underpinning it, accepts children and young people as citizens in their own right, places them at the centre and recognises their capabilities to determine their own lives. It frames children's lives and well-being in the context of rights. Thomas (2011) argues that the UNCRC has put children on the social and political agenda, thereby giving added impetus to theoretical debates about children and childhood.

While political will is critical, taking the views of children and young people seriously is broader than the democratic process. It is a humanitarian matter that empowers children and young people to achieve social justice by enabling them to directly influence matters that affect them (McDonnell, 2000; Whitfield, 1997). The UNCRC, informed by this approach, requires children and young people to be recognised as discrete social units, with rights of equal value to adults including their parents (Hayes, 2002). It recognises children as subjects of rights rather than objects of adult protection. It provides various rights that can be grouped according to the three Ps, i.e. Participation, Protection and Provision. Article 12, the 'Participation Article', lies at the heart of the UNCRC, providing the crucial mechanism for the realisation of each of the other rights contained within the Convention (Santos Pais, 2000; Lansdown, 2005; Kilkelly, 2007; Krappman, 2010; Parkes, 2013).

New sociology of childhood

A social constructionist or new sociology of childhood position acknowledges the capacity of children to shape their own lives (Jans, 2004; Percy-Smith, 2010; Percy-Smith and Burns, 2013). Children are viewed as *'active in the construction of their own lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live'* (Prout and James, 1990, p. 8), thus challenging a view of children and young people as passive objects who are properties of their families, to be shaped and socialised by adult teaching (Smart *et al*, 2001). The new sociology of childhood approach has contributed to childhood being seen as a structural category of society rather than simply a passing phase. Oswell (2013) warns against an over-emphasis on the notion of the child and young person as 'agent', arguing that such categorical thinking does not acknowledge the complexity of their lives. Nonetheless, 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 (Qvotrup, 1994; Uprichard, 2008). Prior to this, little attention was paid to children as children, and what mattered to them, what affected them and how they interacted with their families, peer networks, communities and wider environments (Moran-Ellis, 2010).

Relational approaches

A number of wide-ranging theories emphasise relations, albeit with different starting points. Prout (2005, p. 82) suggests that we use languages of '*non-linearity, hybridity, network and mobility*' in relation to children. Central to this position is a perception of children and young people as individuals having responsibilities, living relationally, intergenerationally and in their communities (Valentin and Meinert, 2009). 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, 2013). A socio-cultural perspective emphasises the interdependency between children's voice and their socio-cultural environments (Mannion, 2007; Bjerke and Kjørholt, 2008). The interaction of development and environment influences the judgement of what is important to children and young people. These relational approaches view participation as rights-based and evolving within socio-cultural and lived realities (Cagliari *et al*, 2004).

2.2 Current research

Definitions and models of participation

Definitions of 'participation'

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 present research adopts a working definition of 'participation' from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009) General Comment No. 12 (entitled *The Right of the Child to be Heard*), which argues that although this term 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*'.

Similarly, the recently published *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020* describes participation as a process (DCYA, 2014, p. 31): '*Participation is 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.*'

Hart (1992, p. 5) describes participation as '*the process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives*', while Moosa-Mitha (2005, p. 375) defines it as '*the expression of one's agency in the multiple relationships within which citizens are present in society*'.

While children have rights and responsibilities, conveyed upon them by national law and international conventions, these are realised in the spaces of interpersonal relations, as well as person–State relations (Roche, 1999). The relational space in which children's citizenship is practised includes the home, neighbourhood, school and leisure facilities, plus occasional contact with figures of authority in peripheral zones (Jans, 2004). Locating citizenship in these spaces moves the discourse of children's citizenship from State–individual or State–civil society interactions to consideration of more horizontal dimensions of relations within civil society. Larkins (2013) explores the activities children and young people associate with citizenship and, similarly, argues that a fuller framework for understanding children's social and political agency in citizenship is needed.

Tisdall *et al* (2009b, p. 419) argue that children and young people's participation in public spaces is not a new phenomenon, in fact, they '*have never stopped participating in their schooling and in their communities. 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. But the formalisation of such participation, the roles of adults and institutional structures, the public recognition of such participation have differed over time*'.

Models of participation

A number of models have been developed that assess the quality of, and commitment to, participation and can be used to distinguish meaningful involvement from 'tokenism' or 'decoration'. These include Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation; Treseder's (1997) Degrees of Participation; Shier's (2001) Pathways of Participation; and Lundy's (2007) Model of Participation.

The present research study uses Lundy's (2007) Model of Participation since, unlike the others, it is specifically based on a conceptualisation of Article 12 of the UNCRC and places this fundamental provision at its core. Lundy argues that the successful implementation of the right enshrined under Article 12 for children and young people's participation requires consideration of four separate, but interrelated factors – space, voice, audience and influence. Each is described below.

- **Space:** An essential prerequisite for the meaningful engagement of children and young people in decision-making is the creation of an opportunity for involvement – a space in which children are encouraged to express their views or equally to choose not to (Lundy, 2007). The use of space here can be compared to Barbers' (2007) notion of the '*engagement zone*', where children and adults creatively engage and find new ways of utilising these spaces (Wyness, 2013).
- **Voice** refers to '*that cluster of intentions, hopes, grievances, and expectations that children guard as their own*' (Pufall and Unsworth, 2004, p. 8).
- **Audience:** A 'right of audience' is described by Lundy (2007, p. 937) as '*a guaranteed opportunity to communicate views to an identifiable individual or body with the responsibility to listen*'.
- **Influence** refers to the impact of children's discussions and participation on their everyday lives or the outcome for them. Research appears to indicate that most children and young people are more concerned that participation is meaningful and that decisions are explained to them rather than that their views are always acted upon (Davey *et al*, 2010a).

This model by Lundy, while specifically developed to apply within the sphere of education, offers an authoritative tool to evaluate the extent to which children and young people in Ireland participate in their homes, schools and communities.

Participation: A contested concept

Participation is not an uncontested concept. Hartas (2008, p. 97) points out that children and young people's participation can be over-regulated and can put too much pressure on them. Indeed, the principle of respect for the views of the child under Article 12 of the UNCRC requires that children express their views freely, and thus in the absence of any extrinsic pressure or force. Children are not required to participate, but they must be given the opportunity to choose whether to engage or not. Just as children and young people have the right not to participate, they may also choose not to assert their agency. Writing specifically in the context of children in the majority world, Tisdall and Punch (2012) argue that rather than adopting a 'taking for granted' stance and assuming agency to be positive and desired by all children and young people, it should be a scrutinised concept. Thus, they state (*ibid*, p. 16), '*problematising children and young people's agency illustrates the complexities and ambiguities of applying theoretical ideas in practice, particularly when social realities are complex and contradictory*'.

Benefits of participation in everyday life

There are many benefits to facilitating child participation in decision-making processes concerning them. Participation of children and young people in everyday life contributes to their well-being (Vis *et al*, 2011; Children's Society, 2012) and fosters a sense of value and self-worth (Davey *et al*, 2010b; Children's Society, 2012). Indeed, Eide and Winger (2005, p. 76) assert that being heard is '*one of the most important issues in identity construction*'. Inclusion of children and young people in decision-making can promote children's protection, improve their confidence, communication skills and ability to negotiate, network and make judgements (DCYA, 2013a; Sinclair and Franklin, 2000).

These skills have been identified as important to the successful transition to adult life and the capacity to contribute to society (Kellett, 2010; Whitfield, 1997). Furthermore, participation leads to the increased fulfilment of other rights (Parkes, 2013). Evidence also shows that inclusive participative strategies strengthen mutual trust and respect with adults (Vis *et al*, 2011; Bell, 2002). Rizzini and Thaplyial (2005, p. 18) recognise the importance, as well as the inherent benefits, of facilitating child participation at an early age when they state: '*Early opportunities for democratic participation nourish a sense of collective ownership and responsibility as well as skills to solve problems in collaborative ways … children develop a belief in themselves as actors who have the power to impact the adverse conditions that shape their lives. They develop confidence and learn attitudes and practical lessons about how they can improve the quality of their lives.*'

In education, effective and meaningful participation of children and young people has been shown to be beneficial to schools. The importance of recognising not only that children have rights, but also that pupil voice leads to a range of benefits is well established in the literature. In particular, it can enhance preparation for citizenship, contribute to improvements in schools and help to ensure that schools serve the needs of pupils (Whitty and Wisby, 2007). Smith (2007) argues that having participation rights and being a citizen are part of an ongoing learning process and that what happens in educational settings gives meaning to children's understanding of what it is to be an active and involved citizen. Opportunities for participation rights support a sense of belonging and inclusion, but, more importantly, they teach children how they can bring about change.

Clerkin and Creaven (2013), in their review of the literature on school engagement, show that among older students, strong feelings of attachment to the school and involvement in school life are associated with greater self-esteem and lower levels of anti-social behaviour and substance abuse, as well as superior academic performance. Students' participation generally, and more particularly in student councils, can improve academic standards, reduce rates of early school-leaving, improve discipline and facilitate students in acquiring communication, planning and organisational skills (Devine, 2002). Furthermore, participation in decision-making increases self-confidence and motivation in children as they see that teachers value their input; it facilitates them to contribute to how and what they learn and thus can improve their learning experience; it promotes their personal growth and development; and it promotes a wider recognition of increasing independence (Parkes, 2013). Effective participative mechanisms, such as school councils, can improve policies, practices, strengthen the democratic process and increase understanding of issues affecting students. Such mechanisms can, as Parkes says (*ibid*, p. 130), result in '*improved school policies and practice, more success achieved in terms of school initiatives, the democratic process within the school is strengthened and there is increased understanding of the issues affecting students within the school environment*'.

Wider society also stands to benefit from the meaningful participation of children and young people. For example, the effective implementation of this right can help create a better developed civil society and democracy. The lived experiences of children and young people can contribute to better decision-making based on their own lives, not on untested adult assumptions (Parkes, 2013, p. 14). Participation promotes citizenship and active inclusion

as children learn that they can make a difference and influence what happens in their environment. Importantly, however, as Wyness *et al* (2004) argue, political socialisation is not simply bestowed upon 18-year-olds, but is expected to have developed via interaction with family, peers and the media. Kellett (2010), similarly, argues that children and young people need to experiment with voice.

Barriers to participation in everyday life

There are challenges to representing the complex, multi-layered voices of children and young people (Percy-Smith, 2010). Gallagher (2008, p. 404), utilising Foucault's work on power, insists that many of the narratives on children's participation '*miss out on something about the messy, fraught and ambiguous processes of children's participation*'. Furthermore, addressing the influence of power relations in decision-making processes is essential (Spyrou, 2011; Mazzei and Jackson, 2009) given the limitations of what children and young people's participation can achieve within the context of powerful forces dominated by adult (economic and organisational) priorities and interests (Percy-Smith, 2005). For example, Bessant (2003, p. 87) points out that student participation in school is often rhetorical rather than meaningful in nature and this is often due to '*the unwillingness by governments to make any real transfer of power to young people*'.

Adult assumptions about the capacity of children and young people to form views have, in the past, resulted in a questioning of their ability to be deemed '*rational and reliable*' (Alderson, 2008, p. 155). There is a danger that the adults who act as gatekeepers to the implementation of Article 12 of the UNCRC may decide that children are not sufficiently mature to express a view – a decision disputed by research, which indicates that children are more capable than adults give them credit for and that their capacity for decision-making increases in direct proportion to the opportunities offered to them (Alderson and Goodwin, 1993; De Winter, 1997; Freeman, 2011). Cavet and Sloper (2004) found that the involvement of children and young people in decisions on service development in the UK tended to be confined to more trivial decisions. How to acknowledge and facilitate children and young people's participation in a meaningful way then remains a significant challenge (McLeod, 2008) since representation does not necessarily confirm the quality of their influence on decisions (Swinderek, 2004). Alderson (2008) contends that there is a need to embrace effective listening and develop appropriate ways of expressing responses.

Age has been recognised as a key barrier to the realisation of participation rights. Children acquire different levels of competence at different ages and this is something that is intrinsic to Article 12 of the UNCRC. Recognition of the evolving capacities of children is implicit in the need for due weight to be afforded to the views of the child. Though the participation rights formulated in the UNCRC in principle concern every child under 18 years of age, Kjørholt (2002) maintains that it has been primarily older children and young people who are seen as participants in society. In this respect, Lansdown (2005) argues that the challenges of participation are greater with younger children who, in their everyday lives, have even less say in how their lives are managed. She highlights a growing body of research on the importance of avoiding preconceptions about what children can and cannot do at any given age.

The widely differing patterns of social and economic participation by children and young people confirm that children's capacities owe less to biological or psychological determinants than to expectations of their community, social and cultural contexts, the decisions involved, the life experience of the child, levels of adult support and goals associated with childhood (Lansdown, 2005, p. 4). There is growing recognition, building on the work of Clark and Moss (2011), of the fact that young children express their views in a variety of ways, not all of which are verbal (Alderson, 2005). As highlighted by the UN Committee (2005, para. 14), young children '*make choices and communicate their feelings, ideas and wishes in numerous ways, long before they are able to communicate through the conventions of spoken or written language*'. Children of all ages are experts in their own lives, with a competence to communicate a unique insight into their experiences and perspectives, and to participate meaningfully (O'Riordan *et al*, 2013; Freeman, 2011).

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2003) in its General Comment No. 5 (para. 12) has warned that *'appearing to "listen" to children is relatively unchallenging; giving due weight to their views requires real change'*. For participation to be meaningful, children and young people should be told what decision was made, how their views were regarded and the reasons why action has proceeded in a certain way (Lundy, 2007). Yet all too often, this does not happen (Davey *et al*, 2010a and 2010b). At a national level, as acknowledged by Freeman (1996, p. 4), many countries ratified the UNCRC without giving much thought to what implementation at domestic level would require from a practical point of view. Barriers to the effective implementation of Article 12 have been multi-factorial in practice. Lundy (2007, p. 192) has pointed out that the limitations on the enjoyment of this right tend to stem from misunderstandings surrounding what children's rights mean and in particular a lack of awareness around what Article 12 in fact requires.

2.3 Current empirical and qualitative research

Limitations of existing research

Research has been undertaken internationally, including in Ireland, analysing the extent to which children and young people interact with formal participation and decision-making structures (Leahy and Burgess, 2011; Parkes, 2013, Martin *et al*, 2015). Some work attempts to understand children and young people's participation in schools (Devine, 2002; Lundy, 2007; De Castro, 2011; Cosgrove and Gilleece, 2012; Fleming, 2013) as well as in community contexts (Percy-Smith, 2010; Percy-Smith and Burns, 2013; Kerrins *et al*, 2010). However, there is limited empirical data concerning the extent to which children and young people participate or have a voice in the everyday activities of daily life, particularly in the home (Davey *et al*, 2010a; Bjerke, 2011). A DCYA (2011a) audit of participation noted that while the greatest impact of participation for children resulted from the opportunity to make decisions that affect them as individuals (e.g. decisions related to family and health), children were more likely to be involved in decision-making related to the development of policies, rules, services and programmes as a result of participation in structures such as student councils and Comhairle na nÓg (McEvoy, 2011, p. 4).

Children and young people's '*webs of participation*' are characterised by a multiplicity of opportunities and types of participation rooted in the organic practice of everyday life (Clarke and Percy-Smith, 2006). Percy-Smith (2010) argues that we need to develop a more inclusive approach to participation – focusing on children and young people's lives at home, in school and in their neighbourhood's 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 individuals' agency, by constraining or expanding children's range of viable choices (Klocker (2007) in Tisdall and Punch, 2012), can be examined.

Children's participation in the home

Theis (2010) discusses the involvement of children in the home as a civil right which has an immediate impact on children and argues that adults listening to children is central to the expression of this civil right. For Alderson (2010), it is the informality of the home that promotes a positive participative environment engendering an ethos of inclusion, choice and respect for children's agency. Parents are identified as key enablers and supporters of participation by children and young people, while also acting as gatekeepers for their participation activities and opportunities (Feinstein *et al*, 2010, p. 59).

Cherney (2010) examined the views of parents and adolescents on children and young people's rights and the development of autonomy during adolescence. He found that children had a more nuanced understanding of rights than their parents thought they had and, on

average, parents thought that their children would advocate for more rights than they actually did. He draws a distinction between nurturance rights (which emphasise society's obligations to make decisions in the best interests of the child) and self-determination rights (which emphasise the child's right to exercise control over various facets of his or her own life). He finds that parents are generally given authority by young people over moral considerations, but less over conventional and personal conventions.

Generally, research identifies the home as the space most conducive to children and young people's participation. Bjerke's (2011) work with 109 Norwegian children (aged 8-9) and young people (aged 14-15) on their expression of agency in the home and school uses a difference-centred theoretical perspective to identify children's participation as expressions of agency embedded in intricate child–adult relations, in which children and adults are positioned differently. Bjerke's study draws on findings from an international project (including data from Australia, Brazil, New Zealand, Norway, Palestine and South Africa) that has sought to understand the meaning of citizenship, rights, responsibilities and participation for children and young people in the everyday contexts of their lives (Taylor and Smith, 2009).

The Norwegian children and young people in Bjerke's (2011) study clearly state that they have participation rights at home in terms of having a voice and being able to 'decide a bit' regarding issues in their everyday lives. Children felt that the environment within the home was one which was conducive to them expressing their opinions and being involved in decision-making. Parents facilitated this by allowing children to participate in decision-making and offering them individual choices, with a strong emphasis on negotiation. Consumption activities (such as food, clothes and TV) were major areas in which both children and young people discussed their participation. Concrete tasks were areas of negotiation for children, while for young people issues such as how they spend their free time were of concern. The study also found that, generally, young people appeared to increase their degree of involvement in decision-making as they grow older. This confirms previous research, also conducted in Norway (Frones, 2007), which states that the home and the family is a place for negotiation and shared decisions between adults and children.

Davey *et al* (2010a) examined the extent to which children and young people in England felt they have a voice and influence in matters affecting them at school, at home and in the area where they live. Their report is based on the findings from focus group interviews conducted with 44 boys and 42 girls from a variety of backgrounds and aged between 3 and 20 years. Day-to-day decisions within the family stand out as the only area where a significant majority of children felt that they were heard and influence decisions. As children grew older, they were more likely to have a greater say in decisions made at home, although the extent to which children's views influenced the outcome of a decision was said to be mediated by the degree to which parents concurred with their views. Findings emphasised the importance for young people of parents, and adults generally, explaining the rationale on which a decision had been made as a means of understanding the process rather than focusing on the outcomes.

There has been limited research on the involvement of children and young people in decision-making in the home in the Irish context. A study was undertaken for the OMCYA in 2010 on children and young people's perspectives of parenting styles and discipline (Nixon and Halpenny, 2010). A theme that emerged exclusively within the older age groups pertained to the parents' role in facilitating children's autonomy and independence. Adolescents described the importance of parents giving their children space, freedom and privacy. A related study (Halpenny *et al*, 2010) surveyed 1,353 parents on parenting styles and parental use of disciplinary strategies with children in Ireland. It found that just over one-third of parents felt it was 'very important' to include children in decision-making in the context of family life and 54% felt it was 'somewhat important'. Parents also felt that as their children grew older, they were more likely to prioritise their participation in decision-making in the family. However, the authors conclude that parents in the study '*did not view involving their children in decision-making as a key priority in their parenting*'.

Halpenny *et al* (2010) found a link between democratic participation of children in the home and the use of physical punishment by parents to discipline their children. Findings showed that older parents (45 years and older) were more likely to engage in democratic participation with their children at home, while younger parents (under 35 years) were more likely to engage in physical punishment of their children. This was also linked to the fact that the older parents were more likely to be parenting adolescents. Again, this could reflect the international research studies (Davey *et al*, 2010a; Bjerke, 2011; Cherney, 2010) which have found that as children get older, they become more involved in decision-making in the home. In addition, democratic participation was lower among parents whose children had hyperactivity problems.[4]

Children's participation in school

Santos Pais (2000, p. 97) highlights the need for a more active role for children and young people in their learning environment when she suggests that they must be '*perceived not as recipient(s) of knowledge, but rather as active players in the learning process*'. Monk (2002, p. 45), in acknowledging the importance of children and young people's rights in the education context, reminds us that the recognition of children's rights within the education system is uniformly understood and informed by the belief that children should be viewed as subjects rather than objects, and that, regardless of the legal or adult recognition of their personhood, children are social agents and active participants within the education system.

Harris (2009, p. 338) highlights the fact that '*there is evidence that young people's participation in the operation or governance of organisations such as schools tends not to be systematic and to occur on only an occasional basis*'. He stresses that *'giving pupils a genuine voice requires some transfer of power and influence to them, which makes for unpredictability*' (*ibid*, p. 357). In fact, 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 (Tapp, 1997; Keogh and Whyte, 2005; Kilkelly and Lundy, 2006). Whitehead and Clough (2004, pp. 216-17), while acknowledging that there has been a movement towards greater involvement of pupils in decisions that affect them in school and that this has gained its legitimacy through the UNCRC, highlight the fact that this '*has remained far from common practice and this absence of pupil voice is apparent in much of the literature*'.

Structural opportunities for children to participate, such as school councils, can often breed cynicism as children and young people find that they are '*only given input into trivial matters, that their ideas were not implemented, and that they received no feedback as to why they were not*' (Smith, 2007, pp. 149-50). In the Good Childhood Inquiry in the UK, school councils received much criticism from young people '*for being just for show, ineffective and for ignoring pupils' suggestions'* (Pople, 2009, p. 26). Furthermore, clever, popular, well-behaved children who were good attendees tend to be disproportionately represented on school councils (Davey *et al*, 2010a). Research in this area has demonstrated that if student councils are seen to be ineffective and tokenistic, they will actually have a negative impact (Alderson, 2000; Lundy, 2007).

A study conducted by Taylor *et al* (2001) in New Zealand found that while two out of every three young people in secondary schools interviewed prioritised participation as a right over and above provision and protection rights, only one-third of teachers believed this right was a priority for children. Moreover, 96% of children and young people were of the opinion that they should be heard in matters affecting them. Only one-third of students felt that their views were considered and had any influence on decisions affecting them at school. Similarly, research into teachers' attitudes towards, and experience of, education for citizenship highlights their tendency to emphasise the moral and social aspects of behaviour (responsibilities, social control functions) rather than political/democratic participative issues in the implementation of citizenship programmes (Davies *et al*, 1999).

[4] Parents who had used physical punishment in the past year used significantly lower levels of democratic participation with their children and higher levels of authoritarian parenting than those who had not used physical punishment. Overall, parents of young children (0-4 years) engaged less frequently in authoritative parenting behaviours than parents of older teenagers (15-17 years) (Halpenny *et al*, 2010).

Davey *et al* (2010a) found that the overwhelming majority of children and young people in their UK study were of the opinion that they generally do not have a sufficient say in decision-making processes in school. The lack of feedback on how their opinions had been taken into account when making 'micro'-level decisions left many of them disillusioned with power-sharing mechanisms. The authors concluded that '*the data suggested that a non-participative culture can have a negative effect on relationships among and between teachers and pupils, with the result that the values of respect and inclusiveness fail to be embedded in the culture of a school*' (*ibid*, p. 19). They emphasised the need for greater representation of children with diverse interests on school councils and for younger children to be involved in decision-making processes to ensure that opportunities to learn new skills could be made available to them from the earliest age possible. The most common response from children to the question of how they would ensure children have a greater say in school was to emphasise the importance of having a range of different media to enable children to engage in decision-making processes in various ways. Suggestions ranged from having a comments box and making better use of the discussion boards/forums on school websites, to using sport as a way to elicit children's views on key issues.

Cross *et al* (2009), in research evaluating the nature of pupil participation in primary and secondary schools across Scotland, found that '*only a small percentage of schools reported significant development of pupil choice that involved pupils in curricular development, evaluation or school planning decisions*'. Pupils within the case study schools suggested that environments which were interactive, respectful and inclusive offered enhanced opportunities for participation. The findings suggest that, overall, effective practice integrated different kinds of participation – learning (pedagogic), expressive (artistic) and civic (decision-making) – so that they complemented and strengthened each other.

In the Irish context, Cosgrove and Gilleece (2012) found that, according to the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) of 38 countries, second-level students in Ireland compare less favourably than other nationalities in participating in school life. Despite having a strong civic knowledge base, it is suggested that children and young people's participation is aspirational rather than actual. Furthermore, this study found that the provisions of the Education Act 1998 for the establishment and functions of student councils at second level are not monitored, and in fact allow little if any input by students into the day-to-day decision-making of the school in relation to such areas as the teaching, content and texts for subjects. There is no provision for student councils at primary level nor is their establishment at secondary level mandatory. The authors selected four ICCS indices relevant to civic participation in the context of schools, namely: students' perceptions of their influence on decision-making at school; their perceptions of the value of participating at school; their civic participation in school life; and principals' perceptions of parental participation in school. While civic knowledge is relatively strong and students in Ireland would appear to value participation, it seems that the opportunity to get involved in decision-making processes in school falls well below the international average.

De Róiste *et al* (2012) investigated the reported level of school participation among children aged 10-17 in schools in Ireland and the relationships between school participation and perceived academic performance, liking school and positive health perceptions. They utilised data from the HBSC Survey 2006 – self-completion questionnaires from a stratified random sample of 10,334 students in Irish schools. More than 63% of participating students reported that they were encouraged to express their views in class, 58% that they were involved in organising school events, while only 22% that they had been involved in making school rules. All forms of participation were lower among older students and girls were more likely than boys to report that they took part in organising school events and were encouraged to express

their views in class. The authors state that participation in school was significantly associated with liking school and higher perceived academic performance, better self-rated health, higher life satisfaction and greater reported happiness. Overall, the study illustrates that school participation among children in Ireland ranges from substantial to inadequate, but that, in general, positive relationships between school participation and health and well-being are demonstrated among Irish children.

Devine's (2002) work on Irish children's experience of school comprises continuous observations of classroom practice, open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with 133 pupils aged 7-8 years and 10-11 years. She contends that school and schooling is experienced as something '*done to*' children, legitimised by a discourse that prioritises adult/future-oriented needs and expectations over present, lived experience. The study investigates the current reality experienced by children regarding how their time and space is controlled and organised in primary school. Findings indicate the absence of children's active participation in decisions about their use of time/space, with children commenting on the absence of consultation over the structuring of the school timetable, calling for a greater balance between work-time and play-time, as well as greater flexibility in the daily routine in school. The children's accounts of their interaction with teachers was '*embedded within a discourse of subordination*' (*ibid*, p. 313). However, peer relations emerged as a core element to children's experience of connectedness to and participation in school life. Devine's study echoes that of Spencer (2000) in its conclusion that, while adult–child relations within the family sphere may be moving towards more negotiated patterns of interaction, schools continue to be organised and run in hierarchical terms, with issues related to empowerment, democracy and the nature of children's experience frequently perceived as a threat to teacher authority and control.

In the Brazilian context, children's position in schools has been explored by De Castro (2011). Open interviews were conducted with 140 students, aged 11-21. The study clearly locates them in a subordinate role as learners and recipients of adults' endeavours in the school context. Evidence of '*conservative participation*' was discovered, which refers to '*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 behavior*' (*ibid*, p. 58). Students in De Castro's research, whether representatives or not, often associated participation with helping the staff. In this regard, student councils cannot be taken as a straightforward mechanism to improve students' participation or as a sign of the *'democratic management of school life'*.

Nevertheless, in schools where student councils were non-existent, there seemed to be less need to envisage participation other than the conservative form (De Castro, 2011, p. 61). The author argues that an openness to problematize current truths of our modern institutions (including the school system) and looking at these institutions from the point of view of children is a necessity. This demands a reframing of institutional goals, formats and procedures so as to accommodate the interests of these newly engaged social actors. Furthermore, it will probably expand present private arenas into arenas of public concern, '*politicizing*' adult–child relationships and making explicit latent conflicts and antagonisms. De Castro concludes that for those who prefer to maintain the image of our '*good-enough society*' with '*good-enough institutions*', the effective inclusion of children's perspectives can be seen as '*a haunting image of disaster*' (*ibid*, p. 65).

Children's participation in their community

Percy-Smith (2010) calls for a wider interpretation of participation for children and young people, one that takes it out of the narrowly defined formal structures currently interpreted as providing meaningful participatory spaces, and develops an understanding of participation that is embedded in their actual daily lives. Such an approach views participation as not merely taking part in existing decision-making structures, but as '*having equal opportunities to take part and be involved in the life of the community, organisation or project, and feel valued for that contribution*' (*ibid*, p. 111). When value is placed solely on public decision-making, young people's own valuing of being involved and present in other, less formal activities is diminished. Percy-Smith contends that the mainstreaming of young people's participation has led to '*corporatisation*' of their interests and while they are constantly sought out to take part in consultations regarding adult/organisational interests, their own interests remain sidelined and adult–child power imbalances are reinforced.

The research conducted by Davey *et al* (2010a) in the UK reveals a marked difference in the responses from children and young people with regard to the community as opposed to the other spaces of home and school. Those who were positive about their participation experiences were significantly more likely to be involved in making decisions relating to their communities by virtue of belonging to a local youth council/forum or an organisation such as UK Youth Parliament or Young Inspectors. Children who were already part of an established group were the best placed to take advantage of additional opportunities to engage in decision-making and these tended to be the high achieving '*go-getting*' students, compared to children from refugee and migrant backgrounds, disabled children and very young children. Yet, even those who were involved criticised youth forums as being unrepresentative of the diverse interests of children living in a community and they suggested more practical, street-based approaches to better educate Councillors in the real-life needs of those children who did not have a platform to voice their views (*ibid*, p. 37).

Vromen and Collin (2010) looked at how youth participation, as a form of consultation within policy-making 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 and young people's experiences. In this research, policy-makers identified contemporary effective practice and believed initiatives ought to be youth-led, creative and fun, purposeful and provide feedback. Such participation was found to be meaningful for the young people involved.

Subsequent to a reliance on formal mechanisms, children and young people's participation has remained static and focused on formal initiatives. This is evident in the study by Fleming (2013), who draws on three UK research and evaluation projects undertaken in partnership with young people as researchers, exploring the views and experience of their participation in the voluntary and statutory sectors. Findings suggest that many organisations are making real progress in the 'hard' elements, with a range of structures and systems in place to support their participation, including budgets for participation activities, recording and evaluation. However, there was much less evidence of similar progress on the 'soft' elements, particularly in local authorities, with more work needed on the shared values, staff, skills and style of leadership. The 'Hear by Right' participation standards framework for organisations working with young people in England emphasises that each standard depends on the others in order to move forward (Badham and Wade, 2010). Yet, Fleming (2013) finds that participation was often limited by instrumental rationality and regulation rather than being transformational and, thus, changing the power relationships within organisations and between young people and adults. She concludes that '*practitioners and policy-makers need to move from the organisational focus of much current participation and young people need to set the agenda for action*' (*ibid*, p. 493).

In an Irish context, a study by Martin *et al* (2015) explores the experiences of, and outcomes for, children and young people who have participated in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs' child and youth participation initiatives over the previous 10 years. In total, 300

young people were involved in the study as respondents and youth researchers. In addition, 28 adults working in the area of child and youth participation were interviewed. The research findings indicate that the children and young people involved in the DCYA participation initiatives experience a range of positive impacts in areas of personal development, social development, skills development and career direction. At a general level, youth participants rated personal skills development as being the area most positively impacted by their participation, followed by improved confidence, social skills and development of their social networks. Findings also indicate that the participation spaces created by the DCYA respect children and young people as community members and value them as citizens in their own right. In particular, youth participants were very positive about:

- being listened to by other young members (their peers);
- being able to bring ideas and problems from young people in their area to Comhairle na nÓg;
- being respected and listened to by adults they came in contact with through their participation activities.

Lundy's (2007) model for implementing Article 12 of the UNCRC was utilised in this study by Martin *et al* (2015) to examine participation impacts. While youth participants in the research were very positive about their experience of voice, space and audience, the fourth strand – influence – was an area which both adult and youth participants agreed needs further work and support.

McGrath *et al* (2010), in a consultation with young people aged 13-17 on public libraries in Ireland, found that young people had a very clear vision of the type of library services they want. Central to this was greater participation and involvement in the planning and running of libraries.

Yet to be evaluated in Ireland, according to Kerrins *et al* (2011), is the extent to which children and young people are consulted on policy development and physical planning and development, their experiences of consultation and participation, the efficacy of the methodologies and methods used, and the outcomes resulting from participation. In this respect, the DCYA has recently published a report, entitled *Children's Voices in Housing Estate Regeneration*, which sheds some light on this subject (O'Connell *et al*, 2015). Kerrins *et al* (2011) highlight the need to increase children's visibility in local policy (design, implementation and monitoring of local recreation policies and facilities). They argue that the methods used for children and young people's participation in developing and improving their communities may benefit from expansion beyond the current consultation models used by Local Authorities, which focus on play and recreation and generally occur as one-off exercises in the later stages of policy-making and planning.

Kerrins *et al* (2011) also comment on the fact that children are rarely seen as partners in decision-making and are not given the opportunity to engage fully in planning processes, from inception to completion. Nor do they participate in Local Government committees alongside adults. The authors cite examples nationally and internationally of participative methods for involving young people in planning and design, which planners and adult community members can also be part of. Such methods include mapping exercises undertaken during preliminary design; walk-throughs and model-building; children accompanying planners on surveys in communities; and open planning days where children and young people take part in child-centred planning activities (*ibid*, p. 108). However, the study concludes that with the exception of an emerging focus on play, particularly playground development, mainstream high-level local policies relating to the built environment in Ireland contain few specifics about improving that environment for children and young people.

2.4 Summary

Adopting a children's rights perspective, with a particular emphasis on Article 12 of the UNCRC as a minimum legal standard, this research aims to examine the extent to which children and young people have a voice in their homes, schools and communities in Ireland. It provides a relational approach to children's participation, recognising the respective roles and positions of children and adults and establishing interdependence as a basis for children and young people's participation. Within this framework, the report examines the lived realities of children and young people's participation, first and foremost by tapping into the unique knowledge and perspectives of children and young people themselves (aged 7-17), but also through engagement with key adults who live or work with children in education or local community settings on a daily basis.

Much research to date has focused on the opportunities for children and young people's participation offered by formal structures and channels. Far less has emerged on the more mundane everyday interactions and the routine informal opportunities for meaningful participation in children and young people's daily lives. 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. The current study aims to address that gap in the Irish context, to some extent, by providing a snapshot of the nature and scope of children and young people's participation in Ireland today. It examines these social processes occurring in children and young people's homes, schools and local communities, and their participation in these processes and settings, utilising Lundy's model of space, voice, audience and influence.

3. Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology and methods used to conduct an inquiry into children and young people's opportunities to participate in decisions affecting them in the contexts of their home, school and local community.

3.1 Purpose of study

This study set out to explore two things:

- Firstly, to capture, describe and give voice to the perspectives of children and young people on their lived experiences of participation in decision-making in their home, school and community. The objectives were to obtain descriptive explorative data describing the 'with whom?', 'about what?', 'where?' and 'when?' of their participation in decision-making.
- Secondly, to gain insight and understanding of the extent and nature of their participation, with the objective of identifying both the barriers and enabling factors that children and young people encounter within their home, school and community.

These objectives draw on Lundy's (2007) conceptualisation of Article 12 set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), discussed in Chapter 2.

The inclusion of children and young people's voices in social research has been given increasing attention in recent decades. There has been an evolution of participatory and creative methods to elicit first-hand data from children and young people's experiences and perspectives and a shift in stance about children as agents, thinkers and expert informants about their own lives (Christensen and James, 2008; Greene and Hogan, 2005; MacNaughton *et al*, 2007). More emphasis is now placed on children and young people having some input into the type of method adopted by the researcher or adult facilitator, thus creating an environment within which children and young people feel more comfortable participating alongside adults (Wyness, 2013). The use of participatory methodologies has been foregrounded as the key to unlocking their potential to contribute rich and useful perspectives to inform research into their lives (Tay-Lim and Lim, 2013). These methods have contributed to research that can better influence practices and policies which are child-centred and appropriate to children's contemporary circumstances.

The landscape of research involving children and young people in Ireland and internationally has changed considerably in recent times, with a growing body of participatory research specifically focused on including children and young people in the research process itself as experts in their own lives. For example, in Ireland, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (and formerly as the OMCYA) has undertaken published research seeking the views of children and young people in relation to a wide range of policies that affect them, including *Teenspace: National Recreation Policy for Young People* (OMC, 2007), *A Consultation with young people on reform of the Junior Cycle* (Roe, 2011) and *Life as a child and young person in Ireland: Report of a National Consultation* (Dempsey *et al*, 2012). Within this range of consultation initiatives, there has been a particular effort to capture the voices of children and young people who are seldom-heard, for example, *Listen to Our Voices: Hearing children and young people living in the care of the State* (McEvoy and Smith, 2011).

Consistent with the impetus behind this research agenda, to inform '*the development of more effective evidence-based policy and practice on children and young people's participation in decision-making*' (DCYA, 2013a), the underpinning principle of the present study is the recognition of children and young people as social actors in their own right (Burns and Schubotz, 2009), with relevant expert information and insights. While the research recognises that parents and professionals can offer their own understanding on the scope and nature of children and young people's participation in decision-making (French, 2004), it views this knowledge as incomplete if the perspectives of children and young people are absent (Jones, 2004).

3.2 Operational phases of the project

Primarily qualitative in nature, the research design had 6 distinct operational phases outlined in its Project Work Plan (*see Appendix 22*). These comprised:

- Phase 1: Project setup
- Phase 2: Meetings of the Steering and Advisory Groups
- Phase 3: Piloting of research methods
- Phase 4: Primary research
- Phase 5: Data analysis and review
- Phase 6: Project write-up and dissemination

Phase 1: Project setup

Two key undertakings during the project's setup addressed the particular ethical requirements of undertaking research with children and young people. First, ethical approval was obtained from the Social Research Ethics Committee, University College Cork in October 2012 and, second, the Research Team applied for Garda clearance.

Interaction with all stakeholders was central to the project's participative methodology. This was achieved by setting up a Steering Group and three Advisory Groups (for children, young people and parents, *see below*) that were fit for the purpose of assisting the Research Team throughout the distinct project phases. The enthusiastic collaboration of these groups with the Research Team served to conceptualise, review, modify and ratify all aspects of the project's design, execution, findings and analysis. Foremost among the stakeholders were the children and young people who took part in a project advisory role and as research participants. The Research Team also embarked on a review of the national and international literature at this stage to identify established discourse relevant to the project's enquiry.

Steering Group

Fundamental to the participative research design, a project Steering Group was formed, consisting of 14 representatives. There were two from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and one from the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (DECLG); one Participation Officer; Emeritus Professor Sheila Greene of Trinity College, Dublin; one Parent Advisory Group representative; one school principal and one teacher; one community stakeholder; and the five members of the Research Team. Although large, the Steering Group needed to reflect the breadth of stakeholder experience and expertise relevant to the project. In achieving the latter, links between the project and community organisations were strengthened.

Children's and Young People's Advisory Groups

Central to the project's design was the absolute importance of children and young people having a real opportunity to assist in producing the best possible research. Mindful of Article 12 of the UNCRC, their involvement ensured that the project maintained its focus on decision-making issues that were important or of concern *to them*. Some of the proposed child-centred data collection methods were also piloted with these groups. Two Cork-based Advisory Groups were set up, one comprising 8 children aged 7-12 years attending primary education in Cork City, and the other comprising 5 young people aged 12-17 attending second-level education in Cork City.

Parents' Advisory Group

Achieving parental involvement on the Steering Group proved challenging. Subsequently, it was decided to form a Parents' Advisory Group, with one of its representatives attending meetings of the Steering Group. The four participating parents provided valuable insights on the design of the parent interview schedule, including identification of themes that could be explored.

Phase 2: Steering and Advisory Group meetings

The first meeting of the Steering Group took place in Dublin at the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) in December 2012. In the same month, the initial meeting of the Children's Advisory Group took place in Cork, with the Young People's Advisory Group first meeting in January 2013 in Cork. Verbal and written informed consent was obtained from all members of both Advisory Groups, in addition to written parental consent. The first meeting of the Parents' Advisory Group was held in Cork in early January 2013. Through detailed discussion within these groups, the research protocol was agreed (dubbed the 'Seen and Not Heard?' project).

Contingent on the project's research design, this phase included the development of data collection instruments appropriate to the participants (who would include children and young people, parents and a range of adult stakeholders) and based, as far as possible, on best practice documented in the literature. The project acknowledged that access to perspectives held by children and young people could be gained through the extensive range of toolkits and other resources developed for enabling participation of children and young people of differing ages and backgrounds internationally (including *Every Child Matters*, *Hear by Right* and *Act by Right*, all developed in the UK; *Spice It Up* developed by Save the Children/ DYNAMIX), as well as through discerning modification of adult data collection methods (Kellett, 2009; Jones, 2004; Lewis and Lindsay, 2000). The research instruments were, thus, all developed specifically for this project and included games; wall charts; floor mats; child-friendly leaflets on the UNCRC and the project itself; and semi-structured focus group/ interview schedules specific to children aged 7-12, young people aged 12-17 years, parents and identified adult stakeholders.

Phase 3: Piloting of research instruments

In February 2013, the semi-structured focus group schedules (*see Appendices 5 and 6*) were piloted with preliminary focus groups comprising children and young people matching the respective Advisory Group age spans of 7-12 and 12-17. Other data collection methods were piloted to test their efficacy and accessibility in relation to the age and understanding of the research participants (Kellett, 2009; Van Deth, 2011). These methods included games (e.g. 'Human bingo') and visual methods (e.g. wall charts and floor mats). Some alterations were made following the pilot process. These were mainly related to the group interview process rather than to the data collection tools themselves. For example, the decision was made to subdivide the children and young people interview groups into smaller groups for parts of the focus group exercise in order to facilitate more discussion and to set up 'stations' dedicated to the project realms of 'home', 'school' and 'community' to enable children and young people to move around. This was seen to be particularly important for the children (aged 7-12). Review of the national and international literature relevant to the project's enquiry focus and methodology continued throughout each project phase.

Phase 4: Primary research

Following piloting, the data collection instruments were refined, ready for primary qualitative data collection with children, young people, parents and other relevant adult stakeholders.

Children and young people

- A total of 10 focus groups were conducted with children and young people in Dublin City, Sligo County and Cork City. They were held in school and community settings, using age-appropriate creative and interactive methods.
- In Dublin, 3 focus groups were conducted in total – two with children (one in a primary school and the other in a community setting) and one with young people (in a second-level school).

- In Sligo, 4 focus groups were conducted in total – two with children (one in a primary school and the other in a community setting) and two with young people (one in a second-level school and the other in a community setting).
- Lastly in Cork, 3 focus groups were held in total – one with children (in a primary school) and two with young people (one in a second-level school and the other in a community setting).
- Focus groups involved between 6 and 9 children and young people with some variations. In total, 94 children and young people were consulted in the course of the research (including Advisory Groups and pilot groups).

Adult stakeholders

Data collection with adult stakeholders comprised a total of 24 one-to-one interviews and 3 focus groups, covering all three data collection locations (Dublin, Sligo and Cork). The one-to-one interviews included a total of 4 parents, 6 school principals, 5 teachers and 9 community stakeholders who worked directly with children and young people. The 3 focus groups were with parents, one in each location. The data collection phase lasted from February to June 2013.

Phase 5: Data analysis and review

Analysis of data followed data collection, using a systematic thematic method. Verbatim quotes from the raw data transcriptions where used to support the write-up of findings in relation to the children, young people, parents and other relevant stakeholders (Spencer *et al*, 2003).

A meeting with the Children's and Young People's Advisory Groups on 21 June 2013 (*see Appendix 14*) at University College Cork contributed to the analysis process by working with the raw data generated from the focus group interviews with children and young people (*see Appendices 16 and 17*). Each Advisory Group (7-12 and 12-17 year-olds) was located in separate rooms and asked to identify important participation issues, utilising the data collected.

A facilitated discussion game was employed with the children: they rotated across the 'home', 'school' and 'community' mats (*see discussion in Section 3.4*) where word mats specific to each of the domains were available to support their discussions. They were asked to write down two important decision-making issues on their 'Important decision-making issues' sheet (*see Appendix 18*) for presentation to the Steering Group. The children were then asked to sort representative verbatim child participant quotations taken from the raw data transcripts into piles of 'most important', 'important', 'not important' and 'disagree'.

The young people were asked to work in small groups to identify, write down and rank in order of importance up to 6 important decision-making issues within the home, school and community on their 'Important decision-making issues' sheet (*see Appendix 19*) for presentation to the Steering Group. They were also asked to sort verbatim quotes of the young people participants into piles of 'most important', 'important', 'not important' and 'disagree'.

On 21 June 2013, a second Steering Group meeting (*see Appendix 15*) was held where initial findings from the children, young people, parents and other stakeholders were discussed (*see Appendices 16, 17, 18 and 19*).

Phase 6: Project write-up and dissemination

Phase 6 focused on preparation of the project's draft report. The final meeting of the Steering Group, to discuss and review the initial draft, was held in early December 2013. The draft report was sent to the DCYA in March 2014, after which a blind peer review process commenced. Following this, the final report was submitted in September 2014. Ongoing dissemination of the findings of this study will employ a range of oral, written and creative methods to ensure their orientation to a diverse audience, including children, young people, communities and parents. Dissemination will utilise the project's existing resources, relationships and networks to the fullest extent.

3.3 Recruitment and sampling

The three locations chosen for the primary research were Cork, Dublin and Sligo. The report *Measures of Affluence and Deprivation for the Republic of Ireland*, which draws on data from the 2006 and 2011 Census of Population, was used to inform the choice of locations (Haase and Pratschke, 2008; Haase *et al*, 2012; Engling and Haase, 2013). A multi-location approach increased the diversity of perspectives obtained, giving voice to children, young people and adult stakeholders living in varying socio-economic circumstances in both rural and urban environments (Denscombe, 2002).

Recruitment of research participants

Children, young people and their parents were recruited through schools and community settings. The school principals and teachers were recruited from the primary and second-level schools that agreed to participate. The remaining adult stakeholders were recruited through networking by the Research Team and by direct contact with leaders of community-based organisations. Efforts were made to achieve an overall gender balance in the research sample.

Project sampling

A pragmatic approach to sampling led to a blend of purposive and convenience sampling (Patton, 2002). Purposive sampling was used to recruit children and young people who fell within the project's required age span, and a combination of purposive and snowballing sampling was used to recruit adult stakeholders who had direct or indirect experience of children and young people also within the project's required age span (*see Table 1*). All participants were recruited from the three designated locations of Dublin City, Cork City and Sligo County, which were selected to represent urban and rural environments that demonstrate a range of affluence and disadvantage.[5]

Table 1: Summary of research sample from each data collection area

Participants	Cork City	Dublin City	Sligo County	Totals
Children – 7-12 years	8	14	15	37
Young people – 12-17 years	15	8	14	37
Parents	5	2	7	14
Principals and Teachers	2 2	2 1	2 2	11
Community stakeholders	3	3	3	9
Total	**35**	**30**	**43**	**108**

[5] *Measures of Deprivation* for the Republic of Ireland that draw on data from the 2006 Census of Population were used to inform the project's profile summaries of the three selected data collection locations (Haase and Pratschke, 2008). Area profiles reporting on the 2006 and 2011 censuses were released after the selection of data collection locations (Engling and Haase, 2013). However, on examination of their updated information, the attributes of the three project locations continue to fit the rationale for their selection: to represent urban and rural environments that demonstrate a range of affluence and disadvantage. The *Deprivation Index* uses three dynamic dimensions of affluence or disadvantage that are influenced by changes in the *Measures of Deprivation*: demographic profile, social class composition and labour market situation.

An Electoral Division in Dublin City was selected for its representativeness as an urban affluent data collection location. The 2011 Census found the Dublin region to be the most affluent in Ireland (Engling and Haase, 2013). In Dublin City, of 162 Electoral Divisions the 2011 Census found 86 to be of above average affluence and an additional 49 Electoral Divisions to be only marginally below average affluence (*ibid*). While it is recognised that there is considerable difference in the relative affluence and deprivation between various parts of Cork City, an Electoral Division was chosen for its representativeness as an urban area with indicators that classified it as disadvantaged. Since the rural population of Ireland was last reported to be 38.1% of the total population in 2010 (World Bank, 2012), the inclusion of a rural data collection area was considered vital. An Electoral Division in Sligo County was selected on the basis of its representation of disadvantage and affluence. Overall, the 2011 Census found that Sligo County was not characterised by extremes of disadvantage or affluence despite the impact of the economic downturn from 2007 (*ibid*).

Convenience sampling was used to overcome a number of challenges encountered. Gaining access to primary and second-level schools was arduous and required perseverance. The main barriers included difficulty communicating directly with relevant staff, such as school principals; the reluctance to allow extended periods of access to pupils during school time; and the non-availability of teachers to enable access to pupils after school. Achieving diversity in sampling in relation to gender, cultural background and disability was considered crucial. Contacts within schools and community groups were asked to facilitate as diverse a group as possible when inviting children and young people to participate. The social class background was varied because of the choice of sites to represent affluent, disadvantaged and mixed income groups, and gender balance was attained overall. However, very few children and young people with disabilities participated in the study.

There were also logistical difficulties involved in securing adult stakeholder focus groups, which were solved by available stakeholders consenting to give one-to-one interviews. For clarity of analysis and presentation of respective perspectives, the sample of adult stakeholders was subdivided into parents, principals/teachers, and community stakeholders. The community stakeholders comprised a range of youth and participation professionals. It should be noted that despite attempts to achieve a more gender-balanced perspective, all parent participants were female. However, it is important to note that the study's Parents' Advisory Group did include a male member.

As shown in Table 1, the research sample of children (n=37), young people (n=37), parents (n=14), principals (n=6), teachers (n=5) and community stakeholders (n= 9) was small, but fit for the purpose of obtaining qualitative in-depth narrative data (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). Working with too many participants might have wasted time and resources or led to superficial data due to a reduced capacity to build productive researcher/participant rapport during data collection. Conversely, too few participants might have resulted in rich data but narrow findings, reflecting only a limited range of participant experience (Curtis *et al*, 2000). There was no attrition from the participant samples.

Inclusion criteria for participants

Children, young people and their parents were recruited through schools and through youth work settings. The only criteria for participation were living or using the services within these specific geographic areas. Although efforts were made to achieve an overall gender balance, this was not considered to be essential in every group. The inclusion criteria for participation were minimal:

- living or using the services within the three data collection geographic areas;
- children and young people aged 7-17;
- parents who have experience of children and young people aged 7-17;
- community stakeholders who work directly or indirectly with children and young people aged 7-17.

Characteristics of the research sample

The characteristics of the participants in the study are presented below. Presentation of detailed biographical data on the individual children, young people, school principals and teachers, and community stakeholders who participated is necessarily limited by the ethical requirement to ensure their anonymity. Involving a broad array of stakeholders in discourse on the highly debated issue of children and young people's right to participate in decision-making on matters that affect their lives is crucial if reforms are to be successful (Nutt, 2002).

Profile of children and young people

A total of 74 children and young people were interviewed for the project. There were four group interviews with child participants (aged 7-12) in three primary schools, one in each of the three research locations, and one in a community project. The young people (aged 12-17) were drawn from three second-level schools as well as a youth project, a youth club and a youth café across the three locations. The participating schools encompassed children and young people of diverse ethnicity and special educational needs. The three primary schools and three second-level schools from which research participants were drawn were important sources of recruitment of children, young people, teachers and principals (*see Table 2*).

Table 2: Summary of characteristics of schools in research sample

School	Level	Enrolment	Average class size	Location
1	Primary	290	13	Cork
2	Primary	108	30	Sligo
3	Primary	421	28	Dublin
4	Second-level	827	30	Dublin
5	Second-level	603	24	Sligo
6	Second-level	359	23	Cork

Source: School profiles, completed by relevant teachers and school principals (*see also Appendix 13*).

Profile of parents

Interviews were conducted with 14 parents across the research locations. All were female, Caucasian and Irish from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds, including unemployed, student and single parents. There were also parents of adopted children and children with special needs. Some of the parents (less than half) who participated were parents of the children and young people who were involved in the group interviews.

All parent participants completed the Parent Written Survey (*see Appendix 11*), which elicited basic information on the number, age and gender of their children (*see Appendix 12*). This information showed that all participating parents had children who were within the project age range of 7-17 years. This represented 80% of all their children (*see Table 1*). Half of the participating parents (n=7) had experience of parenting both girls and boys, while 5 of the parents had no experience of parenting boys and 2 had no experience of parenting girls. The number of children in each participant's family ranged from 1 to 5, with 3 or fewer children being the most common.

Profile of school principals and teachers

Interviews were conducted with 11 educators in total, comprising 6 principals and 5 teachers across the three research sites. The schools represented ranged from a small rural primary school with an enrolment of 108 pupils to a large urban second-level school with 827 students (*see Table 2*). The individual participants themselves were school principals, subject teachers, guidance counsellors and a Home–School Liaison Officer.

Profile of adult community stakeholders

Interviews were conducted with 9 community stakeholders across the three research sites. Three of the interviewees were professional youth workers and 3 were voluntary youth

workers. Two of the professional youth workers work in local projects of large national youth organisations, one in an urban setting and the other in a rural setting. The third professional youth worker works in an after-school programme in an urban setting. Two of the voluntary youth workers run youth clubs in urban and rural settings, and the third runs a summer project in an urban setting and also volunteers in the scouting movement.

Of the three remaining interviewees, one runs a Family Resource Centre in a rural setting, one is a voluntary GAA coach in an urban setting and the other works for RAPID (the Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development Programme) in an urban setting.

Voluntary informed consent

Voluntary informed consent was supported by providing information sheets targeted at each group of participants (*see Appendices 2, 3, 4, 7 and 8*), outlining the background and purpose of the research; the 'who', 'how' and 'what' of the research process and dissemination; and 'why' their participation was requested. This consent was ongoing and participants were advised that their involvement was voluntary and they were free to leave the project at any point. In addition, reassurance was provided concerning confidentiality and safeguarding anonymity. In relation to the latter, the consent form requested permission to quote their views in any subsequent publications, taking care to ensure their identity was disguised. The information sheets for children and young people also contained this information, but in an age-appropriate presentation (*see Appendices 7 and 8*).

It was understood that when school pupils were invited to participate, their consent was never assumed and that it was important for them to be confident that if they declined to participate, their decision would be respected. This was pointed out to all children and young people by the Research Team at the outset of the group interviews. The consent of teachers or of parents was never assumed to be sufficient and there was never any pressure exerted on the children and young people to participate. Although we cannot mitigate fully the effect of holding group interviews in the school setting, the Research Team did try to counterbalance this by holding interviews with children and young people in community settings.

An information sheet and consent form was sent out to all parents of the participating children and young people (aged 7-17) by their respective schools. Contact details of the study's Principal Investigator and Research Assistant were provided if parents wished to ask any questions. In some cases, parents took the opportunity to contact the Principal Investigator for further information.

3.4 Data collection methods

Data collection employed oral and written methods that were predominantly qualitative in nature (*see Table 3*). The project's primary research used one-to-one semi-structured interviews and focus groups to obtain detailed narrative data that captured the experiences and views of children, young people and adult stakeholders on the participation of children and young people in decision-making (Bloor *et al*, 2001; Joyce *et al*, 2003; Warren, 2002). All oral data collected was digitally audio-recorded to enable verbatim transcription in keeping with good practice (Bloor *et al*, 2001; Denscombe, 2002).

Table 3: Summary of data collection methods and number of participants

Participants	Oral data collection method	Dublin No. of participants	Sligo No. of participants	Cork No. of participants	Written data collection
Children 7-12 years	Focus Group Total = 4	n=5 n=9	n=8	n=8	
Young people 12-17 years	Focus Group Total = 6	n=8	n=8 n=6 n=6	n=8 n=7	Internet Tree n=5
Parents	Focus Group Total = 3	n=2	n=5 n=5	n=3	Written Parent Surveys n=14
	Interview Total = 4	n=0	n=2	n=2	
School Principals	Interview Total = 6	n=2	n=2	n=2	Written School Profile n=6 (out of 6 schools)
Teachers	Interview Total = 5	n=1	n=2	n=2	
Community stakeholders	Interview Total = 9	n=3	n=3	n=3	Written Organisation Profile n=5 (out of 9 organisations)

All interview and focus groups took place in rooms made available to the Research Team in the participating schools and in a variety of community-based settings serving as operational bases for participating community stakeholders. Despite the pressure on rooms in all these settings, privacy was ensured and each of the rooms supported the data collection endeavours of the project. To utilise the Research Team's resources effectively, interviews with adult stakeholder and focus groups with children, young people and parents were conducted over several consecutive days in the data collection locations.

Children and young people's focus groups

Focus groups were used to collect data from the children and young people who participated in the study. It is generally accepted that it is a less intimidating experience to speak in a small group than in a one-to-one interview due to the reduced interpersonal intensity of interaction and focus (Kellett and Ding, 2004). Indeed, focus groups with children and young people can *'maximise the confidence of the respondents and, hence, to also maximise the potential richness of the data provided'* (Aston and Lambert, 2010, p. 44). In contrast, it is argued that constraint on the trustworthiness of focus group interview data derives from participants' feelings of vulnerability around self-image, which instigate an interest in presenting a view that preserves self (Briggs, 1986; Wengraf, 2001). The group processes of focus groups have been shown to be particularly effective with young people and in supporting the exploration and clarification of views (Hyde *et al*, 2005; Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999).

Focus groups were used on the basis that they would encourage open debate and shared recollection of participation in decision-making (Turner and Gordon, 2004). They were also considered suitable because their means of delivery was amenable to adaptation, supporting age-appropriate approaches and creating a safe and potentially empowering environment (Lindsay, 2000).

There are differences of opinion as to the optimal size of a focus group, ranging from between 4 to 12 participants (Kitzinger, 1994; Murray, 2006; Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). The size of focus group used in this study ranged between 5 and 9 children or young people, with a minimum of 2, but usually 3 researchers present for each focus group to facilitate the interactive explorative activities.

Children's data collection instruments

The Research Team was sensitive to the benefits of using a familiar environment and the importance of taking time to build a rapport with the child participants. At the beginning of each focus group, an ice-breaker game was played, followed by verbal explanation of the project supported by an information sheet (*see Appendix 7*) and an explanation of Article 12 of the UNCRC (*see Appendix 8*), both child-friendly. The Research Team's experience also endorsed the need to use age-appropriate data collection methods, drawing on the work of Davey *et al* (2010a), Tisdall *et al* (2009a), Kellett (2009) and Greene and Hogan (2005). (Age-appropriate may be defined, according to Ungar *et al* (2006), as involving children and young people in discussions that are germane to their cognitive and psychological development.)

During the focus groups with children (aged 7-12), data collection questions were asked amidst the on-task chatter of interactive activities using the floor mats (*see Figure 3*) or while 'twiddle objects' were used to deflect the glare of researcher and peer attention. Questions were generally phrased so that they were depersonalised on the premise that this might encourage more candid responses, for example, '*Do you think children of your age …*' (Davey *et al*, 2010a, p. 8). The data collection activities were structured around exploring their participation in decision-making in the home, the school and in the community. This was clearly and visibly accomplished by using the Home, School and Community Interactive Floor Mats. An 'Open floor discussion' circle was used to wind-down the focus group. By the time of carrying out this activity, the children were relaxed and confident. They were also familiar with the concept of 'circle time' since it is used in the primary schools they attend. The focus groups were concluded with the final question, '*What would help you feel more listened to at Home? School? Community?*' (*see Appendix 5*).

Creative interactive data collection methods used included ice-breaker games, a decision-making chart, photomontage of pictures, three interactive floor mats and circle time – each described below.

Ice-breaker games

Ice-breakers are short activities used to create a sense of belonging to a group, aiming to lay the foundations for effective participation of group members. Most of the children and young people in the study's groups knew each other reasonably well, but the ice-breakers were important for the researchers, children and young people to get to know each other's names and for the children and young people to become more comfortable with the researchers. In addition to helping group members learn each other's names, ice-breakers inject fun into the proceedings, help to establish rapport between peers and researchers, and foster a safe discursive environment (Chlup and Collins, 2010). Each of the children's focus groups opened with a 'Ball name game'.

Decision-making chart

Effective decision-making skills are important to the development of independence, responsibility and confidence (Kids Matter, 2012-13). Since exploring children and young people's opportunity to participate in decision-making was at the heart of this study, it was therefore crucial that the children understood what decision-making involved. The 'Decision-making chart' (*see Figure 2*) supported children in understanding decision-making by asking them to evaluate a pair of options and to make a choice, and then extended their learning to the concept of 'majority rule'.

Figure 2: Decision-making chart for 7-12 year-olds

Photomontage of pictures

For the purpose of facilitating the children's thinking on their participation in decision-making in the home, school and community, relevant pictures depicting children in a variety of situations were arranged in a photomontage, which was prominently displayed during the focus groups. To prompt children and young people on areas of decision-making in their lives, Davey *et al* (2010a) used a collage of photographs and pictures denoting the widest possible range of decisions in which they might participate, each accompanied by a short caption to communicate gender, age, ethnicity and disability. The use of photomontage was discussed with Ciara Davey to ensure that the Research Team was using the technique appropriately. Although captions were inserted under each picture, generic images were deliberately chosen to encourage children to put their own interpretations on the meaning of the pictures.

Interactive floor mats

Three laminated interactive floor mats (*see Figure 3*) were used in conjunction with a focus group discussion schedule (*see Appendix 5*).

Figure 3: Home, School and Community interactive floor mats

Each floor mat depicted one of the spaces of inquiry – the home, the school and the community. To increase the opportunity for the multiple voices and viewpoints of the child participants to be heard, the focus group was subdivided into smaller collaborations who were asked to rotate around three 'discussion stations', usually located in three spatially distinct parts of the room. Each discussion station was dedicated to the spaces of home, school and community, and equipped with flipchart paper and marker pens (Davey *et al*, 2010a).

It was important that this method allowed the children sufficient space and time to fully express their views on their participation in decision-making in the respective realms (Wulf-Andersen, 2012). Using wipeable pens, the children were asked to draw on the respective mat places of importance in their daily lives within that realm, such as areas within their house, within their school or within their community. They were also asked to map where they spend time, where decision-making discussions happened, what kinds of issues were discussed, who the decisions were discussed with, and how much of a say they had in decisions made or choices agreed. This information unfolded informally, supported by the researchers' facilitation which stayed with the interests of the children and was not in any way prescriptive (Davey *et al*, 2010a). Prompts were only used if there was a prolonged silence.

Circle activity

The 'circle time' approach aims to develop awareness of self and others by focusing on listening skills and positive interpersonal communication (Canney and Byrne, 2006). Congruent with the participative values of the study, a fundamental premise of circle time is that each participant's contribution is equally respected. The circle activity was used to conclude the children's focus group. A ball was used to facilitate equality of turn-taking opportunity to voice a view or raise a topic. No pressure was placed on participants to speak if they did not want to – they simply passed the ball to the next child.

Young people's data collection instruments

Creative age-appropriate interactive data collection methods were also used with the young people in the study (aged 12-17). Their discussion focused on the three realms of the home, school and community, and was guided using a focus group schedule (*see Appendix 6*). The relaxed, receptive and fun atmosphere created conveyed respect for their views and thereby strengthened the depth and scope of their discussion. Each focus group began with an ice-breaker, followed by a verbal explanation of the project supported by an information sheet (*see Appendix 7*) and accessible description of Article 12 (*see Appendix 8*).

As with the children's focus groups (*see above*), questions were depersonalised so as to encourage more candid responses, for example, *'Are there "spaces" where young people your age can have a say at home?'* (*see Appendix 6*) (Davey *et al*, 2010a). Towards the close of the focus groups, the young people were asked to indicate their use of the Internet on an 'Internet tree poster' (*see Appendix 20*). To end the focus group, the closing discussion was participant-led, based on the individual notes or sketches of each young person's own concluding thoughts on their participation in decision-making. Creative interactive data collection methods used included an ice-breaker game, a photomontage of pictures, discussion stations and an Internet tree.

Human bingo

An ice-breaker called 'Human bingo' (National Youth Agency, 2011) was used to emphasise fun and the project's ethos of participation. It was particularly appropriate to facilitate the process of young people and researchers getting to know one another through sharing amusing information. In doing so, the ice-breaker facilitated non-threatening interactive dialogue and aimed to enhance the confidence of each young person to take part.

Photomontage of pictures

The collage of photographs described above for the children's focus groups was also used to prompt the young people on areas of decision-making in their lives (Davey *et al*, 2010a). Additional pictures that had greater relevance to these young participants were used, including a young person smoking, a young person with alcohol and a young person holding hands with another.

Internet tree

The 'Internet tree' was an interactive wall chart or poster that enabled the range of young people's Internet use to be captured in an uncomplicated, undemanding way. Given the increasing prevalence of social media in society today, the Internet tree was used in 5 of the young people's focus groups to examine the nature and extent of their Internet use as a form of participation. Each branch of the tree represented an area of Internet use, such as communication that was formal and social; for educational purposes; to find information; gaming; voting, both rating and reviewing; shopping; and a branch for any other uses. To indicate their usage of the Internet, the participants were asked to place green self-adhesive circles (depicting leaves) on the relevant labelled branches of the Internet tree (*see Appendix 20*).

Data was collected using the interactive Internet tree poster in the focus groups at youth clubs located in each of the study's geographic areas and at the second-level schools located in Dublin and Cork City. Although detailed verbal instructions and a practical demonstration were given to participants, they intuitively understood how to use the Internet tree. As they gathered around the Internet tree poster, much discussion was generated about their personal Internet use, informing their eventual decisions of where to place their green circles. A digital photograph was taken of their completed Internet tree poster for purposes of analysis. On completing this exercise, the young people discussed the extent to which they felt the Internet was a place where they had influence. This discussion was digitally audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

An analysis of the nature of Internet use by the young people participants focused on the nominal data collected and concerned the question of 'what' Internet use. The range of their Internet use was illustrated on their respective Internet trees through visual clustering of the green circles and provided a comparative display of the extent of their participation. The main characteristics of the participants' online engagement shown on the Internet trees were quantified and a thematic analysis of their views, on the extent to which they felt the Internet was a place where they had influence, was conducted by the Research Team.

Adults' semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured one-to-one interviews and group interviews provided a qualitative means of exploring how the school principals, teachers and community stakeholders viewed, experienced, promoted or constrained the participation of children and young people in decision-making within the context of their occupational roles and spheres of operation (Lawler, 2002). Individual interviews were primarily used due to the logistical difficulties encountered in attempting to arrange focus groups with these participants. One-to-one interviews were conducted with 6 school principals and with 5 teachers. One-to-one interviews were conducted with 9 adults who work with children and young people in the community (*see Appendix 9*). In the case of parents, 4 one-to-one interviews were conducted (*see Appendix 10*).

Adult stakeholders' focus groups

A total of 3 focus groups were conducted with groups of 2-5 parents each across the three data collection locations. The focus groups provided insight into '*how and why*' the parent participants '*think as they do*', rendering this method congruent with the project's constructionist position (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999, p. 172).

Adult stakeholders' written information

Adult stakeholders were asked to provide written information of a quantitative and qualitative nature for two reasons: (1) to enable contextual description of the project's sample and (2) to elicit their views and influence on the participation of children and young people in decision-making within the context of their sphere of activity and their role. The written documentation comprised a Parent Written Survey (*see Appendix 11*) and a School Profile (*see Appendix 13*).

3.5 Transcription

The quality of the raw data was central to the overall trustworthiness of the analysis and subsequent findings (Kvale, 1996; Mishler, 1986). All of the project interviews and focus groups were digitally audio-recorded to ensure that participants would '*be heard, with all reasoning, details, and nuances included*' (Wulf-Andersen, 2012, p. 566). As far as possible, the words of the participants were transcribed verbatim into text, without being reduced or refined (Haglund, 2004). Many of these quotations are used to illustrate the findings of this study in Chapters 4 (home), 5 (school) and 6 (community).

3.6 Analytical approach

Following familiarisation with five discrete datasets (i.e. children, young people, parents, principals and teachers, and adults working in the community), a thematic analysis was conducted within each dataset under the three realms of home, school and community. As part of the initial phase of data analysis, the Children's and Young People's Advisory Groups were asked to sort (in order of importance to them) representative verbatim child and young people participant quotations taken from the raw data transcripts.

Types of participation, enabling factors, barriers encountered and recommendations made by participants to facilitate participation were identified through systematic working through the transcripts. The qualitative data were interrogated systematically, using questions based on Lundy's (2007) conceptualisation of Article 12 of the UNCRC.

The questions used to draw out data themes included:

- What spaces allow children and young people to participate?
- Do opportunities exist for children and young people to have a voice?
- On what issues do children and young people have a voice?
- What issues are important?
- What issues are not important?
- What challenges or barriers constrain them?
- What audience listens to the views of children and young people?
- Can their views influence?
- Are their views given weight depending on their age and maturity?
- Are their views acted upon appropriately?
- What actions promote the participation of children and young people in decision-making?
- What actions need to be taken to ensure the participation of children and young people in decision-making?

Guided by the project's Steering Group, it was decided to triangulate analysis of data obtained from children and young people participants with the views expressed by 'significant' adults (significant because they make daily decisions that affect the lives of child and young people). This decision draws on Mannion's (2007, p. 405) argument that '*policy, practice and research on children's participation is better framed as being about child–adult relations*'. The fundamental premise is that context is important when deriving meaning from qualitative perspectives expressed (Cresswell, 2013; Spencer *et al*, 2003). While some of the adults interviewed were the parents, teachers and youth workers of the children and young people involved in the group interviews, we did not examine the specific links between them. Rather, we were looking at the overall understanding and experiences of participation by those interviewed.

3.7 Credibility and trustworthiness

The concepts of credibility, dependability and transferability are used in qualitative research to describe various aspects of trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). Credibility is the level of confidence in how effectively the data collection and analytical process addresses the research focus; dependability is the consistency of researcher judgements over time; and transferability is the extent to which findings can be applied to other settings or groups (Flick, 2002).

The credibility of the findings in this study were supported by clear purposive sampling that ensured inclusion of key participants within the target populations of the research (children, young people, parents, school and community adult stakeholders), so as to enable breadth of perspective on the participation of children and young people in decision-making on matters that affect them (Joyce *et al*, 2003). Data collection was appropriate across all participant stakeholders, providing participants with the time, environment and space to express their views. Digital audio-recording was used to capture these and to facilitate accurate verbatim

transcription for thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was approached systematically and was rigorously anchored in the project's aims and objectives, and drew on harnessed reflexive discussion on themes and interpretation between the Research Team (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). In addition, the Steering and Advisory Groups were asked to engage in a limited validation of the findings from the raw data for interviews, focus groups and written data (*see Appendices 16 and 17*).

Throughout the collection of data, the Research Team worked in a disciplined and well-briefed manner to ensure that there were no inconsistencies in questions asked of participants. During all stages of the research process, the Research Team engaged in open dialogue, both between themselves and with the Steering and Advisory Groups, to safeguard the dependability of the research conducted (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). To facilitate and enhance the transferability and therefore the value of the project's findings, a detailed description of the characteristics and context of the research sample is provided (Trainor and Graue, 2013; Creswell, 2013; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Furthermore, the findings are evidenced by verbatim quotes taken from the transcribed data.

3.8 Limitations of the study

Limitations and challenges that presented during the planning and conduct of the study have already been alluded to in Section 3.3, 'Project sampling'. In relation to data collection, due to the constraints of the daily school routines and the demands of curriculum delivery, it was not possible to prepare the children and young people for the focus groups they engaged in. Neither was it possible for the Research Team to build a rapport with the children and young people prior to data collection. The length of the project did not facilitate the possibility of return visits to conduct a limited validation of the findings with the participants, especially with the children and young people (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004).

The parent focus groups did not contain fathers, despite attempts to secure as diverse a set of parent participants as possible. The Research Team was reliant on the schools and youth projects to gain access to parents and in all cases those parents who consented to participate were mothers.

3.9 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Social Research Ethics Committee of University College Cork. All project activities were informed by the DCYA's *National Guidance for developing ethical research projects involving children* (2012a). Whilst many of the ethical considerations discussed below relate to children, they apply equally to adults.

Capturing lived experiences is an intrusive process, necessitating a consensual relationship between the adult researcher and the research participants (Masson, 2004). Both research participants and Advisory Group members were recruited on the basis of ongoing informed consent and chose freely to participate. The Research Team was conscientious in ensuring that no single child or young person felt compelled to participate or to answer questions simply to placate adults (Mannion, 2007). Prior to data collection, the researchers made themselves available to answer any queries and explained verbally to all participants the aims and objectives of the project. All participants were asked to sign a written declaration of informed consent (*see Appendices 2, 3 and 4*). All parents of participating children and young people were also asked to sign a written declaration of informed consent to their children's participation. The Research Team made every effort to ensure that children were '*given time to assimilate the information, ask questions and consult with others as necessary before deciding*' whether to participate (DCYA, 2012, p. 3).

The Research Team fully recognised the particular vulnerability of children and young people to exploitation or harm (Dempsey *et al*, 2012; Alderson and Morrow, 2004). Groundrules were discussed with children and young people at the outset of each focus group regarding sharing of sensitive information. The research was led by the principle that there are fundamental exceptions to confidentiality, including ethical considerations, particularly where there is a concern that a child is at risk of significant harm. Currently in Ireland, practitioner guidelines and good practice, but not legal mandate, require that professional researchers who have concerns about the existence of abuse disclose such information to a third party. In this regard, the Research Team followed the DCYA's (2012, p. 4) guidance that '*children and young people should be told at the outset, and as necessary during the course of an interview, that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed if information of this type emerges*'.[6]

The Research Team was prepared to deal with sensitive issues that may have arisen, particularly in a group interview (such as a concern about someone being at risk of harm), and had a number of appropriate supports and procedures in place. Where relevant, the researchers used the specific child protection protocols of the schools or youth centres, and all of the Research Team were Garda-vetted, familiar with the *Children First* national guidance (DCYA, 2011b) and experienced in interviewing children and young people. All of the researchers were briefed as to the procedure of a telephone call to local services for follow-up support for any individual child or young person as required (as discussed at the first Steering Group meeting with the DCYA and key stakeholders). Furthermore, a decision was made early on in planning the research to keep children and young people's discussion away from the very personal and to steer group conversation so that no individual was exposed. There were regular team meetings to discuss and evaluate the group interview process throughout the entire data collection period.

During data collection, the unique worth of each child and young person was fully respected by ensuring a relaxed, non-threatening, comfortable environment that promoted undisturbed discussion. Adults, other than the researchers, were requested not to be present during the children and young people's focus groups. The type and timing of rewards was carefully considered because of the risk of inducement of otherwise unwilling participants (Curtis *et al*, 2000). The commitment of the children and young people who had contributed as members of the Advisory Groups was fully recognised by making meetings as age-appropriate and enjoyable as possible, and by celebrating their contribution through presentation of Certificates of Participation and fun 'goody' bags containing, among other things, cinema tickets.

[6] The exceptions to confidentiality were not set out in the written child consent form, but were very much part of the consent negotiations, whereby the researchers spoke with the children and young people at the start of the interview process about both the confidential nature of the interview and the limitations of this confidentiality. The researchers also informed them of the fact that we did not wish to personalise discussions, but rather to emphasise the more general issues and concerns of themselves and their peers.

4. Findings: Participation at home

4.1 Introduction

It is in the *'less-observed private world of the family'* (Alderson, 2010, p. 89) that most children experience their first involvement in decision-making. According to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009, para 90), the family provides an important participatory model and is '*preparation for the child to exercise the right to be heard in wider society*'. Research in the 'new' geographies of childhood and youth about children's changing space–time behaviour finds that, over time, children's geographies and use of space have changed, with less use of the public space of the street and, conversely, private home space increasingly becoming a child space. It identifies 'indoor' children and children of the 'backseat generation', arguing that these two new types of childhood are characterised by a decrease in playing outdoors and an increase in adult supervision. This highlights the importance of children and young people's interactions in the home (Karsten, 2005; Kernan, 2010).

Internationally, research provides evidence of a continuum of participatory experiences, from homes where power-sharing is intrinsic to family life to homes where children have little say (Davey *et al*, 2010a). This chapter presents the findings of the present research concerning children and young people's participation in decision-making at home. It seeks to investigate whether, for the children and young people involved, the home is a space where supportive trusting family relationships can be nurtured, where independence grows with age and where parents listen, discuss and explain decisions made. Furthermore, it outlines the views and experiences of parents and community stakeholders with regard to children and young people's participation in the home.

4.2 Children and young people's views on participation

On the issue of having a voice at home, children and young people felt that they have unique and important perspectives and things to contribute, as the following representative quotes illustrate:

> 'Kids are important too.' [Primary school, Sligo]
>
> 'Because they might have something really important to say.' [Primary school, Dublin]
>
> 'Because they are younger than adults, so they might have a different opinion to the adults.' [Primary school, Dublin]
>
> 'If it's something to do with the children, like where to go on holiday.' [Primary school, Dublin]
>
> 'They [adults] don't understand what we understand. [Young people] wouldn't understand the value of money, but they probably get more about what makes them tick or they probably know more about themselves than the world.' [Youth café, Sligo]

4.3 Experiences of participation at home

For Alderson (2010), it is the informality of the home that promotes a positive participative environment with an ethos of inclusion, choice and respect for children's agency. In the present study, fostering participation in the home was generally attributed to enhancing the ability of children and young people to participate in other settings.

While parents are key enablers of participative activities by children and young people, they can also act as gatekeepers facilitating or suppressing participation (Feinstein *et al*, 2010). Bonner (1998) contends that children are unfairly subject to the power of their parents and it is this experience that precedes all others. Overall, the children and young people participants in this research felt they had some influence on decision-making in the home. For example:

> 'Well, I think I have enough say … yeah.' [Youth café, Sligo]
>
> 'You get to say what you want about most of the things that you should get to have your say about. But there are still things that adults can be unfair about, like bedtimes, sweeties …' [Primary school, Dublin]

However, although there was a general sense that the voices of children and young people were heard in the home, in some cases participation was experienced as tokenistic. For example:

'I don't usually talk to my parents about decisions.' [Youth project, Dublin]

'My mum usually just makes the decisions in our house.' [Youth project, Dublin]

'We talk about stuff and then they tell me what they're going to do and ask me what I think.' [Youth project, Dublin]

'... but I never win.' [Primary school, Dublin]

'My dad never listens. He always says "Talk to me later. Tell me about it later". He never does it.' [Primary school, Cork]

'Sometimes they both can be very bad at listening.' [Primary school, Cork]

4.4 Types of decision-making in the home

In this study, decisions about consumption activities and concrete everyday tasks (such as food, clothes, pocket money, bedtime, playing on the computer or watching television, leisure activities and holidays) were most frequently mentioned by the children (aged 7-12). These findings concur with those of Bjerke (2011) in his study of Norwegian children and young people, where consumption in its various forms is a major area in which they talk about their participation. The young people (aged 12-17) in the present study were more concerned about decisions such as the ability to be with friends and to do what they want on their own. There was some evidence of negotiation on activities such as smoking and drinking alcohol. Generally, however, the consensus was that such discussions with parents were avoided.

Daily activities and tasks

Participation in food choices

In the present study, some children reported that they were actively involved in choosing what was purchased in the supermarket, eaten at family meals and prepared for school lunches. Others wanted to have more input on their food choices. When children and young people were included in choosing food, this was usually negotiated in a casual way with parents:

'My Mam decides 'cos my Dad's a terrible cook. I just ask my Mam, she decides. She'd ask us what we want. I go shopping sometimes with her. We sit down and we have a vote about what we want and the majority decides. When everyone is at home, we have a vote.' [Primary school, Dublin]

'We take turns to decide what's for dinner.' [Primary school, Cork]

'At this point, your parents know what you like and what you don't like. So they're not just going to cook you something that you don't like.' [Youth café, Sligo]

'If they put something in front of me that I don't like eating, then I'll say "OK, I'll have something else".' [Youth café, Sligo]

Most children and young people felt that it was only fair that they are allowed to take part in decisions about what and when to eat. In many cases, they reported that there was little discussion on this because parents usually knew what they liked. However, there were instances of dissatisfaction with the level of decision-making in this area:

'I would like more of a say in what I have to eat for dinner. Half the time it's stuff that I don't really like.' [Primary school, Dublin]

'My father [decides]. And if you don't like what he's eating, you don't eat. Or else you're told, make yourself something.' [Youth café, Sligo]

Some regulation from parents appears common, such as the need to eat what is considered healthy and to have a family dinner on at least some occasions during the week. This correlates somewhat with Bjerke's (2011) research in Norway on children's expression of agency in the home, although the present study did not find the same level of consensus on the notion of the ideal dinner as a 'family meal', where everyone sits round a table and eats together.

Clothing and hair choices

Children and young people discussed clothes and hair with parents, indicating that parents often have the final decision. For example:

> 'When we buy clothes, me and my Mam choose them together. Mostly my mam says what I should wear … And sometimes when we go shopping, we have to use our own money and if we don't have enough money, we have to put the clothes back.' [Primary school, Cork]
>
> 'We compromise.' [Youth club, Dublin]
>
> 'We usually get to pick what we wear at home.' [Primary school, Sligo]
>
> 'I can get my hair cut whenever I want. But I would not be allowed to dye my hair.' [Primary school, Sligo]
>
> 'If my mam goes into town, I'll tell her [what clothes to buy]. Sometimes she'd get me nice jeans, but one time my mam got me these bright blue jeans and I didn't wear them.' [Second-level school, Cork]

Parents recognised that choosing clothes and hair styles was a way in which children and young people express their individuality, but also spoke of practical constraints on children's choices, including time and weather conditions:

> 'Because of his ADHD [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder], if you left him to his own devices in the morning he would never get dressed. So I would pick out his clothes in the morning … When he comes in from school, I let him decide what he wants to wear … Some evenings he wants to get dressed up. Mainly, you know, [he's] pretty easy-going about what he wears.' [Parent, Sligo]
>
> 'We had an argument today about correct warm clothes to wear.' [Parents' Advisory Group, Cork]

Bedtime

Research indicates a predominance of negotiating styles in families (Halpenny *et al*, 2010). In the present study, parent participants generally decided bedtimes for children (aged 7-12), with more discretion and flexibility allowed at weekends. For example:

> 'I don't get to decide bedtime.' [Youth club, Dublin]
>
> 'Bedtime – we get more say at weekends.' [Primary school, Dublin]
>
> 'I go to bed very late. I watch a movie and then I go to bed late. I watch movies with my older brother.' [Primary school, Cork]
>
> 'I go to bed at 9. It feels fair because I need the sleep. If I go to bed late, I still wake up early and then I'm tired.' [Primary school, Cork]

With the young people participants (aged 12-17), there appeared to be more freedom:

> 'My mam often comes in [to the bedroom] at half-past 11 and says "You should try to get to bed. You'll be better off".' [Second-level school, Cork]

There was an overriding concern from parents about children not getting enough sleep:

> 'In regard to their bedtime … if they have stuff on, it's 10 and if not it's 9.30 … I feel they are still growing and they need their rest and they do a lot of sport.' [Parent, Dublin]
>
> 'Bedtime – she used to be brilliant and wanted to have her 8 hours. But all of a sudden she has changed and wants to stay up late.' [Parent, Dublin]

Homework

Most children and young people were happy to have limits set on the time spent on homework and when it is done. A typical comment was: 'Then you get it over and done with and you're free for the rest of the day' [Youth club, Dublin]. Generally, the young people reported flexibility on when homework was completed: 'My parents usually give me enough time to make a decision on when I do it … so I make the choice as to when I do it, I suppose' [Second-level school, Sligo]. For the children (aged 7-12), however, there was more prescription in their homework routine:

'I have to do homework straight after school.' [Youth club, Dublin]
'My mum gives me a time limit for homework.' [Youth club, Dublin]
'It depends what the homework is. If there's not much, I'm expected to get it done in 40 minutes. But if there's a lot of maths or something, I'm expected to take about an hour.' [Primary school, Dublin]

The increased stress at home associated with studying for State examinations was commented on by some of the young people (aged 12-17):

'In 3rd year when I was doing my Junior Cert, I was being pushed to study. They'd say, like, "It's not for me. It's for you" over and over.' [Second-level school, Cork]
'Like coming up to summer, and it's April, and they're like, "Study now" and we don't know what will be coming up on the test.' [Second-level school, Cork]
'She [Mother] would tell you, do it before dinner. But I would do it before dinner to get it done so I could go out after dinner. I have to do it before dinner basically because I have to do my Junior Cert this year. If it was another year, I suppose she wouldn't mind when I did my homework, once I have it done.' [Youth club, Cork]

Pocket money and spending decisions

Most of the children and young people participants in this study had to earn pocket money in exchange for doing chores around the house ('For a job' or 'When I baby-sit'). Unlike the young people, there was some level of prescription by parents in terms of what the children (aged 7-12) spent their pocket money on. Spending was usually subject to varying conditions and restraints. One child, for example, said that she receives direction on how to spend her pocket money: 'Only buy it if it's something that you are going to use' [Primary school, Sligo]. Others said:

'I don't get pocket money. I just earn it.' [Primary school, Sligo]
'Get to spend [pocket money] in the local shop." [Primary school, Sligo]
'Pocket money – I can do almost whatever I want, but I'm not allowed to waste it all on, like, some toy … My mam keeps my wallet in her handbag, so if I want to buy something she'd have to see it first. My dad takes it and keeps an account of it on his phone. Granny, Mam and Dad get to decide the amount of pocket money. Mostly I spend it on sweets.' [Primary school, Dublin]

Young people (aged 12-17) appeared to experience considerable freedom or agency on how they spent their pocket money. They referred to pocket money in terms of money for 'necessities such as phone credit' and received it from their parents, grandparents or in some cases their older siblings:

'When I need it, I can get it. But I don't get a regular amount.' [Second-level school, Dublin]
'I'll ask, "Can I have money for call credit?" ' [Second-level school, Dublin]
'She [mother] gives me €20 a month and tells me I have to spend it on clothes or phone credit. Well, I can spend it on what I want.' [Second-level school, Dublin]
'I want to get a ticket for [concert] and she's asking me to hoover and stuff like empty the dishwasher.' [Second-level school, Cork]
'I get money off my brother and sister because the two of them are working. They're in their 20s.' [Second-level school, Cork]

Parents' management of pocket money varied. Some parents gave money on demand, while others paid amounts into bank or credit union accounts. One parent described it as 'the dad's role'. Others paid a set amount regularly once their children were in their teens, sometimes as 'a wage' for agreed chores performed. Parents were unanimous that phone credit was the most common financial demand, followed by money for occasional trips to town:

'Anytime they look for money, it's for credit. That is all they want, credit or … if they are going to town.' [Parent, Cork]
'Once every two or three weeks they would be going into town. They would get €10 or €20 – that would be it. That would be once a month. It is for credit. I don't mind credit.' [Parent, Cork]

'I do give the older three wages every week, but they have to do their chores around the house.' [Parent, Cork]

'I do not give money to [name of child]. If he wants something, he will ask me … his Dad then puts money into an account for him every week.' [Parent, Cork]

'When he comes into his teens and all the rest. You know, when they start going out with the girls to McDonalds or into the town or something like that.' [Parent, Cork]

Leisure and extra-curricular activities

De Róiste (2005) reported that the most favoured independent and unstructured activities for adolescents included watching television, use of the Internet, talking on the phone, listening to music and reading. The most popular activities with peers included 'hanging out', shopping and going to the cinema, while sport was the most popular community activity. These patterns are also very evident in the present study.

Television

The children and young people identified television as important to their leisure time, as evidenced elsewhere (e.g. Hume, 2010). Most described how their use of TV in the home was negotiated and agreed with parents:

'I get to watch as much TV as I want. I know when to stop because it just gets boring. There are no rules about watching TV.' [Primary school, Sligo]

'If you tell them what you're watching, they're like, "You're not allowed watch that". I have a TV in my bedroom, but it's not connected to the Sky box or anything. It's just for the PlayStation. My mam would be like, "Turn that off" and stuff.' [Second-level school, Cork]

Some of the parent participants were unequivocal about the need for an authoritarian style of parenting (Growing Up in Ireland, 2012b) in relation to the time spent watching television:

'I am afraid, I definitely lay the law down there. It just goes to show you really have to lead children. Like, my two children would sit all day at the television if I let them. But some evenings, I just say no. If it's a nice evening, I say "No, go out and play" and more often than not they don't even come back to look for it because they love being outside. So I definitely make the decision on that.' [Parent, Sligo]

There was also dialogue among parents on the issue of monitoring and censoring the television viewing of their children:

'Oh, watching the telly. And then this Sky thing, the latest thing … if you are not watching it and forget that it is recorded … she goes in and she watches it. *Criminal Minds* … now that I think is too gory. But next thing I am after forgetting, so she's watching it.' [Parent, Cork]

'I don't have the [TV] stations in their bedroom. She watches videos in her room. I felt from an early age I didn't want her seeing grown-up programmes.' [Parent, Dublin]

Young people's Internet use was examined using an 'Internet tree' activity, followed by group discussion with participants aged 12-17 (*see Section 3.4*). This was deemed to be important since research highlights its significance as a tool of communication and thus participation in young people's everyday lives. The data show that the Internet and social media are central to their lives, with most of their activity concentrated in communication and entertainment, followed by education and information activities. This pattern of use is supported by the published literature (O'Neill *et al*, 2009; McAfee, 2010). They appeared to be safety-conscious and aware of the need to manage their interactions online, as the following comment indicates (which received much agreement in one of the focus groups): 'I've never really gone outside [friends]' [Youth club, Sligo]. There was no significant difference in online activity between the Sligo participants and their urban peers in Cork and Dublin. However, it proved a vitally important source of communication with friends for the rural young people, who discussed their restricted access to friends because of transport constraints. Lægran's (2002) work, based

on empirical studies in two Norwegian villages, found that the Internet is used by rural youth to expand their radius of activity and their repertoire of identities in the local community, or to reach beyond their village.

The most common forms of social networking identified by the young people included instant messaging, chat rooms and the use of Facebook for posting photos, music or videos to share with others – 'Everyone uses Facebook and Twitter' [Youth club, Sligo]. Entertainment mainly comprised listening to downloaded music or watching free downloaded films, video clips and shows they had missed on television. Information uses mainly involved completing schoolwork, use of Google translator, Google maps and looking at the news. Gaming was considered separate from entertainment and appeared to feature less in their typical online activities. However, while young people indicated using the Internet for 'other' reasons, they did not wish to elaborate on these in the Internet tree activity. McAfee (2010) found that about one-third of young people in the USA (32%) did not tell their parents what they were doing online, and by the ages of 16 and 17, 56% of teens hide their online activities.

There is some evidence to show that Irish parents set more rules on their children's use of the Internet than other European parents. It is suggested that this results in Irish children incurring greater restrictions than their European peers on the types of activity and time spent on the Internet (Grehan, 2012). Discussions with parent participants in the present study revealed the worry, anxiety and feelings of inadequacy engendered in them about their children's use of the Internet. Their concerns were heightened by their own limitations in what they referred to as 'this other world' [Parent, Cork]. Some were mindful that if their children were subject to cyberbullying, they as parents would remain unaware.

> 'Children know so much more about technology than we do.' [Parent, Cork]
>
> '... peer pressure from friends who have phones with Internet access or are on websites.' [Parent, Cork]

Some of parents' concerns appear to be supported in research that highlights the sharp increase in the rate of cyberbullying over the past year in Ireland (Amárach Research, 2014). Similarly, a recent European study (which includes Ireland) on the changing conditions of Internet access and use highlights the fact that mobile Internet and mobile convergent media bring changing risks to children's online safety (Mascheroni and Ólafsson, 2014). The study found that 21% of children (aged 9-16) are likely to encounter negative user-generated content online (i.e. content relating to hate, pro-anorexia, self-harm, drug-taking or suicide). 21% of children reported seeing sexual images, while 22% had received contact with people they have never met face-to-face. Parents in Ireland are found to be taking an active interest in guiding and mediating children's Internet use (O'Neill and Dinh, 2014).

Other leisure activities

Leisure and extra-curricular choices of the children and young people involved in this study encompassed a wide range of activities, mainly external to the family home. In the main, joining and leaving extra-curricular activities were negotiated with their parents, as illustrated in the quotes below.

> 'I want to quit Taekwondo, but my mam has paid for it, so she won't let me.' [Youth club, Sligo]
>
> 'If I want to join a sport, we discuss all that might be involved.' [Primary school, Cork]
>
> 'My dad played [football] when he was younger, but he wasn't pushing me to play. I wanted to play. And he brought me up there, like.' [Second-level school, Cork]
>
> 'The club I'm in now, I heard about that from other people and I was interested in it for a while and I joined it after I told my mam first about it and she said that would be grand because it's near where I live. If it was a long distance away, she might not have let me join or else I would have to get a lift.' [Youth project, Sligo]

Parents were unequivocal about allowing their children a choice of activities. Even when they disagreed or were disappointed by the children's decisions, there was general agreement that they would not enforce an activity against their child's wishes.

> 'My daughter was in music lessons and wanted to give up at 12. One parent told me not to let her, but she didn't want to do it. We were disappointed. She switched to drama and she loves it. I wouldn't agree with forcing her.' [Parents' Advisory Group, Cork]
>
> 'My 9-year-old boy wants to give up piano after 3 years. He is now doing soccer and GAA and golf with me. He wants to go boxing now. If he is doing something, I am happy enough. He is into rugby, which exposes him to a different community of friends.' [Parents' Advisory Group, Cork]

A desire for their children to be recognised and active in the community was expressed by parent participants. This was seen to be achieved through activities, most particularly sport. There was no mention of decision-making or political participatory opportunities within the wider community for their children.

> 'She never joined any sports and I would have liked that because you become involved in the community more and you become recognised when you are older as being part of the community … I felt she missed out because of that and that was her decision. She was so into horse riding, she missed out on local activities.' [Parent, Dublin]
>
> 'Mine are very active in the community. We started in soccer and then they joined GAA when we moved here 11 years ago. They are all into the GAA here. Once you have one in, the others follow.' [Parent, Dublin]
>
> 'She has started to play football recently and I am really delighted because she had a bit of a weight problem because of the way she eats. I wanted her to play football a few years ago and she didn't want to, but she loves it now and all the friends are playing, so that helps as well.' [Parent, Sligo]

Involvement in family holiday decisions

Being involved in decisions about family holidays was discussed by only a small number of children and young people. Overall, their experiences were varied.

> 'We don't get to decide, but we do get input on it. If it's too far-fetched, like Disneyland, then they'll say no.' [Primary school, Sligo]
>
> 'Whether I get to go on trips with my club – we discuss our options and see if there's any reason why we should or shouldn't, and then we decide.' [Primary school, Dublin]
>
> 'My Mam and Dad ask me where I want to go on holiday.' [Primary school, Cork]

Friends

Friends were highly valued by the children and young people in this study and negotiating time spent with friends featured in the group discussions, as did the role played by friends in listening. This finding is supported by other research indicating that during childhood the need to belong and be 'part of the group' is clearly visible in the importance afforded by children to peer relations, friendships and play (Dunn, 2004; Jans, 2004, cited in Kernan, 2010). In research by Dempsey *et al* (2012), which sought to elicit children and young people's own accounts of their lives and their views on what would improve their lives, friends consistently rank at or near the top of the list, often higher than more material issues. Typical comments from children in the present study include:

> 'Mam and Dad sometimes allow my friends in to play X Box. We play in our house, in their house, on the green outside. My cousin lives around the corner so I can just call around and play with them.' [Primary school, Dublin]
>
> 'My friends listen to me and I'll talk to them a lot about things that are going on. Sometimes I talk to my older brother.' [Primary school, Cork]

Some young people (aged 12-17) described parental restrictions on who they see, where they go and the time at which they need to return home:

'If you're going out to your friend's house and if they [parents] go "Oh" … Like, they think you'll just be off doing stuff you shouldn't do.' [Youth café, Sligo]

'Some of my friends aren't allowed to come over if she [Mum] doesn't feel comfortable with the person, or if she doesn't know who they are, or doesn't know their parents or if they're, like, a heavy drinker or something. She needs to know who they are.' [Second-level school, Cork]

'Sometimes my parents might say "We don't like you hanging around with them".' [Second-level school, Cork]

'If I wanted to go to [name of shopping mall] or something, I'm not allowed go. Or she has to know who you're going with.' [Second-level school, Cork]

'Ask them [for permission] to go out, to go to your friend's house … and whether you can be allowed out later or not.' [Youth café, Sligo]

'My mam will give me a time [to come home] before I go out. Sometimes it's a problem … if she says 10.30 and I come in at 11, then she'll say, "Well, I was reasonable enough to give you 10.30 instead of 10". Monday to Friday, it's 9.30 and at the weekends it's 10.' [Second-level school, Cork]

Parents strongly acknowledged the importance of peers to children's lives. Typical comments were:

'And his friends are grand.' [Parent, Sligo]

'It is your friends that shape you. I was blessed with friends, I really was.' [Parent, Sligo]

Drawing on their own childhood experiences, parents were fully aware of the potential positive and negative influences that peer pressure might have on their own children. The worries and difficulties of undesirable peer friendships were discussed, for example:

'Peer pressure is the biggest thing. If I were to look back on 10 years ago. An awful lot of me going down the wrong path for a year or whatever was because you [felt], "Oh God, I haven't done that and everyone else has done that".' [Parent, Sligo]

Discussing sensitive topics

There appeared to be some consensus among young people that smoking and drinking were difficult topics to discuss with parents. Comments from a youth café in Sligo are representative: 'I don't like those conversations!' and 'No, I hate them because they're really awkward'.

Some young people asserted that parents should be open and factual in their discussions, 'stating the facts and saying that "If you do drink to excess, this is what's going to happen" ' or saying 'If you are going to drink, don't be stupid about it' [Youth café, Sligo].

There was evidence of negotiation in the home around smoking and alcohol consumption activities, with parents informing young people of the consequences.

'I'm going to be 18 in a couple of months and I'd rather that they knew about it and were comfortable with it than doing it behind their back.' [Youth café, Sligo]

'It's not really an issue. I'm allowed to drink at home if I want, but not that much. Like maybe on a Sunday or something like that. There's no rule.' [Youth café, Sligo]

'My parents said that if I do drink, they'd prefer if I started at home.' [Youth café, Sligo]

'My parents said I'm allowed to drink when I'm an adult – it's up to me if I want to drink then. My dad was a [school] principal, so he used to talk about what he saw – the effects of drinking. He wants me to wait, or never drink – preferably never.' [Young People's Advisory Group, Cork]

There was an element of secrecy attached to some of the young people's smoking and drinking behaviour:

> 'If you go out and they know you drink or whatever, I still wouldn't tell them that I do.' [Youth café, Sligo]
>
> 'She [mother] couldn't really stop me [smoking]. She still couldn't catch you like … I still wouldn't do it in front of her.' [Youth café, Sligo]

Some young people reported low tolerance of their smoking by parents:

> 'My dad would probably kick me out if I smoked.' [Young People's Advisory Group, Cork]
>
> 'Parents just give you their opinion that you shouldn't smoke when you're younger, then it's up to you. Like, drinking is probably a lot more loose … a lot of people say just don't smoke, whereas drinking, they might say, well, if you walk into your house drunk, they might get angry, but not as angry as if you smoked.' [Young People's Advisory Group, Cork]

Young people acknowledged that there were situations when parents may know better: 'If it's things that are new to both of you, then they can't really say that they know about it. But if it's things like drinking and smoking that they've already lived through … they know what it's about so you can't really say that you know more' [Youth café, Sligo]. Young people, then, generally acknowledged their parents' authority and greater experience to inform decisions on alcohol and smoking. They accepted that their requests will sometimes be refused by parents. Overall, the level of transparency and direct discussion with parents about alcohol and smoking activities varied. Of importance to the young people participants was to feel respected by their parents: 'Yeah, they need to respect us' [Second-level school, Dublin].

4.5 Enablers of participation in the home

A range of factors were identified as supporting the participation of children and young people in family decision-making and as essential to the home being a space for effective participation. These included spaces where discussion can happen, good family relationships, being listened to by parents, growing levels of independence with age and maturity, where decisions are seen as fair and where the rationale for decisions is explained to them by their parents.

Spaces used for participation in the home

Discussion and participation in decision-making took place in family spaces mainly at times when the whole family was present. Such times primarily occurred during evening dinner and watching TV in the evenings, but also when children and parents routinely spent time together, including on the way to and from school and travelling in the car. This finding echoes Kernan's (2010) finding – that the routes and journeys between school settings and home, or between school settings and local parks and other public places were significant sites for children's everyday play-life outdoors. The present study contends that this also holds true for children and young people's opportunities for communication and voice.

> 'Anytime really. Dinnertime, when the family are all together. In the car, we talk about what's happening.' [Second-level school, Cork]
>
> 'At night. Dinnertime. In the morning, getting ready to go to school, I talk to my Dad.' [Second-level school, Cork]
>
> 'In the kitchen. I'd mostly do it with my mum because my dad works abroad.' [Primary school, Cork]
>
> 'We plan stuff at dinner.' [Youth club, Dublin]
>
> 'I talk mostly in the sitting room when we're all sitting down.' [Primary school, Cork]
>
> 'We talk in the quiet of the evening.' [Youth club, Dublin]

'When we're coming home. When you are home, then like. When you're doing your homework. At dinner, when it's getting ready and stuff. Not in the morning 'cos we'd be all busy. The weekend … but sometimes my mam would come home from work late and then we'd sit down. Family dinner.' [Second-level school, Cork]

Although they valued family time, children and young people nonetheless spoke of needing one-to-one time alone with a parent because family discussions were often dominated by younger or older siblings:

'Later in the evening, when my little brothers have gone to bed.' [Primary school, Dublin]

'We'd talk about school, but then if you're sitting down with the family, generally, like my older brother and sister talk about when they're out and stuff, what happened.' [Second-level school, Cork]

There was discussion in some interview groups about how bedrooms offered children and young people the opportunity to control their own space:

'Allowed to put pictures on my [bedroom] wall.' [Primary school, Cork]

'What sort of stuff I get in my room [bedroom].' [Primary school, Dublin]

'One time we went to the shop to get paint and when we got home and opened it, it was much lighter than I wanted and I didn't want to use it. So we just use it now as a step for my brother to get to the presses.' [Primary school, Cork]

The changing character of indoor space at home as a place for children and young people is explored by Karsten (2005), who highlights children and young people's references to their bedrooms as places that offer an escape from parental control and the adult gaze. Furthermore, James (2001) discusses the importance of the bedroom as a leisure site for adolescent girls in Western Australia; they rated it as the recreational space where they felt least self-conscious and most chose to be.

Age, maturity and increasing autonomy

Age and maturity were seen by parents, children and young people as important to increasing the participatory entitlement of children and young people in family decision-making, This is supported by data in the study by Davey *et al* (2010a), which suggest that as children grow older, they are more likely to have a greater say in decisions that are made at home, although the extent to which their views influence the outcome of a decision was said to be mediated by the degree to which parents concurred with their views. Similarly, Cherney (2010) states that parents change the balance of autonomy and relatedness at different periods in their children's growth and one of the important developmental periods during which such shifts may occur is during early adolescence when children start to negotiate for more autonomy from their parents. The children and young people in this present study spoke about a definite trend in their growing independence and autonomy.

Parents tended to have established routines for children around food, bath and bed times. But the structure and timing of these routines were subject to greater negotiation as the children became older. Decision-making with their older children included such issues as where to live after a parent's divorce, whether to attend Mass or not, where to go on holiday, and choice of friends. These findings reinforce those of Bjerke's (2011) Norwegian study.

The young people concurred with their parents' view on this and also identified key points in their increased autonomy and participation in decision-making as the movement from primary to secondary school and again at Transition year:

'Age is important in having a say. And the way you talk – the more mature you sound, the more they'll listen.' [Second-level school, Cork]

'I get way more say now.' [Second-level school, Dublin]

'5th year … Probably 5th year … seem to be allowed to go out more and that … So I do whatever I want! They usually just let me carry on really … because they trust me … not to do anything too stupid.' [Second-level school, Sligo]

'I normally get what I want. Well, not all the time … My sister, she normally gets what she wants 'cos she's older than me. It makes a difference what age you are. You get more responsibility. They trust you more, like.' [Second-level school, Dublin]

'As you get older, they expect you to get more mature and make your own decisions.' [Youth project, Cork]

'I suppose we're a bit older now. I'm 17 now so it's less kind of "Can I?" and more "Do you want to …?" They [parents] don't mind so much where I go. It's not like asking permission to go to a disco or something like that.' [Youth club, Cork]

Helwig (2006), however, suggested that the development of autonomy during adolescence was shaped, to a significant extent, by the young people's own efforts.

The present study identified that children begin to negotiate more autonomy, often in the face of parental reluctance or opposition. Like the views of the young people (*see above*), parents identified this as happening after the children's passage from primary to secondary school:

'Like my oldest fellow now would ask me (he is probably at that age, 12) "Can I walk home with my friends?" And then you are wondering is it OK to let him walk because some of the friends will come a certain amount of the way and then he has so much more to go on his own.' [Parent, Cork]

'I think once they hit around 6th class up to about Junior Cert or 5th year, they get a bit of sense then.' [Parent, Cork]

Role of mothers and family relationships

Family relationships were seen as key enablers of voice. As one young person commented, 'It all depends on the closeness of your family' [Youth café, Sligo]. However, mothers in particular were described as 'good listeners' by both the children and the young people. Considerably more interaction and negotiation was reported with mothers than with fathers, across genders and in rural and urban sites. Typical comments from the children were:

'My mum, because my dad is in work most of the time.' [Primary school, Dublin]

'We talk mostly to our mums because most of the time they know what's best for us.' [Primary school, Dublin]

'I talk to my mam because she's the one who makes the decisions.' [Primary school, Cork]

This is supported by findings from the *Growing Up in Ireland* (2012a-c) study – that mothers are the primary caregivers in the home for 97% of 13-year-olds and where young people said they spend more time talking to their mum (70%) than to their dad (60%). Smetana *et al* (2006) similarly note that adolescents are more likely to disclose information to their mothers. In the present study, the mothers interviewed presented themselves as the key listeners, counsellors, negotiators and final decision-makers across all aspects of daily living concerning their children:

'Any decision really would just lie with me at the end of the day.' [Parent, Cork]

'I reared my other two children alone, so I couldn't take her dad coming in and making decisions, because I felt I was good at it.' [Parent, Dublin]

'I think mothers would dictate a bit more.' [Parent, Cork]

Fathers were mostly described in supportive terms by the parent participants:

'I threaten [them with] their father every now and then.' [Parent, Cork]

'If I'm not sure what to do, I say "Ask your Dad".' [Parent, Dublin]

'My husband would have more patience than me.' [Parent, Cork]

Parents who listen and encourage

Listening to children is described as central to their learning and development, and to the expression of their civil rights (Theis, 2010). Kirby *et al* (2003) contend that parents reported stronger feelings about the importance of listening to children than other adults. Peterson-Badali and Ruck (2008) note that it is likely that parents who believe in children's rights to autonomy are more likely to permit their children's participation in the family decision-making process. In the present study, the parent participants were unanimous on the importance they afforded to listening to their children:

> 'Yes, I think it is hugely important. If you listen to them, you can go through whatever they want to talk about, you know … It is better than just laying an order down and not listening to what they have to say about it.' [Parent, Sligo]
>
> 'They need to know that they can come to you.' [Parent, Sligo]

This approach is substantiated by the *Growing Up in Ireland* (2012b) data, which found that the majority of 13-year-olds reported that their parents spent time talking to them and that they could count on them for help if they had a problem. Parents in the present study viewed the act of listening as a parenting tool that increased their capacity to respond to the needs of their children. Listening enabled them to gather information on their children's activities, friends and concerns, and provide information or guidance. Listening was also about building relationships, nurturing trust, instilling desirable values, fostering warmth and reinforcing personal worth (Clarke and Churchill, 2012).

Parents made reference to listening on different levels, indicating a range of listening from attending to explicit verbal and behavioural information to 'tuning in' to unstated undercurrents and the finer nuances of body language:

> 'Kids can say things sometimes and they might not mean anything by it, but you still always have to keep the element of awareness.' [Parent, Sligo]
>
> 'Listening can have different levels as well because you can hear what they say, but often times there can be something [else] … this is when they get towards their teens. My oldest now is 13, so things are changing.' [Parent, Sligo]

Parents found it difficult to identify and describe examples of when they did *not* listen to their children and young people: 'They always get a chance to say what they want' [Parent, Cork].

A Family Resource Centre worker expressed the view that the confidence and capacity of children to make decisions is, to a large extent, 'parent-driven'. It was suggested that children who grow up in unsupportive homes 'don't have the confidence to speak out' [Youth Worker 1]. It was felt that children who are engaged at home are often easy to identify.

Explaining decisions and fairness

There was a shared understanding among children and young people that they have to compromise and reach a consensus through discussion with their parents:

> 'If I was going to a party at my friends and Mam would ask me to be home at 12, we'd agree on 12.30. Compromise.' [Second-level school, Dublin]
>
> 'If the kids get more rights, they should have more responsibility. For example, if they're allowed to go to the cinema where they weren't before, they should have to take on another chore.' [Second-level school, Dublin]

This was also evident in the research by Bjerke (2011), which found that knowing that their parents recognise them as people and being able to see the situation from their parents' point of view gives young people a reasonable explanation for why they are treated differently, even if it is experienced as unfair at the time.

Parent participants emphasised the need to exercise fairness that is consistent and undiscriminating, although they admitted this was difficult to achieve at times. This view encompassed all decisions, including those they made on behalf of their children and family decision-making in relation to siblings. This concurs with Madge and Willmott (2007), who report that fairness is important for children in decision-making in their family, especially in relation to siblings. Typical comments from parents in the present study were:

> '... need to be fair. When you tell them you will do something, you need to follow-through.' [Parents' Advisory Group, Cork]

> 'He [son] understands not everybody has the same view of it, but he understands the same rules apply to everybody and that sense of fairness, and this is how it works.' [Parent, Sligo]

> 'Need to be succinct, to explain boundaries, and not over-explain. [My] son says that he hears "blah, blah, blah".' [Parents' Advisory Group, Cork]

Where their decisions were not 'fair', parents were aware of and concerned about it:

> 'Even though I don't think it is fair on the 8-year-old because she has to go to bed with the 4-year-old, but she doesn't really seem to mind that.' [Parent, Sligo]

Trust and dependability

Building trust with parents and 'building a track record' of dependability was seen by the young people in the study as a really important facilitator of their participation:

> 'If your parents say they will let you out, then they'll actually let you out rather than just say it as a ploy to calm you down. It has to work both ways.' [Youth café, Sligo]

> 'Before, I was barely let out. But now I'm let go to more places because my mam and dad trust me that I am safe, because I'm with the same friend every day and I'm not with a big gang or anything.' [Youth project, Cork]

The young people reported that their mobile phones enabled them to communicate with their parents and encouraged responsibility: 'I didn't have a phone when I was younger. But now I have a phone so she [mother] can keep in contact with me. So phones are handy' [Youth project, Cork].

4.6 Barriers to participation in the home

Young age and lack of parental trust were highlighted as significant barriers in young people's participation and decision-making at home, particularly with the young people (aged 12-17) in this research. Parents, and adults generally, not listening to children and young people and tokenism were perceived as obstacles to their effective participation at home. Practical barriers, such as restrictions around transport, were also identified as impinging negatively on children and young people's experience of participation and voice at home.

Age and maturity

There was a general sense among the children and young people that they can have opinions about what is right for them. Young people (aged 12-17) suggested that decision-making on concrete issues and issues that relate directly to their own experiences was appropriate for children. However, adults' views on age and capacity was perceived as a barrier to their participation.

> 'It's harder to listen to younger ones though, because they're so small and young. Nobody really listens to them.' [Youth café, Sligo]

> '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, Dublin]

Lack of parental trust

Trust was seen as an important indicator of parents' willingness to give young people more freedom in decision-making. While the young people felt trusted by their parents, they were unanimous that low levels of trust would present a major barrier to their voice and participation on issues of importance to them at home. The following exchange between some young people in a youth café in Sligo illustrates their frustration with parents' lack of trust in them:

Young person 1: 'I think it [trust] is either there or it's not. There's some people whose parents are like "Oh, you're never going out".'

Young person 2: 'They're just terrified of everything. Like, it's either there from the start … It doesn't change that much over time.'

Young person 3: 'It's better if you have parents not let you do what you want, but just like, now and again …'

Young person 4: 'Let you have your freedom and that they're OK with it. Not to be just "No" to everything.'

Young person 5: 'And if you're going to your friend's house, they're not ringing you 24/7.'

Young person 6: '[Parents are] worried all the time.'

Young person 2: 'If they trust you, you're more likely to be honest with them.'

Balancing nurturance and self-determination poses a dilemma for parents (Cherney, 2010). The parent participants reported that the greatest barrier to their children's participation remained the anxieties and stresses of parenting in a rapidly changing context. They explained that these pressures sometimes steer them towards a protective nurturing stance at the expense of promoting autonomy in their children. Some parents perceive a need to 'overprotect' because they assume their children are unable to protect themselves. Unanimously, the parent participants viewed their children's safety as a priority and identified a number of common threats (Ungar, 2009), including cyberbullying, inappropriate TV/DVD viewing, and undesirable friends:

'Their safety, yes, is very important.' [Parent, Cork]

'Who they are with, who they hang around with and what time they will be back, yes.' [Parent, Cork]

'Well, obviously, the whole safety thing would be paramount, mentally and physically.' [Parent, Sligo]

'I felt from an early age I didn't want her seeing grown-up [TV] programmes.' [Parent, Sligo]

'It is the same with CDs – you have to be careful.' [Parent, Sligo]

Poor listening

Children and young people described their experiences of parents not listening to them and saw this as a barrier to their participation at home. Similarly, Kirby *et al* (2003) reported that children become frustrated when they were not listened to by adults, including parents and teachers.

'Adults don't listen … So, if you're talking about something that happens on TV, they're like, "Mmm" [not listening].' [Second-level school, Dublin]

'My dad never listens - he always says "Talk to me later. Tell me about it later".' [Primary school, Cork]

'Dad works too much and he says "I will listen to you later", but he just never listens.' [Primary school, Cork]

Parental tokenism

Some children and young people reported experiencing cursory interest and responses on issues that were important to them from their parents. Subsequently, they did not expect their decisions would be acted upon. Some gave examples of participation being tokenistic or where children are simply informed of parents' decisions. Young people expressed frustration at parents not explaining the rationale for decisions made:

'We talk about stuff and then they tell me what they're going to do and ask me what I think.' [Youth club, Dublin]

'What time you have to come in at, but without giving a proper explanation.' [Second-level school, Dublin]

'Capacity' of the family

The capacity of families was also considered important to encouraging participation outside the home by community stakeholders interviewed.

'The children with the more problematic backgrounds – there would be incidents of drugs, alcohol, sexual and physical abuse going on – some of them who would be here are less likely to ever talk. So they are not going to involve themselves in a decision because they think the whole modus operandi is to keep your head down and your mouth shut, and you are not getting that belt or you are not causing those around you to be belting and hitting each other.' [Youth Worker 3]

It was also felt that children and young people from middle-class homes may not be listened to by busy parents who subsequently made decisions on their behalf for reasons of expediency. This endorses findings from the young people that some parents were reluctant to allow their children to make decisions for themselves.

'Could it be that because of the very fact that it *is* a middle-class area, maybe two parents working, not there most of the time? So decisions have been made for expedience … "OK, I have to go to work. You have to go to work. So they have to go to, say, Nana's … Be home at 6. I will bring you to such and such". Pack their bags, make sure everything is done for them.' [Voluntary Youth Worker 3]

4.7 Parenting style

Parenting style generally shaped the degree of parental listening, the type of decisions their children participated in and how decisions were explained to children. Findings from the present study concur with those from other research done in Ireland on parenting styles (Halpenny *et al*, 2010), which found that just over one-third of parent respondents felt that involvement of children in decision-making was very important, and Norwegian research (Bjerke, 2011, p. 51), which found that parents '*did not view involving their children in decision-making as a key priority in their parenting*'. While the home was seen by children and young people in the present study to be a place of negotiation, it was also acknowledged by them that parents have greater influence on decision-making outcomes.

Some of the parent participants did not promote participation in family decision-making and expected to exercise absolute authority in relation to certain issues. For example, they were in no doubt that they alone would make necessary medical/health decisions, but stated that they endeavour to explain their decisions to their children.

'There is no argument, like. If I say no, it is no.' [Parent, Cork]

'I like to make a lot of the decisions.' [Parent, Cork]

'Sometimes you have to say, "Because I am a parent and I say so".' [Parent, Cork]

'Because one thing he [son] never gets a say on either is any medical decisions. He can't make those decisions for himself. He understands that. There are certain things he just can't.' [Parent, Sligo]

'Certain things are not up for debate, but you have to explain that. Let him have a say, but negotiate how you come to the decision.' [Parent, Sligo]

There was a view that children are not ready to make decisions and also concern about the evaluative skills that making choices required.

'They think they are ready, but they are not. I think you do have to decide.' [Parent, Cork]

'When you ask them, they don't know what they want. They are disappointed sometimes when they have too many choices.' [Parents' Advisory Group, Cork]

'Too many choices is overwhelming.' [Parents' Advisory Group, Cork]

However, some parents did discuss more responsive styles of engagement.

'A sense of belonging is important for children. Space is huge, even letting them choose which TV programmes to watch and not what their younger brother wants.' [Parents' Advisory Group, Cork]

'... a voice and let then make decisions.' [Parents' Advisory Group, Cork]

'Generally, [we] talk and decide together, unless I feel very strongly.' [Parent, Dublin]

'We only have one child and she is involved in all decisions. If you have lots of kids, are they as involved?' [Parents' Advisory Group, Cork]

Responsive parenting has been identified as central to an authoritative parenting style, considered optimal to achieving the most positive developmental outcomes (Nixon, 2012). This style of parenting combines firm demands for appropriate behaviour with warmth and responsiveness (Maccoby and Martin, 1983). In the *Growing Up in Ireland* (2012b) study, parents scored higher on all aspects of authoritative parenting, compared with authoritarian parenting; however, parents also scored higher on warmth and involvement, induction and reasoning than on democratic participation. Responsive parenting that utilises explanatory feedback is central to children and young people's participation in decision-making (Davey *et al*, 2010a).

Influences on parenting style

Experiences in their own childhoods, their stage of parenting, energy levels and societal expectations appeared to influence the parenting style adopted by parents interviewed in this study. Reflecting on memories of their own childhoods and even those of rearing their older children, the parent participants made comparisons between the more authoritarian parenting style of those times and their own contemporary parenting style. Memories of having 'no voice' during their own childhoods – being 'seen and not heard' – were clear and appeared to have an influence on their parenting decisions and interactions with their own children.

'It was totally different. We were seen and not heard. The difference is unreal. The younger people feel now that they have a say. I think when I was a child and even my older children (who are now in their 30s) didn't have a say. Now they are very strong.' [Parent, Dublin]

'I think they are very strong in what they want and they would give opinions. Even at the moment, I am changing the kitchen and my daughter said to me "You never asked me if I liked the changes". Things like that, that wouldn't have been discussed before.' [Parent, Dublin]

'The different experiences that I had in my own life stemmed from the fact that I didn't have a voice and that I couldn't say "No" for a long number of years. It didn't work out well for me.' [Parent, Sligo]

'I think so much of it is from how you were brought up yourself. Some of the old-fashioned stuff was good. We weren't listened to as children and I don't think I was forward either.' [Parent, Cork]

'The way you were reared yourself.' [Parent, Sligo]

'We let them choose their own clothes because I never had a choice when I was younger.' [Parents' Advisory Group Cork]

'I let my daughter choose because I never had choice either and it caused huge rows with my parents.' [Parents' Advisory Group Cork]

Parents also reported sibling competition and described how this reduced control and energy levels. There was reference to a relaxation of parental boundary-setting for younger children compared to the oldest child.

'I have a big age gap with my children (16 years) and I see the difference. My style of parenting has totally changed.' [Parent, Dublin]

'Sometimes my eldest would say he wishes he wasn't the eldest. Like, my youngest son gets away with a little bit more than my eldest did at that age.' [Parent, Dublin]

'He wants a phone. His other siblings have them – they are older.' [Parents' Advisory Group Cork]

There was reference to the energy levels that parenting within a participative negotiating family environment requires, including the ordinary repeated routines: 'When you have your first, you have more control and more energy' [Parent, Dublin] and 'I think when I was younger, I had more energy to have the disagreement with my children. Now I am inclined to say, "Go on, go away from me" ' [Parent, Dublin].

The parents were emphatic in their view that children and young people have never had so much voice in the home. They explained this as the product of changing childhood expectations combined with parental encouragement of their children to participate in domestic decision-making. Many felt this was child-initiated and in some cases complained of attitudes of cheekiness and defiance in children and young people, as reflected in this comment from one parent: 'I need a bit of respect' [Parent, Sligo]. Adolescents' efforts to construct an expanded personal sphere of decision-making, often in the face of parental reluctance or opposition, is noted in the literature (Ruck *et al*, 1998; Helwig, 2006; Cherney, 2010). Comments from other parents in the present study included:

> 'That is not a discussion. That is a war!' [Parent, Cork]
>
> 'They are very forward and … they wouldn't see it was being cheeky. But we would see it that way.' [Parent, Dublin]
>
> 'I see it with my daughter more than my sons. If she doesn't get her own way, she would put it up to you and I wouldn't do that when I was younger.' [Parent, Sligo]
>
> 'Keep on and on and on. He [son] would get his point across anyway because he would just keep repeating it.' [Parent, Cork]
>
> 'I think what I would see is that he [son] would become more argumentative, but he certainly doesn't step down … He would demand to be heard, which is alright.' [Parent, Sligo]
>
> 'Children are being listened to – [if you don't, they say] "I'm ringing Childline on you"!' [Parents' Advisory Group Cork]

Questions of fulfilling strongly held ideals of 'good enough', fair and consistent parenting were raised in the discussions with parents. They talked about a considerable investment of emotional labour in their parenting, including having to deal with recurrent feelings of guilt: 'Guilt follows you as a parent' [Parents' Advisory Group Cork]. The worry of uncertainty and the pressure to be vigilant and protect their children from high-risk behaviours were evident, underlining the continual unrelenting nature of demands placed on them in supporting their children.

> 'You go out to the chipper and there are young ones who are about 14, 15, outside, drinking outside on the windows and up trying to chat up old guys and that is not good enough.' [Parent, Sligo]
>
> 'They have access to too much information too early. You hear them now having access to porn at 12 years old.' [Parent, Dublin]
>
> 'When I worked in a youth club, I couldn't believe the age they were talking about sex and really knew loads.' [Parent, Dublin]
>
> 'A lot of the time, they haven't a clue what it's all about.' [Parent, Dublin]

In seeking to protect their children, the parents described comprehensive awareness and monitoring of their children's everyday activities, including the influence of friends, television and use of the Internet:

> 'I have one computer in the centre of the house so that I could monitor them … I felt they just can't stop it.' [Parents' Advisory Group Cork]
>
> 'In 6th year, the ones who had joined from Transition year were older and more advanced [than] him, so I saw changes. For a while he was into gambling and betting and I said "Where did you learn that?" 'cause we didn't do that.' [Parent, Dublin]

Overall, the parent participants presented themselves as the gatekeepers of the nature and extent of their children's decision-making through clear boundary-setting. Perhaps mindful of their own childhood experiences, they explained this in terms of their children's best interests:

'It's about boundaries in any setting. Like in the home, if they know there are boundaries it makes them feel that it is easier to say no to something because they can say "Oh no, I wouldn't be allowed" and blame me for it because they know it wouldn't be acceptable, but it gives them a cushion, you know.' [Parent, Sligo]

'Boundaries are good for kids, and routine.' [Parent, Sligo]

4.8 Children and young people's suggestions

The children and young people participants made suggestions on how to improve participation in the home, primarily referring to the need for supportive, engaged parents who foster their children's confidence and skills of self-determination through enabling participation in decision-making in the home. Among the suggestions for improvements were:

- **Definite spaces for discussion** were seen as important. For example: 'A meeting, like every week, where you can talk about what happens. I mean, some days, we're all too busy' [Second-level school, Cork]. Data from other studies also suggest holding family meetings where parental attention was undivided (Davey *et al*, 2010a).
- **Parents actively listening** was seen as central to meaningful participation in the home. For example: 'Ask them [children] all about school. Ask them if things are good. If they say "yes", it's the way they say "yes" as well … it's the way you listen to them' [Youth club, Sligo].
- **Explanation of adults' decisions.** Young people did not have an expectation that their decisions would always be acted upon, but rather spoke about the importance of adults explaining decisions to them. For example: 'Kids should have a say, but adults would have the final decisions – but to explain their decisions' [Second-level school, Dublin] and 'Make sure young people are happy with decisions that are made. Make sure there's a balance' [Second-level school, Dublin].

4.9 Summary

The home was experienced by children and young people as the most facilitative setting of their voice and participation out of the three spheres explored in this research (home, school and community). The key areas of decision-making included consumption activities, leisure and friends. There was evidence to suggest that children and young people were happy, for the most part, with their level of participation in family decision-making and personal autonomy. While the children wanted to have a say in family decision-making, they did not necessarily expect (or want) to make the decisions themselves. However, they did express the desire for more say on issues that directly affect them, such as bedtime and playtime.

Teenagers have greater autonomy and independence than younger children. However, both younger and older children felt it was legitimate for parents to have greater influence over certain issues, such as the time they must be home at night and who their friends are.

Young age, lack of parental trust and tokenism were identified as barriers to participation in decision-making by the children and young people. Key enablers included spaces for discussion, respectful and trusting family relationships, growing levels of independence with age, and parents who listen and explain their decision-making.

Community stakeholders felt that the confidence and capacity of children to make decisions is, to a large extent, 'parent-driven'. Fostering participation in the home was attributed to enhancing the ability of children and young people to participate in other settings.

Parents participating in the study were genuinely engaged in trying to listen to their children's views and to involve them in decision-making in the home. There was anxiety about the risk presented by social media and a desire to protect their children from exposure to negative aspects of Internet use. Furthermore, it was their own childhood experiences that influenced and motivated their own parenting style. Ultimately, the parents (mothers in particular) indicated that they generally had the final say in decision-making in the home.

5. Findings: Participation in school

5.1 Introduction

Since school is one of the first social environments a child experiences outside of the family, it is vital that school life promotes understanding and respect for democratic values. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009, para. 8) has declared that the child's right to education must be provided in such a way that it '*respects the inherent dignity of the child and enables the child to express his or her views freely in accordance with Article 12(1) and to participate in school life*'. As acknowledged by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (*ibid*, para. 107), '*The participation of children in school life, the creation of school communities and student councils, peer education and peer counselling, and the involvement of children in school disciplinary proceedings should be promoted as part of the process of learning and experiencing the realization of rights*'.

There has been a movement towards greater involvement of pupils in decisions that affect them in schools and this has gained its legitimacy through the UNCRC (Whitehead and Clough, 2004, pp. 216-17). However, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has noted with concern that, generally, authoritarianism continues in schools and classrooms across the world. Ireland has been subject to much criticism from the UN Committee concerning the lack of a space for children to express themselves within the school environment. While in recent times Ireland has introduced some formal mechanisms for child participation in school, such as through student councils at second level, the reality of how school children are heard on a daily basis outside these structures in school has remained a largely undocumented matter.

The present research not only aimed to gain an insight into the extent to which children and young people feel their right to be heard and to be active participants is currently respected in the school environment, but also sought to compare this experiential reality with the views and perspectives of parents, school principals and teachers on the issue.

5.2 Views on children and young people's participation

A view of the school as a place where they have something to say was shared by only some of the children and young people in this research. However, overall, it seems that children and young people feel they are not recognised as valuable partners and there seems to be little focus on reaching shared decisions in the school context. Ideas of participation and consensus are present in the way the school democracy is formally organised, but they seem to be far from the reality experienced by students involved in this research. The data confirm previous findings (such as Børhaug, 2006) that the core activities of the school are not much discussed with pupils and that pupils have very limited influence over their day-to-day activities when it comes to questions about management and rules, or the teaching and education processes.

In response to direct questions about their participation, some answered that they do decide 'a bit', especially during PE (physical education), or for older students, specific classes such as SPHE. Younger students said that they discuss projects or what DVD to watch on a rainy day when they cannot play outside in the schoolyard. Any involvement, whether meaningful or not, seemed to be highly appreciated by the children and young people.

There were some examples of instances where children and young people did have an opportunity to be heard, as illustrated in the following quotes:

'Yes we do. If we are out playing, they [teachers] do not tell us what to do.' [Primary school, Sligo]

'We get to choose what books we read.' [Primary school, Sligo]

'We like the comment box – we get to have a say in what happens, and anonymously.' [Primary school, Sligo]

'In the computer room – you get to pick what kinds of things you do. We go once a week.' [Primary school, Cork]

'In your own classroom – what books we want to read and bring home.' [Primary school, Cork]

'PE [physical education]. We get to decide what sports we play. We get to pick what order we do games in – like first of all, we do basketball.' [Primary school, Cork]

We have votes sometimes. Like, if it's a rainy day we have votes to see what TV we watch.' [Primary school, Cork]

'We get our lunch from the school. We have lunch orders and we have to say what we want for lunch.' [Primary school, Cork]

'Our teacher bought us a goldfish and we got to pick the name. The people who won was "Goldie" because he was a goldfish.' [Primary school, Cork]

Significantly, there were many more examples where children and young people were restricted and had no voice in issues of importance to them in school. For example:

'We don't really get a say at all.' [Second-level school, Dublin]

'We never do [make decisions]. Well, we kind of do – like a teacher might say, "Would you prefer to be good for the rest of the day or go to the principal's office now?" ' [Primary school, Cork]

'The teachers, principal and secretary make most of the decisions.' [Primary school, Dublin]

'The teachers have it all worked out before. They have stuff planned for us because we are in 3rd year and have exams. It's all planned out. Whereas in 1st or 2nd year, it was like "We need to do this today, but maybe we could do something fun like watch a movie".' [Second-level school, Cork]

'We don't get to decide on how much homework we get.' [Primary school, Dublin]

'No, teachers just give you what they want and we just do it. But some teachers are really nice and they don't give you loads of homework, so you won't be home all night doing it.' [Second-level school, Cork]

Various alternative meanings emerged from the interviews with school principals and teachers in response to questions concerning whether or not the school has an atmosphere that supports child participation.

'It does. We have a student council and they [pupils] are very involved in the student council, in the development of all the plans and policies of the school. The students would be addressed via the council and target groups and focus groups as well within the school would also be addressed. So they are very involved and would have a huge input in policy, decision-making and, of course, via the Guidance Counsellor in the guidance plan and policies.' [Guidance Counsellor, Secondary school, Dublin]

A principal of a secondary school asserted that:

'There's a number of areas where they make decisions themselves … They also make decisions in relation to what subjects they will take in 1st year … I would always meet with, for instance, the school council [SC] when a new school policy is being put in place. So they would have a say over that. The SC is very active in the school. They would often come to me with requests to do various things in the school. Things like, you know, they wanted the heating to be ramped up a bit in the cafeteria. So we looked after that and brought heaters in and so on. They would constantly come to me. Like the group now who are doing the Green school, they would make the announcements themselves over the intercom system and they would make decisions on how the programme or the project was run in consultation with the teacher who was helping them … So, I think in lots of cases they get an opportunity to … and they wouldn't even be aware of it sometimes.' [Principal, Secondary school, Cork]

While the views above from two school personnel are only a snapshot of the views of some teachers in the country concerning what child participation in school means for them, it is nonetheless interesting that both made reference to the more formal structures in existence. Less structured decision-making processes was not something that received much attention in general.

The parent participants seemed to have limited knowledge of their children's school experience. While they confirmed that their children spoke to them about school, they were unable to recount actual examples of participation in decision-making at school.

> 'I don't know what they are like in school. I asked my daughter the other day if she asked questions in school and she said "Of course I do".' [Parent, Dublin]
>
> 'You don't know how they are getting on in school, you know, if they are having problems there.' [Parent, Cork]

For some parents, disconnection from their children's school experiences was heightened by inaction on the part of the teachers. Conversely, other parents depicted an educative partnership between teachers and parents:

> 'She went into 1st year and I didn't sign that homework journal for a month and there was nothing that came back to me and that freaks me out then because I would say they are asking you to do something. But if you don't do it, they are not coming back saying it to you.' [Parent, Cork]
>
> 'Most of the education done in the schools is done in unison with the parents. They send information home to the parents and then you do it together.' [Parent, Sligo]

There was overall agreement among parents that their children were generally not engaged in any decision-making at school that they could expressly identify. On the question of whether their children should have more say at school, the parent participants were divided:

> 'I wouldn't say they [students] have a say in school tours.' [Parent, Dublin]
>
> 'I would say the teachers decide.' [Parent, Dublin]
>
> 'If they all made decisions, then they would have too much of a say.' [Parent, Dublin]
>
> 'I don't think they have enough say in school.' [Parent, Dublin]

5.3 Student participation in schools

Article 12(1) of the UNCRC requires that children and young people be given meaningful opportunities to participate in formal and informal decision-making processes that take place within the school environment. Indeed, legislation in Ireland makes specific reference to the rights of children to have involvement in educational matters: Section 27(2) of the Education Act 1998 asserts that schools '*shall facilitate the involvement of students in the operation of the school, having regard to the age and experience of the students, in association with their parents and teachers.*'

The inclusion of the voices of children and young people in decision-making processes affecting them in school can take place within formal structures (such as school councils) as well as in an unstructured manner on a day-to-day basis. While the unstructured day-to-day realities of children's experiences in schools were the main focus of this research, inevitably information emerged concerning the effectiveness of the formal structures as an effective channel for student voice in the school sphere. Both are considered below.

Harris (2009, p. 338) points out that the effective implementation of Article 12 of the UNCRC in school at domestic level requires integration of its provisions at three distinct levels. These are:

- at individual level – when decisions concerning a school child are being made;
- at school policy level – when policy is being formulated by the school (e.g. discipline and behaviour);
- at national level – when Government is drafting relevant laws and policies.

Structured spaces for participation

As acknowledged by Lundy (2007), some States in their reports to the UNCRC Committee place a great deal of emphasis on mechanisms for ensuring that children are heard in education. These mechanisms include student councils, school rules and policies, and evaluations and surveys.

Student councils

In accordance with the Education Act 1998, '*students of a post-primary school may establish a student council*' and the principal, under the direction of the school board and in consultation with teachers and parents as well as the students (in accordance with their age and maturity), shall set objectives for the school and monitor the achievement of those objectives (Sections 27(3) and 23(2)(d)). While facilitating the involvement of children in school is obligatory, it is noteworthy that the provisions concerning the establishment of the council and the inclusion of children ('students') in terms of setting objectives of the school are of a discretionary nature as denoted by the wording of the relevant sections.

The issues addressed by school councils as indicated in the present research varied to a great extent. For example, the principals of two secondary schools commented:

> 'They [student council] might note that they would like something stopped in the canteen or that there are some of the locks on the bathroom doors broken or it can be general things. It can be anything really, but they are always addressed. If it is something that is fixable, it is fixed straight away. In relation to canteen or other teachers or subjects or whatever … issues are always addressed and it is fed back to them at the next meeting. Normally, they will see the changes anyway happen even before that. Now it is not always – sometimes you would get the odd request that you might think "Oops, I don't know. We might have to think about that one", but they will always be told.' [Principal, Secondary school, Sligo]

> 'In relation to the school uniform, we consult. We have a student council, as you may be aware, and we changed the school uniform for our Senior Cycle probably about 3 or 4 years ago and we consulted the student council on that. So we got samples from the company and showed them to the students and asked them what they thought – would they like a change or would they prefer to keep it as it is, and at the time they were in favour. Now they are a representative body, obviously, of the students so they made a decision themselves, I suppose. The support there for them was a welcome change. We agreed to that.' [Principal, Secondary school, Dublin]

In the context of this research, formal structures, such as the student council, were recognised by only some of the children and young people as facilitating participation in the school context, particularly by those who did not have access to them. While most children and young people are aware of the formal opportunities for participation that exist in schools, not all agree that they are beneficial to students. The more formal space of the student council was recognised, in particular the importance of having both a Junior and a Senior Council.

> 'In my school, we have a council. 5th and 6th class have pupils who go around the school and take suggestions from a box – and they organise something like a non-uniform day.' [Youth club, Dublin]

> 'I think they should have a Junior and a Senior Council because if there is no Junior Council, there is no one for the 1st years to talk to. A girl from Comhairle na nÓg came in a few weeks ago and asked if we had a Junior Council and asked us to set one up, but nothing was done about it.' [Second-level school, Cork]

Those children in schools where a student council did *not* exist noted its importance as a formal participatory structure for children. However, in those schools where a student council was in place, many young people felt that it was not a space where important decisions were made and did not offer a real opportunity for expression of their views. Some young people

questioned the representativeness of the student council and many expressed frustration at the lack of communication about decisions made at council and the lack of power on the part of the council to make any real changes in relation to how their school operates. Indeed, there was a clear disconnect between students' perceptions of their influence on decision-making in school and their views concerning the benefits of participation more generally. The latter views echo those found in other research. Percy-Smith (2010), for example, found that while student councils may address issues of importance to children (such as playground improvements or food served in the canteen), many factors that influence a child's experience of school are not likely to get addressed at a student council.

Tisdall *et al* (2009b) comment that school councils and other youth forums have garnered much criticism for *'advantaging the already advantaged, for being dominated by articulate middle-class children and young people and for excluding the more marginalised children and young people'*. Tisdall and Punch (2012) urge caution in this, citing Prout (2005) who encourages childhood studies to move beyond polarisation of ideas, for example, creating the dogma that formal and technocratic forms [of participation] are bad and that less formal approaches are all good. Nonetheless, Smith (2007) cites a number of studies indicating that young people had little faith in the effectiveness of such '*democratic bodies*' as school councils. Davey *et al* (2010a) cite research on the need for greater representation of children with diverse interests on school councils and for younger children to be involved in decision-making processes.

In the present study, there was an overall sense of disenchantment with student councils among the young people:

> '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]
>
> 'Anyone can run for the student council. They don't really do much and we don't really talk to them.' [Second-level school, Dublin]
>
> 'Only two people talking for 100 people – 2 reps per year. We never really get told about what decisions are being made. We don't get told much about it, only in some classes. 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]

In contrast with the less-than-positive feedback from the young people, the school principals and teachers interviewed for the study consistently referred to the student council as an effective means of facilitating the participation of children and young people in the running of the school. The following example, given by a principal from a secondary school in Sligo, is typical of how schools implement their student council requirements:

> 'We have two students, a boy and a girl, from every year on the student council. So that would be 12 in total from 1st year, including Transition year right up to Leaving Cert … [The student council] is facilitated by one of our teachers and she would meet with them on a fortnightly basis usually, if possible. Sometimes it might slip, maybe to a week later, but it is an active student council which is, I suppose, the most important thing … Sometimes I would sit in if I have time or I am around. In cases where I am not, she [the teacher] will come to me afterwards with the minutes of the meeting and go through them with me, and if there are any issues that the students wish to be brought up with me, that is what she does and they are always addressed.' [Principal, Secondary school, Sligo]

In the absence of student councils in the primary schools investigated in the study, the importance of having some type of formal structure was recognised by principals and teachers. Interestingly, the principal of one primary school in Cork, while admitting no such structure existed in his own school, acknowledged that structures are very important in terms of ensuring child participation in practice in school. He pointed out that:

> 'I think, to be fair, it can't be haphazard. There have to be structures, but unfortunately we don't tick that box because it's not very structured in the school. But it would have to be a structured approach, like a time allocated, that everyone would have their say, regardless of age, disability, etc. But you'd want to be very specific and have it very structured … It should apply more in primary school … actually you've caught me because of our own setup. But … we should have it in some form, obviously, I think, in the school.' [Principal, Primary school, Cork]

Similarly, in a school in another part of the country, it was pointed out that:

> 'There is no formal structure. I think a lot of it goes on, but it is not formalised.' [Principal, Primary school, Sligo]

This was clearly a common issue among primary schools. When asked about structures for participation other than student councils, one principal replied:

> 'No, there is not. I would think, obviously, in the classroom situation the teachers are constantly listening to what they [students] are saying. But in terms of community based [participation in the school], there is not much of that. Obviously, there is a Parents' Association and we speak to those, but … I would say they are not particularly involved in the curricular areas. Nor has there been a demand for it, funnily enough.' [Principal, Primary school, Dublin]

While there were occasional comments demonstrating parental awareness of student and 'green' councils, there was no indication that the parent participants had expectations for these structures in relation to their children's overall educational experience. They were only able to attribute small peripheral achievements to the student councils and their involvement in debating courses of action on only the most minor issues of school life. Overall, the parent participants had little idea of how their children engaged with student councils. For example:

> 'My daughter was elected onto the school council … and my son was on it. They meet with teachers and principal on a regular basis. She is happy to be on it … but not very sure what she does on it.' [Parents' Advisory Group, Cork]

> 'The student council also helped to hold the Christmas fundraiser raffle and help out with the bazaar. They managed to get soap provided for the boys' bathrooms and heating for the prefabs. They also had a debate about whether vending machines would be a good idea.' [Parents' Advisory Group, Cork]

School rules and policies

UNICEF has identified a litany of ways in which children can contribute to decision-making at school, such as in the development of the curriculum, teaching methods and school codes of behaviour, as well as classroom design (Lansdown, 2005). The report *State of the Nation's Children: Ireland 2012* noted an overall increase in the number of children in Ireland aged 10-17 who participated in the drafting of the school rules. In fact, over a period of 4 years, the percentage of children involved in this process has increased 10 percentage points – from 22.5% in 2006 to 32.6% in 2010 (DCYA, 2012b, p. 114).

There was some reference in the present study, albeit limited, to student input into school policies, class rules and school guidance plans. According to school principals and teachers, input from children and young people in relation to school policies appeared more likely in secondary schools:

> 'They are very involved and they have a huge input in policy, decision-making and, of course, via the Guidance Counsellor and the guidance plans and policies.' [Teacher, Secondary school, Dublin]

> 'So what I would always do is tell the students, "You tell me …" Like, I would give them a copy of the policy first and they would read it and then discuss it inside in a meeting and if they have recommendations to make and I feel that they're not inappropriate … I would always make changes. Absolutely. They suggested, for instance, that we should try and bring in more healthy food into the cafeteria. I've no problem with

> that. And they made those changes over there themselves. They felt that the hall, the cafeteria, was cold and we made those changes. So we're getting there and any sort of request that is being made to me by the student council has always been acceded to. Because, I think at the end of the day, from my experience of being involved in youth work, if you give people a sense of say and then … nothing's happening, well then they won't bother. It's crucially important that they feel their voice is being heard. And that's our focus here. To make sure that's done.' [Principal, Secondary school, Cork]

For some primary school children, input into class rules was a common practice according to some educators:

> 'The children are all involved in making and compiling the class rules, for example. I suppose they made them up themselves, with my guidance … They all actually agreed to them and signed to them and so I suppose if there was a problem … I would refer back to the rules and generally they do conform.' [Teacher, Primary school, Sligo]

There were also claims made concerning young people's input into school guidance plans at secondary level:

> 'The development of the school guidance plan. Obviously, we have a guidance plan within the school and that has to be developed and would be reviewed on a regular basis. A direct example would be with my 6th years, which is quite an important year for career options and choices for third level. In May, which will be coming up shortly, I would give them all a questionnaire and a survey to fill out on how they felt the year went, future improvements in guidance, what they think they learned and so on, and suggestions for future students.' [Teacher, Secondary school, Dublin]

However in primary schools, this seemed even less likely:

> 'Should they be consulted on school uniforms? They would probably say "Yes", they would like to have a choice. I would be going "No". Would they be consulted? No, not really.' [Principal, Primary school, Sligo]

The lack of participation by children in the formulation of school policies is similarly evidenced in the HBSC Survey 2006 (Nic Gabhainn *et al*, 2007), which measured the percentage of children aged 9-17 who report students at their school participate in making the school rules. Drawing international comparisons with the 7 countries and regions that use this HBSC item, it found that 24.9% of Irish children reported that students at their school participate in making the school rules, which is lower than the HBSC average of 33.8% and ranks Irish children 7th (bottom of the scale).

While the Research Team in the present study saw evidence of 'Golden Rules' in many of the primary schools visited and were informed by school personnel that these are developed with the children, none of the children interviewed referred to these when asked for examples of participative processes in their school. Lack of consultation and participation on rules relating to behaviour and discipline was something that young people in this research were particularly concerned about (*see Section 5.5 for further discussion*). Munn *et al* (2000, p. 66) cite a range of studies that show the benefits accruing from pupil participation in '*the negotiation of rules, rewards and sanctions*', such as the sense of ownership, the promotion of citizenship and democratic values, and the contribution to '*a sense of fairness and justice about school rules*'.

Evaluations and surveys

One school principal mentioned the students' role in the school self-evaluation process:

> 'They would be consulted. Maybe an example would be – we are working at the moment on literacy and numeracy paths. The ones we have chosen this year to do and are focusing on is numeracy. As part of that, children will have been surveyed … so they are kind of asked for their opinion, you know, on that. Each of those would be given

a survey to complete and those surveys that come back are then collated. They were all put together electronically … and those results were all sent to the classrooms and the children spoke … As part of the school self-evaluation now, you are asked to take into consideration the views of parents and, indeed, the views of the children. So we have taken the views of children into consideration and we are presently surveying parents.' [Principal, Primary school, Dublin]

Many of the children and young people interviewed referred to surveys as an effective means of gathering student opinion and preferences. This is interesting in the sense that it may offer young people anonymity and thus make it easier for them to voice their views in a school context.

'Young people's views can be listened to doing surveys to see what students want, e.g. food in cafeteria. Should do surveys.' [Second-level school, Sligo]

When asked about the extent to which children and young people participate in school, some schools focused on the general ethos of the school.

'We try to teach them respect and that they can have a voice, but also that there is help here for them as well if they need it. So we have an extensive pastoral care policy in place and at assembly and at information evenings and so on, or even when I am addressing them as class groups. We would always drive that point home, you know, if they need to speak to anybody that there is help. There is the Chaplain, there is the Guidance Counsellor, the Year heads, the tutors, the deputy, myself or any teacher that they feel comfortable with. Because we want them to be essentially happy – if they are not happy when they come in the doors in the morning, everything else is really a futile exercise … to be happy, they need to be comfortable and feel safe and that is what the parents of our kids want anyway.' [Principal, Secondary school, Sligo]

'I think that the ethos here is good. We are a kind of Christian community if you like and we do appreciate everybody's opinion and that is what we try to get through to the students – that every opinion is valid.' [Principal, Second-level school, Sligo]

Other schools referred to once-off events where children would contribute their views. For example, preparation in advance of the school play was one type of event that facilitated the inclusion of the views of children and all involved. It seems that in most settings (at secondary school level as well as at primary school level) it was a positive experience, a testament to the benefits of child participation.

'What do they decide – the school play, what they are going to do. Obviously class rules are the obvious one. They will kind of decide what they want to do. Well, they are given a choice – Will we do a play or would we do a song or a poem? We will do a play. Their talent day is completely dictated by them.' [Principal, Primary school, Sligo]

'The one that jumps out at me is, we put on a Christmas play. The whole school is involved. They have a huge role in decisions about what they want to do and how they want to do it (what dance routines, etc), so it's very much a whole-school approach. Every class then decides what part they will do and they all can choose, you know, and it's our flagship. It's a big production – this year it will be 'Grease' … The outcome of that is a fantastic experience for everyone who is involved. They love it. They have ownership of it, and then they put it on DVD and they sell it. It's a very practical example of getting the children to create something within the school. The school gardens too – we have our own allotments where the children have a say in what they want to grow.' [Principal, Primary school, Cork]

Non-structured participation spaces

While the past decade has seen significant developments in children and young people'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 (Burke, 2010; Aston and Lambert, 2010). It appears that children in educational settings are often not allowed to participate in, to quote James (2004, p. 25), '*even quite elementary decision-making about the shape and structure of their everyday lives*'. In the present research, there was a clear sense from both children and young people of having little voice in the school context, epitomised by the following statement from one child: 'We don't get to make decisions in school' [Primary school, Sligo].

In the absence of providing children and young people with formal structures to contribute to decision-making processes in schools, some principals and teachers were at pains to point out that they do listen to children on a daily basis. As one principal pointed out:

> 'There is a lot of informal chat in all of the rooms, so I am beginning to think yes, we do take the ideas and we chat about them in general and maybe go back then and take them to the staff. We take a lot of what they say on board, but I suppose it is not formalised. We would say, "Listen, we are thinking about what you said", but we won't necessarily have a very formal arrangement.' [Principal, Primary school, Sligo]

For the most part, where participation did occur, it occurred by default and was informal in nature:

> 'I suppose there are no formal structures where children can participate, but the door is always open … There's an open door policy, you know. They're always welcome to come in and discuss, and they know that, and they're always encouraged to come up and talk about any difficulties they have.' [Principal, Primary school, Cork]

'Circle time' was a term used by a number of school personnel to mean a safe space for children to participate.

> 'We engage an awful lot in circle time and children participate, I suppose, at a basic level in the rules of the classroom … we don't actively try and encourage [participation], but they're not lost in the sea of the classroom.' [Principal, Primary school, Cork]

There are many decisions made in school where no opportunity is provided for children and young people to participate. Decisions where children did not have any input included:

> 'What day we do PE [physical education] or schedules, they are not consulted … Where do you draw the line? Do I have to explain to the children, by the way I had to pay a lot of money getting a new percolation area for the drainage system of the school because the sewer doesn't work. No! But, having said that, I changed the plans and have now put in grass because I know they want to have grass … But I can't go around saying to them "Yes, I will take it on board" if I know I can't deliver. That would be the practicalities of it. I can't deliver a pitch – there ain't no way I am going to be asking them "Would you like one?" ' [Principal, Primary school, Sligo]

In one school, the issue of social media presented some difficulties that resulted in sanctions being applied. But there was no involvement of any students in these proceedings.

> 'I mean that Facebook issue I mentioned to you earlier, where students set up a Facebook page in the name of the school last year and there were all sorts of nasty stuff put up and all of that. I mean, we came down very hard on them that time and the Gardaí were involved and everything else, and very hard and fast decisions were made then regarding sanctions. Now, none of the students would have been party to any of that. It was done and that was it … I think it was necessary and the Board actually would have been in agreement with that … Maybe it is an example of just a time where decisions have to be, where you really can't and don't link in with the students. Call them "executive decisions" or whatever you like, but that whole investigation took a whole week of our time here.' [Principal, Secondary school, Sligo]

Children and young people referred to the existence or otherwise of informal forums 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]
>
> 'We have SPHE, but sometimes you don't want to say something in front of the whole class.' [Second-level school, Dublin]

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]

Food choices

Having a cafeteria where they could choose from a variety of food options was seen by many children and young people as an important feature of expression of voice: 'There is a healthy eating thing in the canteen going on for the Green Flag and they did ask us last year what food we wanted, which was good' [Second-level school, Cork]. One group spoke about the difficulties in introducing hot food to the school canteen because of health and safety restrictions: 'The student council gets to have input and that is checked against school policy by the person who runs the canteen. But she's bound by school rules. Some changes have been accepted. Other times, changes have been made against the advice of the student council for health and safety reasons' [Young People's Advisory Group, Cork].

School uniforms

Some students, in particular girls, wanted to be involved in decisions about the school uniform and dress codes. Indeed, since what one wears is a form of self-expression in itself, this becomes all the more important for children and young people in the school context (Piacentini and Greig, 2006). Several of the older students in this study said that they thought that uniform, jewellery and such issues are not directly relevant to their education and thus they were frustrated that they still could not influence decisions about these issues. In particular, girls complained about the requirement to wear 'skirts/dresses' [Youth club, Dublin].

> 'The tracksuit is terrible. The trousers don't fit and the jumper's way too big.' [Youth club, Dublin]
>
> 'We can only wear trousers in Senior school. We have to wear skirts in Junior school and again in secondary school. In our school, the student council helped to change the school jumper.' [Youth club, Dublin]

School tours

School tours emerged as an issue of importance for children and young people, but one in which they felt they had little say in the school setting:

> 'We would like more say in trips.' [Second-level school, Sligo]
>
> 'When it comes to school trips, we get told where we are going. We don't get a say in where we go.' [Second-level school, Sligo]
>
> 'School tours – we don't get a say, and we really only go on educational tours anyway.' [Primary school, Dublin]

One group discussed how their attempts at organising their Transition year trip were frustrated by teachers; this resulted in the location they preferred being overruled by teachers: 'We would have loved to go to [X]' [Youth club, Sligo]. Also, there appeared to be a lack of transparency in the costings of the trip, with students unsure as to how teachers' travel costs were covered: 'Because we don't understand, like, do we pay for the teacher as well?' [Youth club, Sligo].

5.4 Enablers of participation in school

Relationships with teachers

The importance of students' relationships with teachers for student motivation, engagement and overall success in school is highlighted in much of the research (Clerkin and Creaven, 2013; De Róiste *et al*, 2012; Jennings and Greenberg, 2009; Eivers *et al*, 2000). This is borne out in the present study, where relationships with adults in school appeared to be highly significant in terms of enabling children and young people's participation. These personnel would not necessarily occupy a specific role within the school, although in some cases the young people (aged 12-17) did identify the class teacher as an important enabler of voice, but rather were those teachers or school personnel who had developed a good rapport with the children and young people. They agreed that the characteristics of a good adult facilitator was someone who made them feel comfortable and was not judgemental, and that this may not necessarily be part of the person's formal role in the school: '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, Dublin].

Age

Age seems to be an important enabler in children and young people's participation in the school context, with a clear sense from the children and young people involved in this research of growing levels of independence as they move through the school system, particularly when they reach Transition year (TY).

> 'The more you progress in the school, the more teachers get to know you.' [Second-level school, Cork]
>
> 'I'm in TY and go where I want to. Like, I decide. You get more responsibilities as you get older.' [Second-level school, Cork]
>
> 'Get loads of choices of things to do in TY. Like on Thursdays, you get to choose what you do, which is deadly.' [Second-level school, Cork]
>
> '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, Cork]
>
> 'It means the older you are, the more sense you probably make. You're more in control.' [Youth project, Cork]

5.5 Barriers to participation in school

Despite the well-recognised benefits of involving children and young people in schools, according to Parkes (2013, p. 125) '*it is clear that some children still regard themselves as occupying a very low position on the hierarchical scale within the schools and feel that their space for agency is very limited within school space*'. Indeed, Gilleece and Cosgrove (2012, p. 226) point out that in practice in Irish education settings, '*children and young people often experience fewer opportunities to exercise their rights than might be expected*'. Scanlon (2012, p. 188) notes that *'the stakeholders whose day-to-day learning and teaching experiences are most affected by school change are students and teachers; however, students as key stakeholders are frequently excluded from consultative processes*'. Furthermore, in those circumstances where participation is facilitated, it runs the danger of being deemed tokenistic. A similar study to Scanlon's by Harris (2009) in the UK has noted the importance that children and young people place on teachers actively respecting their viewpoints, ideas and suggestions. Indeed, it has been argued that pupils are '*expert witnesses*' in the overall process of school improvement. However, in reality the children interviewed were of the view that teachers did not always listen to them and their views were only partially heard. Existing studies on the extent to which children participate in school have substantiated this position. Mayall (2002, p. 99), for example, acknowledges the fact that '*many UK studies find that schools are profoundly undemocratic, and that young people experience rejection of their moral agency*'.

In the present research study, children and young people, as well as school principals and teachers, identified a number of barriers to the participation of children and young people in the context of education. Children and young people highlighted the autocratic and hierarchical nature of the school system as a major barrier experienced by them. Specifically, they identified the lack of or poor relationships with key personnel in schools as important barriers to their participation, as well as poor information systems in schools whereby policy changes or decisions regarding disciplinary procedures are not communicated effectively. Significantly, they had very low expectations of schools being participatory sites. However, even with those low expectations, they recognised that they had little say in anything apart from peripheral matters in school. Young people's own apathy about being able to have agency in the school context is exemplified in the following quote from a young person: 'We're never not going to be able to wear a uniform and we're never going to be able to change the times of school' [Second-level school, Dublin].

Other factors highlighted by principals and teachers that acted as barriers to children and young people's participation included the background of the children and young people, the influence of the parents over the children, the location and size of the school and the number of teachers and students.

Everyday routine

Research has highlighted the mismatch between the typical school curriculum and the opportunities for students to participate in decision-making about the running of the school (Demetriou *et al*, 2000). In the present study, children referred to the 'sameness' of every day at school, as exemplified in the following quote: 'We have a routine. We do everything in order every day' [Primary school, Sligo].

Others young people commented on lack of variety and opportunities they thought should be available:

> 'Like music wasn't here last year and there is a fella in 1st year who loves to sing. He is going for auditions and all that, but there is nothing there for him. There was a guy two years ago, he got to X-Factor in UK. And there is another fella in 2nd year who loves to beatbox, but there is nowhere to do it. [X] comes and does workshops in music. You have to have an interest to get picked.' [Second-level school, Cork]

> 'Yeah, like what sport to do. It's always hurling and Gaelic here. They did basketball last year, but then the teacher that set it up is out … they didn't do it this year either. They could do other sports as well. Try them to see if people enjoy it. Soccer was meant to be here last year. One of the teachers did a soccer tournament, but it was inside the school. They don't really have a team that goes outside of the school. They don't ask the students what they would like to do. Some people play rugby and cricket, but they don't ask.' [Second-level school, Cork]

> 'We need other stuff as well. A lot of people don't like sports. They like different clubs, like a chess club. There is no chess club or reading club here.' [Second-level school, Cork]

> '[The] school focuses on GAA, but many would like more focus on rugby and soccer. We have asked, but the school won't change their priority of sports. Soccer is one of the biggest games, but the school won't do it. A new teacher is having a huge influence on broadening sports. Because of her, we have basketball back in the school.' [Young People's Advisory Group, Cork]

Age

Age was one of the main barriers to participation identified by the children and young people, as well as the adults who participated in the research. In particular, the younger children felt they had less voice in decision-making processes in school. Even those who were older emphasised that it was not until Transition year that they had some sense of voice in the

school context. Participants agreed that as students progress through the school system, they get slightly more independence and voice. The frustration of 'starting all over again in 1st year' was expressed by some of the students, while this had improved by the time they reach Transition year.

> 'In 1st year, we have no say or way of getting your opinion across.' [Second-level school, Cork]
>
> 'It's Transition year and older. We don't get asked anything about it.' [Second-level school, Cork]
>
> 'Yes, that's way different to last year. It's hard to move [to secondary school]. You have a lot more say in primary school. You would know the principal really well in primary school.' [Second-level school, Cork]

One principal noted that maturity and background would determine the weight to be attached to the views of a young person:

> 'I have to say, you would be more inclined to listen to senior students on certain issues that impact on them directly … the exams … I suppose with older students, you are more inclined to treat them as adults and therefore you are more inclined to talk to them on a one-to-one [basis]. They would probably feel much freer to do that, you know.' [Principal, Secondary school, Sligo]

Similarly, one teacher pointed out:

> 'I would have to say, obviously, maturity. The senior students – you would tend maybe to give them, I wouldn't say a bit more of an ear (they would all be listened to) but, for example, if a very responsible good kid from Leaving Cert comes in here and … makes some kind of request, you tend to be more at ease with that than probably a 2nd year who is a bit of a devil or whatever, do you know what I mean. Not saying that you would ignore that 2nd year, but at the same time … So yes, there would be factors like that. I suppose maturity and, dare I say it, possibly just the general background probably. Now that sounds terrible – just as I said it, it sounds terrible, you know.' [Principal, Secondary school, Sligo]

The age of the child might even affect the likelihood of them reporting an issue in the first place:

> 'I think with younger kids … in a class situation, most children who have an issue are too shy to come forward … You often find with young ones if there is a major issue, it nearly needs to reach kind of a crisis level before they report to someone.' [Principal, Secondary school, Sligo]

Space and time

Space and time, or the lack thereof, was another barrier identified by both the young people and the adults. The lack of opportunities and space in the school week for their voice to be heard was consistently highlighted by the young participants in particular: '[There is] no class where you can just talk, even if it's just after assembly' [Second-level school, Dublin].

The same was true for the educators: 'I feel they are quite comfortable in saying what they want to say and definitely when it gets up to circle time, which we don't do enough of in here. They do in some of the other rooms, so hopefully next year we will have a bit of space' [Principal, Primary school, Sligo].

Outside of designated times, student councils and limited events, there were no practical opportunities for children to express their views.

> 'Not a formalised suggestion box. But we do have a suggestion box for some of our SPHE lessons … But then, have we got it formalised so there is a suggestion box in the middle of the school? No … but that is a good idea. Again, I suppose because there is a lot of talk in every classroom … between the teachers and the children anyway … the message gets around very quickly. I would know exactly what somebody said in Junior infants and they know [that].' [Principal, Primary school, Sligo]

Adult attitudes towards listening to children

Adult attitudes towards and influences over child and youth participation had the potential to act as a major barrier to child participation in practice.

> 'We have no say in our timetable – it is the same. We have a routine, we do everything in order every day. In the classroom, it's mainly the teacher decides what lessons we do.' [Primary school, Sligo]

> 'We get told what to do! If we don't, or if we try to argue, we get punished with a 'step' [a stage on the sanction scale of the school]. It's kinda like a warning. The highest is Step 5, but no one got Step 5.' [Youth club, Dublin]

It seems that the traditional approach – of imposing decisions on children in school – is still very strong. Where children and young people did cite examples of involvement in decisions on school matters, these normally related to matters such as projects for older children or the choice of a DVD for younger children on rainy days when they could not play in the schoolyard.

> 'We work in groups sometimes, on posters.' [Primary school, Dublin]

> 'Projects – we didn't do any this year, but last year Mr. X [teacher] said you can pick a country. He wrote up all the countries on the board and he said "Pick a country". And I picked Y.' [Primary school, Cork]

However, on matters more important to them, such as the location of school tours, uniform, curriculum, timetabling and school reports, there was limited evidence of children and young people's participation. School tours emerged as an issue of importance for them, but one in which they felt they had little say in the school setting. Indeed, one principal from a secondary school acknowledged the influence of parents' experiences on that of their children, as the following quote illustrates:

> 'The views of a lot of kids, you see, would be formed by the experience their parents would have had in school … I would say at least 50% [of parents here] would have had a bad experience in school or they would have left school early … And their experience of school would be a place that you go to where you don't challenge the teacher, you say nothing and you try and get on with your work as best you can, but you stay out of trouble. And sometimes their view is that to stay out of trouble means that you can't voice an opinion.

> 'Then you have the other side of the coin, where you have maybe 30% or 40% of them [children] … who wouldn't be confident enough to say what they need to say because there isn't a lot of conversation and talk at home. If that conversation is not taking place at home – because the parents are out when the kids come home or the parents are watching TV all night and the kids are up in their room watching TV – the art of conversation is actually dead. They don't know how to hold a conversation. They don't understand how to actually express their point of view, a lot of them. And then you have 10% who would be extremely aggressive, who feel that the only way that they can get their point across is to insult the teacher or me.' [Principal, Secondary school, Cork]

Negative adult attitudes towards listening to children was mentioned more than once:

> 'People are a bit apathetic towards it [participation], a bit dismissive, you know. It's probably not great, to be honest, but that would just be my opinion. Probably, and I'm dealing with the primary sector, because the children are so young.' [Principal, Primary school, Cork]

Fear of criticism

One teacher highlighted that inviting feedback from students was feared due to the potential for criticism:

> 'I would be the first to say that, even at our stage, I think a teacher is always nervous about evaluation of anything because you always take it as a criticism, including myself. You can't take self-criticism even though the idea of the evaluation is to improve the situation.' [Teacher, Secondary school, Sligo]

Lack of information provision

There was evidence of poor communication systems in schools with regard to policies, with either a lack of information or contradictory information received. For example, the ability to carry and use their mobile phones was of particular concern to young people. They expressed frustration at the changing of the rules by school personnel relating to the use of mobile phones by pupils and the lack of communication about these changes:

> 'If they're seen on [you], they're confiscated. But they don't search your bag. It's just not allowed to be switched on during school. You can use the phone in reception if you need to ring home. It used to be that they had to be switched off in the class, but now you cannot have them coming into school or during breaks. The tutor was supposed to tell the class, but that didn't always happen.' [Second-level school, Dublin]

Within one focus group (representing the Youth club, Sligo), there was some confusion as to the school policy on mobile phones and its implementation:

> *Young person 1:* 'You get it taken off ye.'
> *Young person 2:* 'It depends on the teacher.'
> *Young person 3:* 'If you have a fair genuine reason.'

Young people also expressed frustration at school decisions on discipline, which they viewed as inconsistent, overly harsh and not being explained:

> 'Our school's awful strict, like. You can't do anything. Those girls got found out skiving … they got suspended. Like, there are people doing that every day of the week, and then there are two girls who have never done anything before. So why they got suspended for it I don't know. School uniform – if the boys wear any kind of white shoes or something. They're so strict on the uniform.' [Youth club, Sligo]

The power imbalance

The inequality in staff/student relations in school and the need for mutual respect were raised by the children and young people. The use of first names with youth workers as opposed to teachers, who must be addressed by titles, and students having to put up their hands to speak were given as examples of the imbalance of power in relationships at school.

The autocratic style of teachers and evidence of the important mediating role of parents with the school is demonstrated in the following quote from a young child who needed to go to the toilet frequently in school:

> 'I was taking too long in the bathroom, so she [teacher] said to me, 'I'll have to ban you from the toilet, until lunchtime". And, like, sometimes I'm just bursting and stuff, so I went up to the teacher and I was saying, "Please, please can I go?" And she kept saying "No!" And she said "I'm going to tell your mam". So she told my mam and my mam said to let me go to the toilet, so now she lets me go to the toilet.' [Primary school, Cork]

Gender differentiation

One group of young people interviewed for the study, which consisted exclusively of girls, raised the issue of gender differentiation in schools, expressing the view that boys are given more opportunity to engage in sports activities and receive more recognition of their teams' achievements in their co-educational school:

> 'Boys are treated differently and it's not fair. They get to do sports from 3rd class, but girls don't get to do sports until 5th class. Some of the boys even leave school early and they don't get homework sometimes because of matches and we have to do all the work. It's because sport for men and boys has more status, and it's on TV more. The men are seen more and everyone's more excited about their teams than the girls. Like last year, the girls' team got to the [X] Final, but it wasn't really that big of a deal. They didn't really say anything about it in the school.' [Youth club, Dublin]

Nature of the decision being made

The nature of the decision being made was a key aspect in determining the extent to which the views of children were heard. Monk (2002, p. 45) has identified a range of rights attributable to the child within the education system, each of which bears some connection to Article 12 of the UNCRC. These include the right to *'be able to decide themselves which school to attend and, indeed, whether or not to attend school; to be present and heard at proceedings such as exclusions and special educational needs; to participate in the day-to-day management of schools, the employment of teachers and the development of school policies; to dress as they wish; and to have a say over the content of the curriculum'.*

Generally, it was clear from the present research that the more serious the level of decision to be made in the school, the less likely it was that the children and young people would be consulted. In one case, where an incident concerning cyberbullying had arisen, the principal was of the opinion that:

> 'It is an example of just a time where decisions have to be, where you really can't and don't link in with the students. Call them "executive decisions" or whatever you like, but that whole investigation took a whole week of our time here … It got very heavy so we just had to act straight away … so I suppose from that point of view, it couldn't really have been discussed what would they have done.' [Principal, Secondary school, Sligo]

A similar approach was adopted in another cyberbullying case in another secondary school:

> 'There was no consultation there. I didn't speak to the student council or anything. I felt it was something I had to do. But I impressed on them the importance of this being to protect them.' [Principal, Secondary school, Cork]

Considerable scepticism was articulated by parent participants in the study on the matter of achieving change. It was suggested that the schools 'will always ask' children and parents for their views on a matter, but will rarely act on them unless it is of minor significance:

> 'I think they are asked, but I think, at the end of the day, the Board [decision] is final and that is that. Like, they'll ask the children and parents what they think, but you will never see the change … unless it is really a small little thing.' [Parent, Cork]

Examination stress

There was some indication that being in an exam year (in this case Junior Certificate) did not facilitate young people's opportunity to engage with teachers and school personnel due to a combination of exam stress for the students and some evidence of pressure on the teachers.

> 'Big changes from 2nd year. It all comes at you at once. Whereas in 2nd year it is all easier, like there is no exam year.' [Second-level school, Cork]
>
> 'We are doing project Maths this year for the first time. Would be better to have less exams and more work. The exams will be hard. They are not easy.' [Second-level school, Cork]
>
> 'Even in 2nd year, if they said "Listen up, this is probably going to come up for your Junior Cert next year", you would listen. All the teachers are calm in 1st and 2nd year and then they are roaring at you in 3rd year. They change a lot.' [Second-level school, Cork]

Large class sizes

Some young people identified the limitations and challenges for schools in facilitating voice because of the large class sizes, indicating that class control diminished opportunity for voice: 'Classes are big – class of 29, so it's hard to have a say. They want us to be quiet. If one person is talking, then everyone is' [Second-level school, Cork]. While the average class size was 24.7 in the 2012/13 school year in Ireland, almost a quarter (23.5%) of primary school pupils were being taught in classes with over 30 pupils in the last school cycle and in certain Local Authority

areas that percentage was closer to a third (Department of Education and Skills, 2012). Large class size has significant knock-on effects on the opportunities for participation by children, both at primary and secondary level, and according to Kilkelly (2007) it frustrates the teaching of the primary school curriculum and the child's participation in an interactive and activity-based curriculum that is child-centred.

While many children and young people may compensate for these large class sizes, the young people interviewed for this research identified that it would present a significant problem for quieter children and young people.

> 'In the classroom, there are two types of kids – the quiet crowd and the more popular, louder crowd. The quiet ones – we are afraid to speak our own mind – it's hard to speak up. The teacher doesn't notice what's going on. You don't really get a chance to have a say in the classroom. You get given out to by the teacher.' [Second-level school, Sligo]

> 'We all agree to disagree. We share it, but sometimes the person who says no finds it hard to get their opinion across. Quiet students wouldn't say nothing. They just go along with it. The teacher does go around and ask, but then when you go out to the corridor you have people saying it.' [Second-level school, Cork]

In summary, for the children and young people, participation in decision-making processes with adults at school is an issue that causes much frustration. As identified elsewhere (Bjerke, 2011), their participation at school is often characterised as being embedded in a conflictual relationship with adults as a group of staff members. It is clear that pupils' expressions of agency in many ways reflects a struggle for children and young people to be recognised as a group, with valuable viewpoints and democratic rights to be taken into account as participants. Issues such as rules are important and there was agreement that it is sometimes unfair how teachers practise the rules and the fact that they do not listen to students' views on how the rules are enforced. Similar to the study by Davey *et al* (2010a), data from the present study suggest that a non-participative culture can have a negative effect on relationships among and between teachers and pupils, with the result that the values of respect and inclusiveness fail to be embedded in the culture of a school.

5.6 Children and young people's suggestions

A number of key themes emerged in the data from children and young people in relation to participation in school. They identified the importance of ensuring their genuine involvement in decision-making, a participative school culture, positive teacher attitudes towards them, an appropriate learning environment with good facilities, and a more flexible and creative curriculum. These findings are similar to those of Aston and Lambert (2010).

There were many suggestions from children and young people about how to make schools more inclusive of their views in decision-making processes. Key recommendations were:

- student councils for primary schools to facilitate voice;
- spaces for participation in the school setting, including a class set aside in the week to discuss issues of importance;
- respectful and open relationships with teachers.

Younger children in this study (aged 7-12) spoke about the value of having some sort of representative structure in the school, such as a student council. Other, less structured methods were also discussed, such as class votes or suggestion boxes for ensuring that they have more of a say while also providing anonymity.

Teaching methods and subject choice emerged as important for young people (aged 12-17), with some discussion in two of the focus group interviews on Irish being a compulsory school subject and the implications for their futures if it were not.

'About the way we're taught, the subjects that we have to take … like Irish and stuff. I reckon it should be left to our own decision.' [Second-level school, Sligo]
'I don't know how that works though. How will that affect our Leaving Cert? The fact that we're missing out … You have 8 or 6 choices at first, but in the end I had to make choices I didn't want.' [Second-level school, Sligo]
'Yes, that happened with mine. It works out for the majority, but there are some, the few, it doesn't.' [Second-level school, Sligo]
'There are a couple of mandatory subjects like Maths, but we get to pick most of our own ones. Like, we're not pushed into picking any subjects. Irish should be optional.' [Second-level school, Dublin]

This exchange highlighted the need for some space where such core issues of curriculum could be discussed by students.

For young people, the idea of having a specific class or time set aside designed to give them the opportunity to discuss issues of particular concern was important and while there was some recognition of the difficulties associated with such a forum (such as safety and confidentiality), it did seem to provide some outlet or opportunity for young people to have a voice in a routine manner in school. However, they argued that some young people are shy and they would not say what they would like to in class and so suggested that a survey may be more appropriate in some cases: 'The school council could have a suggestion box or bring a copy[book] to meetings and students could write down what they would like in the school and they could bring that to the Vice-Principal' [Second-level school, Dublin].

There were other specific issues within the school context on which children and young people wanted more of a say. These included disciplinary protocols, teaching methods, uniform, school tours and restrictions on mobile phone usage.

5.7 Summary

The current reality is that any meaningful change towards authentic participation of children and young people in school is wholly dependent on a cultural change in adults' thinking towards them and the adoption of a children's rights-based approach on both a formal level and an informal level. This was one area in the research where the reality experienced by the different actors – adults, children and young people –was quite different. Hammarberg (1998, p. 24) suggests that teachers could find their job description in the UNCRC, which sets out the general principles of non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, child development and respect for the views of the child – all of which are '*the crucial ingredients in the conduct of educators as facilitators*'.

While school principals and teachers were of the opinion that children and young people attending their schools had plenty of time and many opportunities to contribute to decisions made affecting them, the views of the children and young people themselves painted a wholly different picture. It is clearly evident that most children and young people who participated in this research were generally 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. In an analogous study conducted in New Zealand, similar results were apparent (Taylor *et al*, 2001).

It was clearly articulated by the parent participants that their children were not involved in decision-making in their schools except in relation to minor issues. Arbitrary access, dependent on the disposition of their children's teachers, to decision-making at school was the main barrier identified by parents. They themselves also felt disconnected from their children's schools, reporting a vacuum in their knowledge about their children's experiences of participation and also feelings of powerlessness in their ability to influence decisions or change in their children's schools.

Some of the key barriers to participation in school identified by the children and young people included age, the autocratic and hierarchical nature of the school system, the lack of opportunities and space in the school week for their voice to be heard, the lack of or poor relationships with key personnel in schools, and poor information systems in schools whereby policy changes or decisions regarding disciplinary procedures are not communicated effectively.

It seems that some principals and teachers are increasingly aware of the need to involve children and young people in decisions affecting them. Moreover, they are acutely aware of the challenges inherent in involving children and young people in daily decision-making processes.

From the perspectives of the children and young people themselves, enablers were described as increasing age, the availability of and access to formal and informal structures for participation, appropriate spaces in the school timetable and key school personnel. A school culture that is facilitative of voice also emerged as being critical for children and young people. For example, the collaborative development of school rules and policy was seen as important by many children and young people, as was a shared culture of respect. In addition, they identified the importance of ensuring the genuine involvement of children and young people in decision-making, positive teacher attitudes towards them, an appropriate learning environment with good facilities, and a more flexible and creative curriculum.

It is beyond doubt that schools have a unique opportunity not only to teach children democratic principles and values, but also to reinforce and demonstrate these principles and values by their practices and procedures. As Whitehead and Clough point out (2004, p. 224), participation needs to be meaningful and be made a reality, while also acknowledging that this will *'involve both a shift in the dominant epistemology and in power relations'*.

6. Findings: Participation in the community

6.1 Introduction

Children and young people are involved in their communities in all sorts of different ways. Children play in the streets, playgrounds and spaces near their homes, while teenagers 'hang out' in a range of public places, from green spaces to parks and playing fields, bus stops and shopping centres (Weller, 2007). Large numbers of children and young people participate in organised community activities, including youth, sports and recreational clubs, groups and programmes. Some become involved in public life through engagement in decision-making forums in local youth organisations, voluntary and public bodies, and local and national youth councils. These activities emphasise children and young people's status as active and engaged citizens who contribute to and shape community life in rich and diverse ways (Checkoway *et al*, 2003; Jans, 2004; Percy-Smith, 2010; Percy-Smith and Burns, 2013).

While there is a growing recognition of the benefits of children and young people's participation and initiatives to promote participation have proliferated over the last 20 years, children and young people are undervalued and often misunderstood in their own communities and their opportunities for meaningful participation in decisions that affect them and their communities are very limited (Theis, 2010; Kerrins *et al*, 2011). Many adults do not recognise children and young people as social actors and citizens in their own right (Lansdown, 2010) and consequently do not acknowledge their right to participate in community settings, or seek to curtail or shape their participation in accordance with adult needs. This leads to a situation in which children and young people often feel targeted and demonised in public, informal places and corralled by adult agendas in organised spaces (Weller, 2007).

This chapter focuses on the perspectives and experiences of participation of children and young people in a range of youth and community settings. It examines their perceptions of the enablers and barriers to their participation in the community and their recommendations on how their voice and participation can be better facilitated in their communities. The chapter also explores the views of parents and of relevant adults who work with children and young people in youth and community organisations. It explores their attitudes towards children and young people's participation, how their organisations address the participation of children and young people, the benefits and challenges of participation and the ways in which participation by children and young people can be encouraged in the community.

6.2 Forms of participation in the community

Understanding of 'community'

Many of the children and young participants in this study had difficulties in understanding and interpreting the concept of 'community'. Interpreting the concept was particularly challenging for the children aged 7-12, who tended to refer to 'community' as something that is 'outside of home and school'. One way of focusing on their experience of community was to explore the activities in which they engage in their local areas. When children and young people were asked about decisions they make in their local community, they regularly referred to sports or youth clubs and there appeared to be a strong association between these activities and their understanding of 'community':

> 'We do sports with our friends, socially, not in clubs. The facilities in the area belong to the area, like the swimming pool, the field, the basketball court.' [Second-level school, Cork]

Types of participation activities

Sport played a central role in the children and young people's lives, along with youth clubs and activities based in community centres. Sporting activities included hurling, football, camogie, boxing, karate, horse-riding, athletics, swimming, basketball and snooker. Sport provides opportunities for young people to acquire social, physical and intellectual skills, and establish a supportive social network (Byrne *et al*, 2006). As the findings suggest, Irish children's levels of physical activity compare favourably with those of children in other countries (Growing Up in Ireland, 2012a and 2012b; Sullivan and Nic Gabhainn, 2013).

Other activities reported by the children and young people were simply 'doing nothing' or 'hanging out' with their friends, which occupied much of their time. Interests included drama, dancing, altar serving, attending youth clubs and non-scheduled activities like the cinema. Age, gender and class correlations with leisure pursuits have been identified. Decreased participation in structured and unstructured activities by girls upon adolescence is highlighted (Zeijl *et al*, 2001; Kelly *et al*, 2012; Growing Up in Ireland, 2012a and 2012b). Some of these patterns were evident among the research participants in the present study, with more of the boys involved in sport and a more limited choice of activities available to the young people living in rural areas.

Children and young people spoke about the important role of local community centres in their daily lives: 'The [X] is used for loads of events – they do drama, drumming, parent and toddler which my sister goes to' [Primary School, Cork].

The parent participants were unable to provide examples of community issues raised by their children and tended to describe community participation in terms of involvement in sport or youth clubs. They did not express any expectations that their children should participate or contribute to formal decision-making in their local areas.

6.3 Participation in local decision-making

The child and young people participating in this study were asked about opportunities for children and young people to get involved in their local communities. A number of issues were raised, including adults' attitudes and behaviour toward children, and a lack of awareness among children and young people themselves about how to make their input into local decision-making.

The young people spoke about the lack of consultation between adults and young people in the provision of local services and facilities. One group of participants spoke about how adults in their neighbourhood had turned an area into an allotment 'without telling anyone. We used to be able to have a bonfire, so we have nowhere to go now. The change was not for the benefit of everyone. There are only some people using the allotments. There should be more of a park for everyone to use' [Youth project, Cork].

Young people had a good understanding of why they were not being consulted:

> 'I think they'd probably say "Oh yeah, that's a great idea". But saying it's one thing, but actually putting it into practice … because at the end of the day young people aren't going to vote for you in an election. If you're building stuff like a pool or cinema or something, you're not counting on young people to fund it. I suppose it's fair enough if you look at it from a business or a political point of view. Realistically, young people can't do much. We don't have serious money that could be used to fund something, so it's like "Well, if young people get involved that'll be fine, but we can do without it".' [Youth café, Sligo]

The children and young people expressed concern about a number of community issues, including crime, personal safety, education, facilities for young people and the environment:

> 'I would like people to stop littering 'cause there is a lot of littering around the house.' [Primary school, Cork]
>
> 'More traffic lights because my cousin got knocked down because there was no traffic lights at her house.' [Primary school, Cork]
>
> 'We're afraid to go out at night because of gangs hanging around the Chinese and in the terraces.' [Youth project, Cork]
>
> 'During the day it's not too bad, I suppose, but during the day they [gangs] would be out as well. But they wouldn't be as harmful. It depends on who they are or what they are on!' [Youth project, Cork]

Young people declared that they had no idea who to talk to about these matters and expressed frustration on their poor level of influence in the local community:

> 'The two lollipop ladies come to the school and talk to us, but no one else.' [Primary school, Cork]
>
> 'The only way we feel we impact in our communities is by bringing the ideas from what we do in school outside, like not littering.' [Second-level school, Cork]
>
> 'We have no place to have a say. The Guards don't help. We can't complain to the Guards if something is wrong. The Guards have no presence in schools. They never come in to introduce themselves or give us information.' [Second-level school, Cork]

When asked who makes the kinds of decisions that affect young people in the community, they did not know: 'I don't think most people would even know who to go to … if they had an idea for something. Like, I wouldn't have a clue who I'd go to talk to' [Youth café, Sligo]. Some young people referred to local committees on which there were no youth representatives. For example, the following discussion took place in a focus group with young people in a youth café in Sligo:

> 'The Town Committee – they just kind of make decisions and do it. You don't hear about it until it's done.'
>
> *Interviewer*: 'And are there any young people on that committee?'
>
> 'No, it's an adult committee.'
>
> *Interviewer*: 'And is there any way of you inputting into that committee?'
>
> 'No.' [Other 'Nos']
>
> 'Like even when the school was set up, there was no talking to young people about what would be in the school.'

Consistent with previous studies (Cherney, 2010; Cherney and Shing, 2008), the findings from this present study indicate that the young people favour social participation over being able to vote. Combe (2002) suggests that while young people may feel disconnected from political debate and decision-making, they may be interested in playing a part in decision-making on a range of issues.

6.4 Decision-making in youth and community organisations

According to the young people and the adults who work with them, children and young people are involved in decision-making in the youth and community organisations investigated in this study. In some cases, young people are formally involved in the management of the organisation, while in others they are more informally involved in decisions about activities, planning and making rules.

Young people evidenced some agency in the community in the context of local youth clubs, which they identified as their 'space'. When questioned about other spaces for them in the community, they responded, 'Just this – nothing really for young people' [Youth café, Sligo].

Other comments included:

> 'At the youth club, the leader asks us to tell him what we need in the youth club and if it's possible, money-wise, we usually get it.' [Second-level school, Cork]
>
> 'We got to choose the name of the youth club – we haven't chosen it yet, but we're gonna vote.' [Youth club, Dublin]
>
> 'We get to decide what we do at the club.' [Youth club, Dublin]
>
> 'So we can see we are playing a part where we are making most of the decisions with the youth centre. [We make] decisions for the group and what goes on and we can report on stuff and we can get ideas from another group and we can help another group to make a new club. We can help other people to try get here so we can help them. So, like, instead of them being out on the streets being bored and possibly causing trouble or something, they can be in here and just have fun or get out of trouble. We come around in a circle and talk about the club, and if they do not feel comfortable with what you do in the club, then change it around and then everyone is comfortable after a while.' [Youth club, Cork]

The following extracts highlight how young people involved in a youth café feel a sense of ownership of the space due to their involvement in key decision-making about its design and the activities that take place there:

> 'We designed this house … we kind of run the house.' [Youth café, Sligo]
>
> 'We all discussed it together and we kind of went on a majority then.' [Youth café, Sligo]
>
> 'What food you eat in the house … about the PlayStation 3 and X Box.' [Youth café, Sligo]
>
> 'Like there was how to fund-raise. When we came here first, there was nothing.' [Youth café, Sligo]

Youth participation is formalised in the two youth work organisations involved in this study. A professional youth worker in one of the youth organisations describes how her project used to engage in consultation with the young people on activities, but has moved on to more formal types of participation: 'They were always consulted because we felt that if we didn't consult with them, if we just put something on, it doesn't work that way' [Youth worker 1]. A young person sits on the Board of Directors of the local organisation and a youth council has been established to facilitate communication with the Board.

The other youth work organisation facilitates formal participation by young people at national and local level. Regional panels of young people feed into decision-making at national level by advising the Director of the organisation of issues that are arising for young people at regional level. Young people are chosen for the regional panel via fun days for youth clubs in each county. At the fun day, those interested in being selected for the regional panel give a speech on their reasons for wanting to be chosen and the speeches are voted on in order to choose the panel members. The local organisation operates a youth committee that runs the youth café, including fund-raising and activities. The youth worker described the committee's work in glowing terms:

> 'So they actually had a jumble sale just last weekend and they would have had to organise absolutely everything and make all the decisions and do their advertising by themselves. The treasurer would have had to step up to the mark and work out maybe money, change, everything like that … We really want them to develop as people as well, pick up all these different skills that they are going to pick up over doing an activity.' [Youth worker 2]

In the Family Resource Centre, the young people are not formally involved in its running (it is a public company), but the worker is keen to establish a Youth Board in parallel to the Centre's Board of Directors.

In RAPID (the Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development Programme), there is an area-based youth network made up of people who work with children and young people in different contexts, including schools and youth organisations. One adult from the youth network sits on the Area Implementation Team (AIT) of RAPID. Young people have represented their needs to the AIT, which helped in the establishment of a youth café and

which has met with young people from a number of schools. RAPID also runs family fun days in a number of localities each year and uses these as a way of consulting children and young people on issues affecting them.

> 'Obviously, hundreds of local young people come to that [fun day], so we would have used that as a place to meet with the young people and to ask them. I think in one example when we were developing the park, we kind of did a very visual consultation where we had maps and plans and those sticky things.' [RAPID worker]

In the after-school club, the rules and regulations of the club are drawn up by the children and young people every year and they have a say in the activities they can undertake:

> 'If they are involved in the making of the rules, which they always are … the children themselves are very, very quick to point and say "Rule 8 says you can't be shouting at me" … Like, "This is our club and you are included in our club and we don't do this in the club". That has happened once or twice and has just been fantastic.' [Youth worker 3]

The voluntary organisations also involve children and young people in informal decision-making. The two youth clubs, the GAA club, the summer project and scouting groups involve them in decisions about club activities. In one of the youth clubs, the young people are involved in developing a contract for the club and deciding on club activities. In the other youth club, the young people have their own committee and make decisions about the club's activities. The voluntary youth worker points out that the young people took some time to adjust to the idea of having a role in decision-making in the club because they do not have significant experience of decision-making outside the club:

> 'Because they are not involved in things outside of the group, it is difficult for them to switch on and say "We actually do have a say here. This is a new group we have – jees, they are actually asking us what we would like to do!" ' [Voluntary youth worker 1]

The scouting volunteer pointed out that the scouts make their own groundrules at the beginning of each year and plan their own activities on a 6-week basis, but the adult leaders play a role in directing the decision-making.

The parents agreed that the informal, relaxed approach of the youth clubs provides an environment that is conducive to candid, open talking by their children and young people and that they heed the advice of the youth workers, who often wield an influence over and above their own as parents. Key features that the parent participants attributed to these outcomes included the non-judgemental listening attitudes of the youth workers; the respectful and trusting child–youth worker rapport; and the overall expectation by their children that a youth club space is safe. One member of the Parents' Advisory Group in Cork commented: 'My daughter's in the youth club and they talk openly about these issues [cyberbullying]. They listen to youth leaders a lot more in youth clubs than they would parents. She is on the youth club committee.'

Some adult community stakeholders spoke about decisions in which youth participation is *not* facilitated, for example, in recruitment of youth workers, applying for grants and safety-related issues. One of the professional youth workers stated that her organisation does not usually involve children and young people in the recruitment of workers, but did, however, include a young person on the interview panel on the last occasion a youth worker was recruited. She pointed out that having a young person on the panel enabled the interviewers to identify candidates' attitudes towards participation: 'A couple of people who were being interviewed didn't even look at the young person when they were being interviewed …' [Youth worker 1].

This overview indicates that all of the organisations involved in this study give children and young people a degree of space, voice, audience and influence (Lundy, 2007), but that there are significant variations between organisations in the nature and extent of children and young people's participation. In some organisations, participation is restricted to engagement

in adult-led activities (such as rule-making), while in others – primarily the professional youth work agencies – children and young people are actively engaged in organisational management and decision-making about how the organisation or project is run.

Theis (2010, p. 352) suggests that an approach whereby adults gradually cede increasing amounts of decision-making authority to children tends to work best because it enables the building of the '*capacities, commitment, resources, standards and structures*' necessary for the representation of children's views and ideas in the making of policy. He points out, however, that some approaches '*get stuck at a low level of children's control*' and argues that progress needs to be continuous so that children's decision-making capacities can be optimised. Fleming (2013) echoes this point and suggests that children and young people need to be facilitated to build on basic participatory opportunities by participating in increasingly significant ways, including in youth-led activities, which is still quite rare.

6.5 Decision-making in Comhairle na nÓg

Several adult respondents were critical of aspects of the work of Comhairle na nÓg in their areas. Criticisms range from a perception that Comhairle is 'unrepresentative' to a suggestion that Comhairle 'does not follow through' on the projects that it undertakes with the young people. The RAPID worker and Family Resource Centre worker questioned the representativeness of Comhairle:

> 'And I wonder is Comhairle na nÓg enough, do you know, or do they consult with a broader group of young people because, again, we would deal a lot with younger people who don't attach themselves very easily to things like official structures and don't even maybe participate in youth networks and youth groups and youth cafés and those people rarely get heard.' [RAPID worker]

> 'I think it [Comhairle] is very middle to upper class. I think that the way it has been promoted is that … you almost have to be part of an organisation to be in it and it is very difficult – how do you reach the hard-to-reach teens?' [Family Resource Centre worker]

A professional youth worker, who is also on the Steering Committee of the local Comhairle, described attempts by the Comhairle to encourage the involvement of young people from disadvantaged areas. The young people from her project who attended a Comhairle meeting felt that the Comhairle facilitators were not listening to what they had to say and that there was snobbery based on the schools which the young people attended. This experience has discouraged the young people in her organisation from participating in Comhairle:

> 'Then it was this snobbery about what school the young people were going to and where they were coming from and it didn't go down well with the young people that we were with.' [Youth worker 1]

This same youth worker mentioned that the local Comhairle wrote to schools to ask them if participants could wear their own clothes at Comhairle meetings rather than their school uniforms, but that schools would not allow it. This youth worker also questioned the extent to which the local Comhairle achieved anything following the young people's efforts throughout the year and suggested that the annual reports may be left on the shelf rather than acted upon. Shier (2010) identifies a tension in youth activities between '*process and product*', whereby long-term development may be sacrificed to achieve short-term goals. Each Comhairle na nÓg operates on a 2-year cycle as young members leave and others join, so continuity is difficult to achieve.

These criticisms of Comhairle na nÓg resonate with similar critiques in the international literature on youth councils, which appeal to some young people but not necessarily to '*outsider youth*' (McGinley and Grieve, 2010, p. 255) who may consequently be excluded. These structures are usually established by adults and therefore represent 'invited' spaces in which young people may feel uncomfortable or unable to participate meaningfully unless efforts are made to ensure that they can do so (Turkie, 2010; Martin *et al*, 2015).

6.6 Enablers of participation in the community

The children, young people and adults all identified a number of factors that enable the participation of children and young people in their local communities.

Adult recognition of children and young people's agency with increasing age, the existence of identified spaces for them in the local area, and sport as a key site of participation in the community – all emerged from the discussions with children and young people as important enablers of voice in their local community. Positive experiences of participation in other spheres seemed to facilitate young people's participation in the community context. Formalised policies on youth participation allied with skills training in this area were highlighted by the adult respondents.

Age

Age and its relationship with increased 'say' and autonomy was discussed by the young people, who suggested that they attain more responsibility with age: 'As we get older and we take on/get given more responsibility, we get more respect and get listened to more by adults' [Second-level school, Cork].

Space

The importance of spaces for young people in their local community where there is more equality in the relationships with adults was discussed in a number of the group interviews:

> 'You get to do what you want to do and you can joke around with them [adults running the clubs] and have fun. Everyone here is on a first-name basis. It's like breaking a barrier. Teachers you call Mr. or Mrs., but everyone here you call by their first name.' [Youth project, Cork]
>
> 'They do actually listen to you … if you have an issue here, it's 100% talk time, like.' [Youth café, Sligo]
>
> 'If you make suggestions or you want to talk, they will listen.' [Youth café, Sligo]
>
> 'At soccer, on the team you can have influence and at training. If you're the captain, as I am, you have to take control: encouraging players, involving and welcoming new players. My club is a safe place for me. We get to be involved in fundraising and input into decisions by asking the manager for what we want and he makes the final decision. We don't have actual meetings, but we do have group discussions … We go by what the manager says in the end. The team talk tactics.' [Second-level school, Cork]
>
> 'In the basketball club, we get to pick training schedules.' [Second-level school, Cork]

Formal policies in participation

The two youth work organisations and the Family Resource Centre have formal policies on children and young people's participation, while in 3 of the 9 youth and community organisations, formal or informal training is provided to the children and young people. For example, in one of the youth clubs the children are given an induction that covers what the club is about and how participation happens. They also write their own contract for the club:

> 'Up on the board and ask them to go into focus groups – what do they expect from the [club] in this year and how do they want to achieve that and what rules, what contract do they want to abide by, like respect each other.' [Voluntary youth worker 2]

Skills and training in youth participation

In one of the youth work organisations, the young people were given some training in decision-making. The training was aimed at helping them to make decisions about equipping, furnishing and running their own youth café.

> 'Yes, at the start in our workshops we would have looked at maybe ways of how we all come up with a fair decision … We have different methods of coming up with a decision or voting or there would be post-its stuck on different words and stars on words. And then obviously we would narrow them down to maybe three or four ideas, and then we would go back and would have a vote again.' [Youth worker 2]

The children and young people in the second youth work organisation did not receive formal training in decision-making, but learned by actually participating. The youth worker suggested that 'the more they get involved, the better equipped they are … the more they do it, the more they become trained in making decisions' [Youth worker 1]. She pointed out that the young people had their own mini-referendum on the Children's Rights Bill in 2012.

Training for adults in children and young people's participation is less common, but most adult community workers in the present study indicated that this training is essential to enable effective participation. None indicated that they had received formal training in participation, but several suggested that they had learned by experience. One voluntary youth worker suggested that she learned about how to listen to children and young people through 'trial and error' rather than through formal training. Another voluntary youth worker talked about the importance of adults understanding the young people, their behaviour and their needs:

> 'I really would like to say that people who are working with young people need to be trained. I know you have the smaller community groups and you have someone who has set up this, that and the other, but they can be doing more damage than good.' [Voluntary youth worker 2]

A professional youth worker argued that basic training in listening to children and young people would be useful: 'Why are they there in the first place if they are not going to listen? So I think it would be beneficial even if they were trained in hearing what they are saying and seeing if they could help or push something forward' [Youth worker 1].

Another professional youth worker suggested that adults who work with children and young people are quite resistant to the idea of getting training for participation, arguing that such training would have to be mandatory before adults would submit to it:

> 'I think you would nearly need a statutory requirement on every adult or every organisation that involve themselves with children to have mandatory training in that field [participation] and I would believe there are two chances that is going to happen!' [Youth worker 3]

Lundy (2007, p. 930) refers to the recommendation of the UNCRC Committee – that '*initial and in-service training*' in understanding and respecting the provisions of the UNCRC should be provided for teachers and others who work with children.

6.7 Barriers to participation in the community

Children and young people were asked to identify possible obstacles to the achievement of children and young people's participation. What emerged was their lack of awareness about how decisions are made at local level and how they could engage with these processes. Other barriers to voice and participation identified included the lack of identified spaces for children and young people in communities, negative media representation of young people, poor access to facilities and activities in which young people are interested in engaging and adult attitudes generally towards young people.

Adult respondents were also asked to identify possible obstacles to the achievement of children and young people's participation. Issues raised included negative adult attitudes towards children and young people in the community; some children and young people's lack of experience of participation in the home; infrastructural problems related to transport; the lack of key identified spaces for children and young people in their local areas; and the constraints imposed on human resources and front-line youth services by budget cuts in recent years.

Attitudes towards children and young people

The children and young people participating in the study suggested that adults in the community tend to have negative attitudes towards them:

> 'Adults dismiss what children say as silly, but if an adult says it, they take it seriously.' [Primary school, Dublin]
>
> 'Most of the time, children aren't taken seriously when they have an idea – and it might be good.' [Primary school, Dublin]
>
> '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. They just took it down.' [Primary school, Dublin]
>
> 'Adults will listen to the idea, but won't take it seriously.' [Second-level school, Cork]

Some young people in a disadvantaged urban area referred to being seen as a nuisance and being moved on by Gardaí and security personnel in their local community:

> 'The Gardaí tell us to move on. They [City Council] put a load of trees where we used to hang out. The Guards tell us to go to the green, which is supposed to be to play soccer, but the grass never gets cut and it's too long to play in.' [Second-level school, Cork]
>
> '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. But sometimes they leave us in.' [Second-level school, Cork]

Negative or dismissive adult attitudes were seen by the young people as being an important 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, Cork].

Several adult participants also recognised the importance of participation in ensuring that young people will contribute to their communities in the future: 'Kids develop into adults and we need the adults to run the clubs. So the happier they are in childhood … it goes all the way through and hopefully they come back when they are older and contribute to the club' [GAA coach].

Despite potential benefits to communities, adult participants reported varying levels of support from communities for children and young people's participation. The professional youth workers indicated that the communities in which their projects are based have been highly supportive of the initiatives. One described how members of the local community were instrumental in securing from the local Council the building in which the youth café is housed:

> 'They gave so many layers of support because they knew the young people were getting into trouble for being bored … there was nothing for them to do … so the community really worked to get this place up and running and their support was outstanding.' [Youth worker 2]

Another professional youth worker in an urban context described a similar level of support, but suggested that her organisation had to build a relationship with the community, some members of which initially viewed the youth organisation and its activities with suspicion:

> 'We would have had problems at the very beginning with the elderly members in the community because this is a shared building and there was a lot of mistrust, distrust between the older people and the younger people.' [Youth worker 1]

This youth work organisation established an intergenerational group to bring the older and younger people together, and this worked very well. The volunteer who runs summer projects also referred to generational differences in attitudes towards children and young people.

Contrary to these experiences, the worker in the Family Resource Centre said that the centre has received very little support from influential local groups in its activities for children and young people. He gave the example of an idea for a street art initiative that would have given the children and young people a chance to draw murals and graffiti on the walls of derelict buildings in the town. The idea was discouraged by the local Chamber of Commerce, which was 'very fearful that it would get out of hand'. This resonates with the manner in which children are often constructed '*as problems by the "voice" of local communities*' (Cockburn, 2010, p. 311).

Young people recognise these '*limiting mindsets*' (Percy-Smith and Burns, 2013, p. 13) and express dissatisfaction with them (DCYA, 2013a). In his study of stereotyping of young people in Ireland, Devlin (2006) suggests that the construction of young people as problems or nuisances may be class-based in nature. But this contention does not appear to be supported by the experience of one of the voluntary youth workers in the present study, who operates a youth club in a middle-class area. This volunteer points out that there is no community centre in the area and the youth club is not allowed to use the Church Hall:

> 'When we tried to get in there with the youth club, they wouldn't allow us in, which really, really annoyed me at the time. There was no choice of letting us in, but they were also charging quite a high rent because it was being let commercially. It didn't need the locals.' [Voluntary youth worker 1]

The Family Resource Centre worker argued that rather than being consulted, children and young people are often told what to do in sports clubs and other activities in which they engage: 'I am looking at local GAA clubs, soccer clubs. The situation is that the children are told what to do, told "Training is on" ' [Family Resource Centre worker]. However, this was contradicted by some of the young people who cite sports activities as key spaces for their participation and where they see their input validated (*see Section 6.6*).

This worker went on to suggest that organisations may pay lip-service to participation and view it as an 'exercise that has to be ticked off', but fail to realise participation in practice. He pointed to the example of a local youth club in which the volunteers make all the decisions, including about the nights on which the youth club will run. Although this particular point was made by a single worker, it resonates with comments made by other participants to the research, child and adult alike, on adults' attitudes to participation. They suggest that many adults, both parents and adults outside the home, are unwilling or unable to listen to children and young people's voices, representing a significant obstacle to the achievement of consequential participation.

These descriptions of attitudes in the community suggest that adults tend to be more comfortable with organised activities for children and young people, but are not always willing to provide them with spaces in which these activities can take place. Shier (2010, p. 28) points out that children and young people tend to be '*on the margins and are resource-poor compared to most adults*'. This may be the case in affluent as well as poorer communities.

Appearance and stereotyping

When asked to identify possible obstacles to the achievement of children and young people's participation, some of the young people suggested that their appearance is a contributory factor to their identification as a potential threat:

> '[Gardaí] … judge the way you talk.' [Second-level school, Cork]
>
> 'The way you look – "Look at you, like, you're obviously causing trouble".' [Second-level school, Cork]
>
> 'There is no grey area.' [Youth café, Sligo]

Negative media representation of young people was seen to reinforce stereotypes and was identified by some as a key barrier to their participation and voice in their local community:

> 'The media's always put stigma on teenagers.' [Youth café, Sligo]
>
> 'I think they group you into "good", who stay at home and do their homework, and then the people on the street.' [Youth café, Sligo]

Weller (2007, p. 141) points out that a gathering of teenagers '*is often seen as a criminal threat and demonized*', sometimes by other teenagers who may feel threatened or intimidated by groups or gangs, particularly in urban areas at night. Some of the children in the present study reported that they found the presence of teenagers in parks and playgrounds threatening and that this restricted their use of these places: '[It's] not safe on some estates … teenage drinking' [Primary school, Cork]. For some of the young people, fear of local gangs seemed connected to an absence of Gardaí who were viewed as important to safety in their area:

> 'We've got one Guard. We all know the community Garda and fear that the Garda Station will soon close. He has come into the school in the past, for road safety, and some people get him for their CSP project. But there is a bit of an issue with the shortage of Gardaí around the place because the Garda Station closes down after 9pm and if there's a problem, which there will be … you have to wait for the Guards to come from [another town 20km away].' [Young People's Advisory Group, Cork]

Lack of identified spaces

The lack of identified spaces for children and young people in communities has emerged as important. Kilkelly (2007) argues that there is evidence that particular problems are faced by those seeking to deliver services to children and young people in rural areas and in many other areas of geographical disparity, resulting in services that are significantly worse in some areas than others. This leads to an uneven enjoyment of children's rights. In the present study, the experience for those young people growing up in rural areas was distinctly different in many respects to that of young people living in urban areas. When asked about places/spaces for them in their local area, young people consistently replied 'not much', 'nothing', 'there's zero things here' and 'there's f*** all!' [Youth club, Sligo].

More generally, outside of rural locations, most children and young people felt there were insufficient spaces for them to participate in their local areas: 'There are no facilities where I live' [Second-level school, Dublin]. Other than specific youth clubs or projects, which some were involved in, many spent their time in organised activities or 'hanging out' at the green, park and local shops or shopping centre.

Effect of budget cuts and funding constraints

Other adult participants also acknowledged the importance of space and equipment to enable participation, but pointed out that the cutting of budgets has had an adverse effect on the provision of services for children and young people, who have not been consulted on how this will affect them. A professional youth worker indicated that her organisation's 'budgets have been severely slashed' and referred to the impact that this is having on youth work and on the young people with whom she works:

> 'We have buildings, we have equipment, but what is happening is that the human resources are being cut and I think they are the most important resources in the services. Like, for example … they are actually putting money into buildings, but cutting services … They [young people] haven't been asked about what an impact it is going to have on their lives if they can't come down here for, you know, their music or the drop-in especially.' [Youth worker 1]

The Family Resource Centre worker pointed to difficulties associated with funding restrictions, which sometimes prevent him from spending funds on activities in which the young people want to engage. He suggested that this is frustrating for him and for them, and that a degree of flexibility is necessary to react to the changing needs of the young people. Milbourne (2009, p. 358) identifies similar problems due to funding constraints and suggests that these constraints present '*countervailing pressures to more responsive, participatory approaches to their work*'.

Transport restrictions

The following discussion among several young people in a youth club in Sligo highlights the restrictions placed on children and young people's participation in the community due to transport inadequacies:

'There's two buses.'
'It's so expensive.'
'It's €13.50 to get from [X] to Sligo.'
'... and that's using a student card.'
'It's only €20 to get to Dublin and return, so how do you work that out?'
'... and then the buses in Dublin are so cheap.'

Lack of participation experience in the home

Most of the adults who work with children and young people in communities suggested that encouragement and participation in the home are crucial to enabling children and young people to participate in other settings, including the community.

'If children are encouraged at school and at home to make these decisions, it will follow through to the community. I think like anything, most things start at home. If they are encouraged at home to make good decisions and you back them up, that will follow through to the community and the community then just needs to be open to that and aware that the children have rights to make these decisions ... to have input as well.' [Voluntary youth worker 3]

A key issue identified here is that if children and young people are not listened to or encouraged to participate in the home, they will experience difficulties in participating in other social spaces like youth clubs. The inconsistency of children and young people's experience between social spaces is acknowledged by Percy-Smith (2010), who refers to a paradoxical situation in which children may be listened to in one space but not in another. The empowerment experienced in one space can be undermined when the child returns to the space where voice and participation are not promoted or actively discouraged.

Focus on sports

One of the voluntary youth workers suggested that boys are less likely to participate in the youth club because they are heavily involved in sports and their sports activities coincide with the night when the youth club takes place (Voluntary youth worker 1). The worker in the Family Resource Centre also noted the predominance of sports activities in his area and suggested that there is little in the area for those children in the 7-10 age bracket who are not interested in sport.

Rural areas

The Family Resource Centre worker pointed out that social policy tends to neglect children and young people living in rural areas:

'There is nothing for them to do. They get on the bus at 4pm, are home by 5pm, 5.45pm – that is it ... We talk about the rural buses and the rural programmes, that they are able to access buses ... The younger person who has to access that bus has to pay for it. Where do they get the money? They go back to parents, parents are unemployed. They haven't got the money to give them.' [Family Resource Centre worker]

This was echoed by a professional youth worker who works in the same rural area and who stated that there was nothing for the young people to do prior to the establishment of the youth café. She suggested that local people were very anxious to establish the youth café in order to give young people a place to congregate and because there had previously been some anti-social behaviour by young people in the area [Youth worker 2].

The young people frequently referred to public transport as a critical means of their engagement in local activities and youth forums: 'There's no public transport', 'There's two buses …' and 'It's so expensive' [Youth club, Sligo].

6.8 Children and young people's suggestions

Participants engaged in this research had a range of views about how participation by children and young people can be encouraged in the community and in wider society.

Spaces and places for participation

Children and young people spoke about the need for dedicated spaces where they can meet and spend time: 'The need for a community hall. There are no facilities where I live – but there are lots in this area like the park and the GAA and soccer clubs. They are really good, they host a lot of community events' [Second-level school, Dublin].

Young people suggested creating appealing decision-making processes, using informal, flexible, fun activities. They advised the use of incentives and of youth-friendly language, and the creation of spaces where young people can make decisions for themselves:

> 'I think it'd need to be made clear to young people that it is young people running it because I'm sure that there's loads of young people who have ideas and they just think "Oh, what's the point?" Whereas if they knew that "It's someone in my year that's running it or someone in my school", they might be more likely to [get involved].' [Youth café, Sligo]

Space and the opportunity for socialising with peers are important to older children and young people (OMC, 2007; DCYA, 2013a). In research by De Róiste and Dinneen (2005), 90% of Irish adolescents said they enjoyed 'hanging around' with their friends. As supported by the focus group discussions, streets, civic and commercial areas, and indoor spaces like youth cafés[7] or local youth/community facilities were where they tended to 'hang around'. However, hanging around in public spaces can be symptomatic of insufficient provision of safe spaces and recreation facilities in communities. This was reported to be the case by a number of young people interviewed for the present study. A minority (42%) of children and young people aged 9-17 in Ireland reported that there were good places in their area to spend their free time.

One of the professional youth workers spoke about the importance of a physical space that the young people can have as their own:

> 'I think them having an area that they call their own – because this area is theirs – has helped dramatically for them making decisions … So 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 just get a huge sense of security and almost they are willing to do things and make decisions for their community, so it is brilliant in this area for young people.' [Youth worker 2]

[7] Youth cafés are being developed in both low and mixed-income communities. They are free, youth-oriented, alcohol- and drug-free indoor spaces where young people can hang around and socialise, and get information on services. They are often youth-led and are managed and financed through an intersectoral, multi-agency arrangement that may include Local Authorities.

The RAPID worker referred to how youth cafés represent spaces where young people can hang out and do what they like, rather than being compelled to engage in particular activities:

> 'Well, the idea of the youth café is that you can just come in and hang out … It is just the place that is warm and dry and there is usually food and young people like that, especially on a Friday night when they don't want to be doing things, I suppose.' [RAPID worker]

These responses are interesting because they highlight the importance of actual physical spaces for participation, apart from the symbolic participatory spaces that are often highlighted in the literature.

Access to facilities and activities through appropriate scheduling, advertising and transport all featured in young people's discussion of how their engagement with their local community could be enhanced. Public transport was referred to frequently by the young people in the rural locations as a critical means of accessing and engagement in local activities and youth forums: 'There's no public transport' [Youth club, Sligo]. The timing and scheduling of activities in conjunction with and to suit the needs of young people was important for them:

> 'Need for places to go at weekends. All the youth clubs are during the week when we have school and training and things. When you have free time at the weekend, they're not on at that time.' [Second-level school, Dublin]

Advertising was seen as an essential means of enabling children and young people's participation in local events and activities: 'And advertising the forums, where they're taking place in schools, rather than waiting for people to discover them … giving them the information might help start people off' [Foróige, Sligo]. They stressed that to appeal to a broad range of young people, opportunities to participate have to be promoted in the 'right places'. They emphasised that, wherever possible, organisations need to go to where young people are.

This is supported in Davey *et al* (2010a), who found that good advertising strategies were key to involving children and young people in decision-making in the local community. In that study, the need for more regular and well-advertised meetings, as well as open days in drop-in centres, was deemed the best way to engage children in participation and break down the power barriers that often exist between adults and children.

Broadening participation of children and young people

The Family Resource Centre worker also identified these concerns and talked about the difficulty of finding time to work with young people in a coordinated way:

> 'In an ideal world, if I had everything that I wanted, I would like three young people from each of the current youth organisations in the town … to agree to meet with me quarterly to tell me what they see happening in the town and what they want. Then, from that, we would draw up a list and two or three of those representatives would come along with me to meet the local elected representatives and say the youth of [the town] want A, B and C.' [Family Resource Centre worker]

This same worker pointed out that efforts to involve workers from other youth organisations have so far proved fruitless. This experience reflects the findings of the interviews with children and young people who are involved in youth clubs and groups and who report that they do not have anything to do with other youth groups or committees in their area. For example, young people in a youth club and a youth café in the same area of Sligo reported no contact:

> 'There is [some contact], but they're awful young. Well, not awful young, but two years younger than us. They would be 3rd year, like we wouldn't even be friends with them. We wouldn't even hang out with them. I don't think we'd be allowed to, to be honest with you, to go into the youth café. It wouldn't even cut the ice for me, right!' [Youth club, Sligo]

> 'We can't speak for the actual [X] club because we just run this house, like. We're kind of specific to here. We don't go to their meetings. They might have a very different story about what resources they use.' [Youth café, Sligo]

If young people from different groups were brought together to influence community affairs, the range and extent of their participation would potentially be broadened, but instances of such participation are still uncommon (Fleming, 2013). When children and young people in the present study were asked how they could ensure that they have more of a say in the area where they live, they responded that consulting them is critical:

> 'Ask the kids in the local area by a survey done through the post, where kids get to write down all their ideas.' [Primary school, Sligo]
>
> 'Listen to them. Involve them in conversations … Ask them, "Well, what do you think here?" ' [Foróige, Sligo]
>
> 'Like this project [meaning the present research study] … Asking young people to see what they think, asking questions and see what their say is. Then, like the TDs, asking their opinions, comparing with what they have from the adults, and if it fits, great.' [Second-level school, Cork]
>
> 'For young people to have more of a say, adults need to go into youth clubs, schools, and ask them.' [Second-level school, Cork]

A youth worker in an after-school project suggested that adults need to be educated in hearing and enabling children and young people's voices:

> 'For the children to have their say, I think you are going to have to educate the adults that they are entitled to it and that, I think, is your first port of call.' [Youth worker 3]

These views emphasise the important role of adults in helping to mediate children and young people's experience of the world (Kernan, 2010; Theis, 2010). They are also consistent with the idea that, in addition to having a voice, children and young people should be able to exert influence, in accordance with Article 12 of the UNCRC. As Lundy (2007, p. 938) states, '*The challenge is to find ways of ensuring that adults not only listen to children but that they take children's views seriously*'. In order to do so, at the very least adults have to acknowledge children and young people's views and indicate how their views have influenced the decision-making process.

The RAPID worker suggested that there should be a legal requirement for agencies to consult with children and young people in their planning, or a performance indicator to which they are required to adhere: 'If there was some kind of, not like a legal responsibility, but some kind of official requirement that they consult with young people …' [RAPID worker]. This participant also suggested that some agencies are better than others in consulting with children and young people, and named the HSE and the Local Authority in the area where she is based as examples of agencies that do attempt to consult with and involve children and young people. Theis (2010, p. 350) refers to the importance of developing '*permanent mechanisms for children and young people to influence public planning and budget decisions*'. The development of such mechanisms has yet to feature significantly in Irish national public policy. The impact of initiatives such as the Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSCs) in each city and county to promote the integration of children's services remains to be seen (Burke *et al*, 2010).

In the young people's interview groups, there was discussion on the voting age and they generally felt that they would not be prepared to vote: 'I wouldn't be prepared … at 15 years old' [Youth café, Sligo] and 'Young people who do have the maturity for it are frustrated by it and young people who don't have the maturity for it don't care' [Youth café, Sligo]. One of the professional youth workers referred to the possibility of lowering the age of voting to 16 in order to give young people more 'political clout' [Youth worker 1], but she did not elaborate on the potential benefits of such a development for children and young people's participation.

6.9 Summary

This chapter has explored the attitudes and experiences of children, young people and adults towards participation in their communities. The children and young people were generally dissatisfied with their opportunities to participate in their communities. Barriers to their participation include negative adult attitudes, few dedicated spaces and poor access to facilities and activities. However, there were also important enablers of voice, including adult recognition of their agency with increasing age and maturity, some dedicated spaces and activities, and supportive participatory attitudes and practices by adults and organisations.

Through the work of their youth clubs and organisations, the adult respondents are seeking to provide a variety of participatory mechanisms and opportunities for children and young people. These opportunities vary in nature and extent between clubs and organisations and tend to be most organised, extensive and formalised in professional youth work contexts. These clubs and organisations are experiencing challenges that make the achievement of participation more difficult. These challenges include the constraints currently imposed by cuts to services, staffing and facilities as a result of fiscal retrenchment, as well as the attitudes and practices of other adults, organisations and the general community towards young people and the impact this has on children and young people's confidence, experience and expectations of participation. Meeting these challenges will help to develop and extend the exercise of children and young people's citizenship.

7. Key Messages and Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) sets out a benchmark standard for the Irish State concerning when, and under what circumstances, children and young people should be heard on matters affecting them. From a practical point of view, this research aimed to explore the extent to which children and young people aged 7-17 in Ireland are heard in matters affecting them at home, at school and in their communities. In an attempt to ensure that a child-rights approach was taken to this project, we adopted a methodology that was child-friendly and engaged children and young people as partners in the research process from the outset. Lundy's (2007) Model of Participation was used as a framework to determine the extent to which children and young people are heard in each of these areas of their lives.

This final chapter sets out the principal findings of the research, with a particular focus on the views expressed by children and young people. Furthermore, the views of adult stakeholders (such as parents, school principals, teachers and youth workers), which also informed the research, are compared and contrasted with the views of children and young people. The latter will serve to highlight the relational nature of children and young people's lives and participatory experiences, and also the extent to which the realities experienced by children and young people are actually known and understood by adults.

7.2 Key messages

The findings of this report raise a number of key points about the nature, extent and influence of children and young people's participation in their home, school and communities.

Children and young people's lived realities of participation

1. Children and young people felt that adults should listen to them because of their status as citizens, their unique perspectives and their specialist expertise and knowledge on matters related to their lives. They revealed a genuine enthusiasm for playing a part in aspects of decision-making processes, particularly when they were given some encouragement to do so.
2. Most children and young people who participated in this research were generally dissatisfied with their level of input into decision-making processes in school, in relation to the area where they lived and, to a lesser extent, in the home. While there were some excellent examples of where student councils, youth forums, local youth and community groups and individual parents had proactively engaged children in decision-making processes, these opportunities were not the norm and where they were in place were not inclusive of all children and young people.
3. Many children and young people accepted the authority of adults regarding decision-making, although they were more likely to negotiate the adult–child power difference as they grew older. What they found frustrating and unfair was the low status adults often accorded to their opinions and the lack of explanation on how children and young people's opinions had been taken into account during a decision-making process.
4. Young children can take a very rational and reasoned approach to decision-making. This finding reiterates the importance of engaging children in participatory processes from a young age. Our experience of working with 7 and 8 year-olds, in particular, demonstrated their capacity to understand and reflect on issues of importance in their daily lives. Despite this, we found that younger children were among the most likely to miss out on opportunities to raise concerns that were pertinent to their lives and to have these concerns addressed as a result. For example, at the most basic level of formal representative structures, there was no student council in any of the primary schools involved in the study.

The children and young people made a number of suggestions in relation to facilitating their participation, many of which refer to the importance of positive relationships with the adults in their lives and the fostering of a participative culture in schools and community contexts (*see Appendix 21*).

Home

The home was experienced by children and young people as the setting most facilitative of their voice and participation in their everyday lives. There was a general sense among children and young people that they had a voice and some level of influence in the home, while also an acceptance that their parents had the ultimate authority. However, there was also evidence of tokenistic practices at home, as well as limited participation on such issues as food and clothes, leisure and choice of friends. Generally, children and young people felt it was legitimate for parents to have greater influence over certain issues, although they were more likely to negotiate these as they grew older.

Key barriers included:

- parents not effectively listening to them;
- age and maturity;
- lack of parental trust;
- tokenistic practices regarding participation at home.

Key enablers included:

- spaces where discussion can happen at home;
- good family relationships;
- being listened to and encouraged by parents;
- trust and growing levels of independence with age;
- decisions being perceived as fair;
- having the rationale for decisions explained to them by parents.

School

Most children and young people who participated in this research 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.

Key barriers included:

- adult recognition of their agency with increasing age and maturity;
- the autocratic and hierarchical nature of the school system;
- the lack of opportunities and space in the school week for their voice to be heard;
- lack of or poor relationships with key personnel in schools;
- poor information systems in schools, whereby policy changes or decisions regarding disciplinary procedures are not communicated effectively.

Key enablers included:

- increasing age and maturity;
- the availability of and access to scheduled and unscheduled structures for participation;
- appropriate spaces in the school timetable;
- relationships with key school personnel;
- a school culture that is facilitative of voice.

Community

Children and young people who participated in this research were generally ambivalent or dissatisfied with their level of 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 specific settings.

Key barriers included:

- negative adult attitudes generally towards young people;
- their own lack of awareness about how decisions are made at local level and how they could engage with these processes;
- the lack of identified spaces for children and young people in communities;
- poor access to facilities and activities in which young people are interested in engaging and the impact of the economic recession on this.

Key enablers included:

- adult recognition of their agency with increasing age and maturity;
- the existence of dedicated youth spaces in the community for them, such as youth cafés and youth projects;
- readiness of adults in dedicated youth spaces to listen to them;
- sport as a key site of participation in the community.

The participation of children and young people in both individual and collective decision-making was addressed in this research. However, while children and young people discussed their involvement in decisions about themselves as individuals, as well as family decisions in the home context (e.g. holidays, clothes), they prioritised collective decision-making in their responses about school and the community. This might be explained by their perceptions of themselves in these contexts. In particular, they did not see themselves as individuals with any effective power in schools and so there was limited discussion on individual decision-making (e.g. their involvement in their own learning) in the school context. The nature of 'community' and their engagement in individual decision-making within this context, other than perhaps in sporting activities, was also difficult for many of the children and young participants. While seeing themselves individually as quite powerless and marginal in their communities, some could envisage becoming involved in collective decision-making processes with adults and other young people.

Adult perspectives

The views of the adults interviewed as part of this research project were most informative, particularly when compared with the views of children and young people in the context of home, school and community.

Home

The views of parents reflected much of what the children and young people had to say about participation in the home.

Parents participating in this study appeared to be genuinely engaged in trying to listen to their children's views and to involve them in decision-making in the home. They felt that their children have never had more freedom to be heard in the home and explained that this is the product of changing childhood expectations and parental encouragement of their children to participate in domestic decision-making. In contrast, parents themselves had experienced a more authoritarian form of parenting as children, where they felt they really were 'seen and not heard'. Their own childhood experience was the main motivation for and influence on their parenting style, combined with factors such as their stage of parenting, energy levels and societal expectations.

A key source of concern for the parent participants was where to draw the line and overrule their children. Parents presented themselves as the gatekeepers of the nature and extent of their children's decision-making through clear boundary-setting. Ultimately, the parents indicated that they generally had the final say.

Community stakeholders discussed the importance of parents in encouraging children and young people's participation outside of the home and referred to how parents' capacity to facilitate this is being undermined by family problems and today's busy pace of life.

School

The participation of children and young people in the school context was the one area in the research where the realities experienced by children compared with adults were ultimately at opposite ends of the spectrum. While recognising the need to involve children and young people in decisions affecting them, school principals and teachers genuinely felt that there already existed adequate spaces for children and young people's voice in the school context, primarily through formal representative structures such as student councils. In contrast, the children and young people generally viewed schools as hierarchical institutions where even formal participation structures (including student councils) were experienced as undemocratic and ineffective.

Generally, school principals and teachers were positive about school being a facilitative space for children's voice, with plenty of time and opportunity for young people to contribute to decisions affecting them. Interestingly, they tended to refer mainly to the more formal, representative decision-making structures in existence in schools rather than to the opportunities and spaces for everyday participation by children and young people.

Parents' views were similar to those of the children and young people with regard to voice and participation in school settings. Overall, however, the parent participants seemed to have limited knowledge of their children's school experience and expressed scepticism in relation to their involvement in decision-making and scope to influence change within their school.

Community

There was a degree of consensus among the adult community stakeholders and children and young people about the lack of consultation between adults and young people in the provision of local services and facilities. Both raised the issue of negative adult attitudes and a lack of awareness among children and young people on how to make an input into local decision-making. However, those adults and young people involved in youth projects locally felt that the young people have a sense of ownership of these spaces due to their involvement in key decision-making about their design and the activities that take place there.

The community stakeholders recognised that children and young people have the right to a voice, to be heard and to be involved in the decisions that affect them in clubs and communities. However, they acknowledged that other adults, who may not share their understanding of child participation, often have a negative view of young people 'hanging out' in community spaces. They also thought that the youth organisations they were involved in did seek to realise voice and participation of children and young people through their structures, policies, activities and processes, and that they were successful in this to varying degrees. Some engaged children and young people in decision-making through formal involvement in the management of the organisation, while others involved them through more informal channels in making decisions about activities, rules and planning. The community stakeholders spoke about the need for training of adults in youth participation. They pointed out that the cutting of youth work budgets has had an adverse effect on the resourcing of dedicated youth spaces.

Parents had little to say about their children's participation in the local community apart from valuing their involvement in sports and local activities. This echoes their knowledge vacuum of their children's school experience (*see above*). However, those parents whose children were involved in specific youth clubs or community projects felt that the informal and relaxed approach of such settings is conducive to providing an environment where children can talk openly and can listen to the advice of youth workers, who may often wield an influence over and above their own as parents.

7.3 Conclusion

Informed by Lundy's (2007) Model of Participation, this research indicates that children and young people have varying levels of space, voice, audience and influence from one sphere of their lives to another. The only area that appears to meet Article 12 of the UNCRC in facilitating the right of the child and young person to express their views (and it is not possible to make a generalised statement here) is the home. Our findings are that in day-to-day decision-making within the family, a significant majority of children and young people who participated feel that they are heard and influence decisions. School is the area that emerges as least conducive to listening to children and young people. In the community sphere, the experience of children and young people, while positive in structured programmes and youth clubs or youth cafés, was very negative where there was no forum in which they could gather locally. While many children and young people highlighted very positive relationships with individual school personnel or adults in the community, such as youth leaders or sports coaches who encouraged and supported their engagement, there were an equal number who did not have such positive experiences. There were some excellent examples of proactive engagement of children and young people in decision-making processes in student councils, youth forums and local youth and community groups, but these opportunities were not the norm.

Children and young people in this study often identified issues that related to their everyday experiences, such as wanting to have places where they could gather and spend time with each other (youth-friendly public spaces); wanting to have decision-making power in relation to school uniforms, school tours, mobile phone and discipline policies; and wanting to make policing practices fairer in disadvantaged areas. These issues point to the need to focus on what Percy-Smith (2010) calls the more 'organic' spaces within everyday settings, where young people can benefit from the development of a culture of participation and active citizenship, and gradually take on more responsibilities and active roles according to their abilities and inclinations.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: DCYA/OMCYA Consultation Initiatives

The DCYA/OMCYA has undertaken consultations with children and young people for a wide range of policies, including:

- Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020 (2011)
- Listen to Our Voices! Hearing children and young people living in the care of the State (2011)
- Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in Primary Schools (2011)
- Reform of Junior Cycle in second-level schools (2010)
- White Paper on Crime (2010)
- Children and young people in the care of the State (2010)
- National Paediatric Hospital (2009)
- Mental health consultations with teenagers (2008)
- Misuse of alcohol among young people (2007)
- Development of the Irish Youth Justice Strategy (2007)
- Age of consent for sexual activity (2006)
- Development of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship (2006)
- Development of a national set of child well-being indicators (2005)
- Development of the National Recreation Policy (2005)
- Development of the Children's Code of Advertising (2004)

All reports are available at: http://www.dcya.gov.ie/viewdoc.asp?fn=%2Fdocuments%2FChildYouthParticipation%2FNational_Consultations.htm&mn=chiv&nID=5

Appendix 2: Informed Consent Form for Adult research participation

Information

Purpose of the study. This study will examine the extent to which children aged 7-17 years are provided with opportunities to participate in decisions affecting them within the family, the classroom and school, as well as the community. It is an Irish Research Council-funded project on behalf of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (DECLG).

Who is carrying out the research? The project is headed by Dr. Deirdre Horgan and is based in the School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork (UCC). The other members of the team are Dr. Catherine Forde, Dr. Shirley Martin, Dr. Aisling Parkes and Dr. Linda Mages. The project will be guided by a Steering Group. Members of the Steering Group are to be drawn from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, an external expert Professor Sheila Greene (Trinity College, Dublin), 2 parents, 2 community stakeholders, 1 school principal and 1 teacher, and an advisory group of 14 children and young people aged between 7 and 17 years.

What will the study involve? The study will involve a series of focus groups and in-depth individual and group interviews with children, families, teachers and other members of the community, in Cork, Dublin and Sligo.

Why have I been asked to take part? The research aims to talk to a wide variety of parents, teachers and community stakeholders, as well as children and young people of all age groups between 7 and 17 years around the country.

Do I have to take part? No – participation is voluntary. You are asked to read through this information and sign the attached Consent Form. You will be given a copy of this along with the information sheet to keep.

Will my participation in the study be kept confidential? Yes. We will ensure that you will not be identifiable in any report(s) or any subsequent publications resulting from the research. Any extracts from the interviews or focus groups will be anonymous.

What will happen to the information that I give? It is proposed to record the interviews. All recorded data (and any transcripts obtained from these recordings) will be labelled/coded in such a way that it will not be possible to identify any individual research participant. The data will be maintained confidentially for the duration of the study. On completion of the project, they will be retained for a further 2 years and then destroyed.

What will happen to the results? The results will be presented in a final report for the DCYA and DECLG and a youth-friendly version of the report will also be available to all participants and will be published online. We also hope to publish some of the findings.

What are the possible benefits to me of taking part? There will be no direct benefits to you, but we hope that the sessions will be interesting and that you will welcome the opportunity to have input into what we consider to be an important study into children's voice.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part? We don't expect any negative consequences for you in taking part in this research. However, as with any research process, it is possible that some might find the process boring, uncomfortable or inconvenient. As noted above, you may withdraw from the research at any time.

Who has approved this study? The project has received ethical approval from the Social Research Ethics Committee, UCC.

Any further queries? If you need any further information, you can contact:

Dr. Deirdre Horgan, Tel: (021) 490 2869; e-mail: d.horgan@ucc.ie

If you agree to take part in the study, please sign the Consent Form attached.

Consent

I..... agree to participate in the research study *Seen and not heard? The lived realities of children and young people's participation in Ireland in their homes, schools and communities.*

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing.

I understand that I am participating voluntarily.

I give permission for sessions to be recorded.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while participating.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data from the interviews, in which case the material will be deleted.

I understand that my anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity and taking heed of any sensitive issues arising.

I understand that disguised extracts from sessions may be quoted in any subsequent publications if I give permission below (*please tick one statement*):

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from sessions ☐

I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from sessions ☐

Signed: .....

Date: .....

Appendix 3: Informed Consent Form for Parents of research participants

Information

Purpose of the study. This study will examine the extent to which children aged 7-17 years are provided with opportunities to participate in decisions affecting them within the family, the classroom and school, as well as the community. It is an Irish Research Council-funded project on behalf of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (DECLG).

Who is carrying out the research? The project is headed by Dr. Deirdre Horgan and is based in the School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork (UCC). The other members of the team are Dr. Catherine Forde, Dr. Shirley Martin, Dr. Aisling Parkes and Dr. Linda Mages. The project will be guided by a Steering Group. Members of the Steering Group are to be drawn from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, an external expert Professor Sheila Greene (Trinity College, Dublin), 2 parents, 2 community stakeholders, 1 school principal and 1 teacher, and an advisory group of 14 children and young people aged between 7 and 17 years.

What will the study involve? The study will involve a series of focus groups and in-depth individual and group interviews with children, families, teachers and other members of the community, in Cork, Dublin and Sligo.

Why has your child been asked to take part? The research aims to talk to a wide variety of children and young people of all age groups between 7 and 17 years around the country.

Does my child have to take part? No – participation is voluntary. Your child will be given information and asked to sign a consent form and will have the option of withdrawing at any time. You are asked to sign the attached Consent Form and will be given a copy of this along with the information sheet to keep.

Will your child's participation in the study be kept confidential? Yes. We will ensure that your child will not be identifiable in any report(s) or any subsequent publications resulting from the research. Any extracts from the interviews or focus groups will be anonymous.

What will happen to the information that you give? It is proposed to record the interviews. All recorded data (and any transcripts obtained from these recordings) will be labelled/coded in such a way that it will not be possible to identify any individual research participant. The data will be maintained confidentially for the duration of the study. On completion of the project, they will be retained for a further 2 years and then destroyed.

What will happen to the results? The results will be presented in a final report for the DCYA and DECLG and a youth-friendly version of the report will also be available to all participants and will be published online. We also hope to publish some of the findings.

What are the possible benefits to my child of taking part? There will be no direct benefits to your child, but we hope that the sessions will be fun, interesting and that your child will enjoy the opportunity to have input into what we consider to be an important study into children's voice.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part? We don't expect any negative consequences for your child in taking part in this research. However, as with any research process, it is possible that some might find the process boring, uncomfortable or inconvenient. As noted above, your child may withdraw from the research at any time.

Who has approved this study? The project has received ethical approval from the Social Research Ethics Committee, UCC.

Any further queries? If you need any further information, you can contact:

Dr. Deirdre Horgan, Tel: (021) 490 2869; e-mail: d.horgan@ucc.ie

If you agree to take part in the study, please sign the Consent Form attached.

Consent

I..... give permission for my child .....
to participate in the research study *Seen and not heard? The lived realities of children and young people's participation in Ireland in their homes, schools and communities.*

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing.

I understand that my child will be participating voluntarily.

I give permission for sessions to be recorded.

I understand that my child can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while participating.

I understand that I or my child can withdraw permission to use the data from the interviews, in which case the material will be deleted.

I understand that my own and my child's anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising our identities and taking heed of any sensitive issues arising.

I understand that disguised extracts from sessions may be quoted in any subsequent publications if I give permission below (*please tick one box*):

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from sessions ☐

I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from sessions ☐

Signed: .....

Date: .....

Appendix 4: Informed Consent Form for Young Participants, aged 7-17 years

Information

What is this all about? It's about whether children and young people are able to take part in making decisions at home, in school and around where they live. We'll be talking to children, families, teachers and other members of the community.

Who is doing the research? A research team from University College Cork (UCC): Deirdre Horgan, Catherine Forde, Shirley Martin, Aisling Parkes and Linda Mages. They will be working with other people who give them advice, including people from the Government, people working with children and young people in places like youth clubs and schools, and we are also getting some help from a group of children and young people.

Why are we asking you to take part? We want to talk to a wide variety of children and young people aged between 7 and 17 years from all over the country.

Do you have to take part? No, only if you want to. There is a Consent Form for you to sign and you will be given a copy to keep. You can stop being in the group at any time.

Will your participation in the study be private? Yes. We will ensure that nobody else will know that it's you in anything we write about this research. We won't use your name and we will change things about you so people won't recognise you. Even if we say what you said, we won't say that it's you saying it.

What will happen to the information that you give? We are hoping to record the sessions. All recordings (and when we write out these recordings) will disguise who everyone is and kept hidden while the research is going on. When it's finished, they will be kept for 2 years and then destroyed.

What will happen to the results? We will write a report for the Government and a youth-friendly version for all the children and young people who take part, which we will also publish online. We also hope to publish some of the findings in papers and books.

How will this be good for you? There will be no direct benefits to you, but we hope that the sessions will be fun, interesting and that you will enjoy the opportunity to have your voice heard and help to shape how we do our research.

Might it be bad for you? We don't expect anything bad, but it is possible that some people might find the process boring, uncomfortable or inconvenient. As we said, you can stop being in the research at any time.

Is it safe? Yes. All of us have been checked out by the Gardaí and the project has been approved by the Social Research Ethics Committee, UCC, who make sure that research projects are safe for everyone taking part.

Any further queries? If you need any further information, you can contact one of the Research Team:

Dr. Deirdre Horgan, Tel: (021) 490 2869; e-mail: d.horgan@ucc.ie

If you agree to take part in the study, please sign the Consent Form attached.

Consent

I..... agree to take part in the research study *Seen and not heard? The lived realities of children and young people's participation in Ireland in their homes, schools and communities.*

I understand what the study is about and it has been clearly explained to me.

I understand that I don't have to take part.

I give permission for sessions to be recorded.

It's fine if I drop out of the study at any time.

I can tell the researchers that I don't want them to use stuff from the sessions and they will destroy it.

I understand that nobody will know it's me in the report because the researchers will change things so people won't recognise it's me.

I understand that disguised bits from sessions might be used later in books or other written matter if I give permission below (*please tick one box*):

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from sessions ☐

I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from sessions ☐

Signed: .....

Date: .....

Appendix 5: Children's Focus Group Schedule

(1 hour 20 minutes)

Resources

- Schedule for Research Team, information and consent sheets for parents and for children.
- Audio recorder, 3 large mats, 2 prompt posters, 'Would you rather …?' poster, markers, pens, paper, sticky notes, flipchart pad, blu-tak.
- Bring along goodies and 'twiddle' objects – balls, plasticine, pipe cleaners, chickens, sweets, etc.

Warm-up: Ball Name Game (3 minutes)

The first person throws the ball, saying her own name. Then the person she throws the ball to throws to someone else, saying their own name, until everyone has said their name at least once. Then, the person throwing the ball has to call the name of the person they are going to throw to, and so on.

Introduce project (5 minutes)

1. **What is the project about and why are we doing it?** UNCRC. The Government has asked us to find out how children and young people in Ireland feel about being listened to by the adults in their lives. We are adults, so we don't know what it's like to be a child or a young person in Ireland in 2012. We would like to talk to you so that we really get to understand what it's like to be you.
2. **What do we want to do today?** We want to ask you how much of a say you feel you have in decisions that affect you – at home, at school and around where you live.

What is a decision? (5 minutes) (poster)

We all make decisions all the time. I could ask you, '***Would you rather ….***' – shout out answers, hands up:

- Eat a snake or jump into an icy stream?
- Have slugs for breakfast or snails for dinner?
- Tidy the classroom or get extra homework?
- Play outside with your friends or watch TV?
- Have one sweet now or two when we finish the session?

This to be done with a vote, and majority rules! Secret ballot. Discuss this way of making a decision.

You can decide these things, but sometimes adults make decisions that affect you.

Open floor: Write suggestions up on a flipchart/note-taker (5 minutes)

Group discussion – Why should adults listen to children when they are making decisions about them?

What sorts of decisions get made about you? (40 minutes) Group discussion. Show children a collage of photographs and pictures denoting the widest possible range of decisions that children may be involved in making.

Mapping. 3 large-scale laminated maps, indicating home/school/community. Complete each map drawing places of importance (areas within their house, within their school, within their community, e.g. library, church, GAA club, etc.) using wipeable pens. Indicate on the map where you spend time, where discussions happen, what kinds of things you talk about there and how much of a say in decisions/choices you have there. Start from where children are at. Their experiences of decision-making. Mostly informal. Don't force the issues. For example: Community – perhaps this needs to stay at the level of interests and how children spend their free time. Write one or two words only or draw image, to show what these decisions are for each of the three realms: home, school and around where you live (don't be prescriptive –use collage method from Davey *et al* (2010a). Only prompt if there is silence.

- **Home:** Money, bedtime, food, what you do in your spare time, clothes, homework …
- **School:** What you do in school, lunch, school report, teachers, school tours, uniform/ tracksuit, PE and sport, subjects, break-times, discipline …
- **Community:** Litter, lighting, cars, things to do around your area, green spaces, playgrounds, safe places to cross road, decisions in your sports clubs or other after-school activities, what books there are in libraries, street lighting, stray dogs …

Who these decisions are made with? (Indicate mother/father/sibling/other)

Open floor discussion/ball game (5 minutes)

Group forms a circle and people pass a ball around. Hold onto the ball if you want to talk. Pass it on if not.

Appendix 6: Young People's Focus Group Schedule

(1 hour)

Resources

- Schedule for Research Team, information and consent sheets for parents and for young people.
- Recorders, 'Internet tree' poster, prompt posters, pens, paper, sticky notes, circle stickers, flipchart pad, blu-tak.
- Bring along goodies – prize and breakfast bar for Human bingo, fidget stuff, sweets, etc.

Warm-up: Human bingo (5 minutes)

Give each participant a bingo sheet and a pen. Explain that they have to move around the room greeting other participants and finding out specific bits of information about others in the group. There are 6 items on the bingo sheet: someone who missed breakfast this morning; someone who has taken a bus in the past week; someone who was born somewhere else; someone who has a pet dog; someone who likes green beans; and someone who has broken a bone.

When a participant has marked off all six items, they call 'House'.

The person who hasn't had breakfast is given a cereal bar.

Introduce project (5 minutes)

1. **What is project about and why are we doing it?** UNCRC and Project info flyer. The Government has asked us to find out how children and young people in Ireland feel about being listened to by the adults in their lives. We are adults, so we don't know what it's like to be a young person in Ireland in 2012.
2. **What do we want to do today?** We want to ask you how much of a say you feel you have in decisions that affect you – at home, at school, and around where you live.
3. **We are looking at participation from four different angles:** space, voice, audience and impact.

Group discussion

(based on Davey *et al,* 2010a; Hart, 1992; Funky Dragon website)

Divide participants into three groups. Use 3 flipchart sheets at 3 stations – one researcher at each station - to record points. Rotate groups at specified intervals. (30 minutes).

1. Home

- Are there 'spaces' where young people your age can have a say at home? (*e.g. family mealtimes, car journeys, living/TV room, bedroom, garden*)
- Do you feel young people your age have enough say at home?
- What decisions would people your age like to have more of a say in at home and why? (*e.g. dinner, being allowed out at weekends, washing up, Facebook, homework, bedtime, friends, money, smoking and drinking*)
- What types of things might affect whether people your age get a say at home?
- If you were the head of your household, how would you ensure that young people have more of a say at home?

2. School

- Are there 'spaces' where young people your age can have a say in school? (*e.g. student council, Green committee, canteen committee, Fair Trade committee, TY initiatives, class projects, class tutorial*)
- Do you feel young people your age have enough say in school?
- What would young people your age like to have more of a say in at school? (*e.g. homework, food in canteen, how a subject is taught, choice of sports*)
- What types of things might affect whether young people your age get a say in school?
- If you were the Principal or head teacher, how would you ensure young people have more of a say in school?

3. Local area

- Are there 'spaces' where young people your age can have a say in your local area? (*e.g. organisations that work with young people in your area – Council, youth club, Girl Guides, GAA, soccer, activities – music, going to shops*)
- What kinds of decisions that affect young people your age are made around the area where you live? (*e.g. street lighting, social problems, drink and drug use, Garda presence and powers*)
- Who makes these decisions?
- Have you ever been asked for your views about the area where you live? (*e.g. local Councillors, reps on committees in the area*)
- Do you feel young people your age have enough say in decision-making in your local area?
- What types of things might affect whether young people your age get a say in decisions made in your local area?
- How would you ensure young people had more of a say in the area where they live?

Use of the Internet

The Internet can be a place for fun, to keep in touch, shop, find things out or sometimes to influence change –discuss. *Suggestions*: online polls, rating games, signing petitions, organising protests, flash mobs.

- Do you use the Internet?
- Is the Internet a place where you feel you can have influence?

Ask participants to stick green stickers (to depict leaves) on the 'Internet tree' chart on the wall.

At the end, ask participants to make their own notes – a word, a phrase, a picture – then we can talk it through.

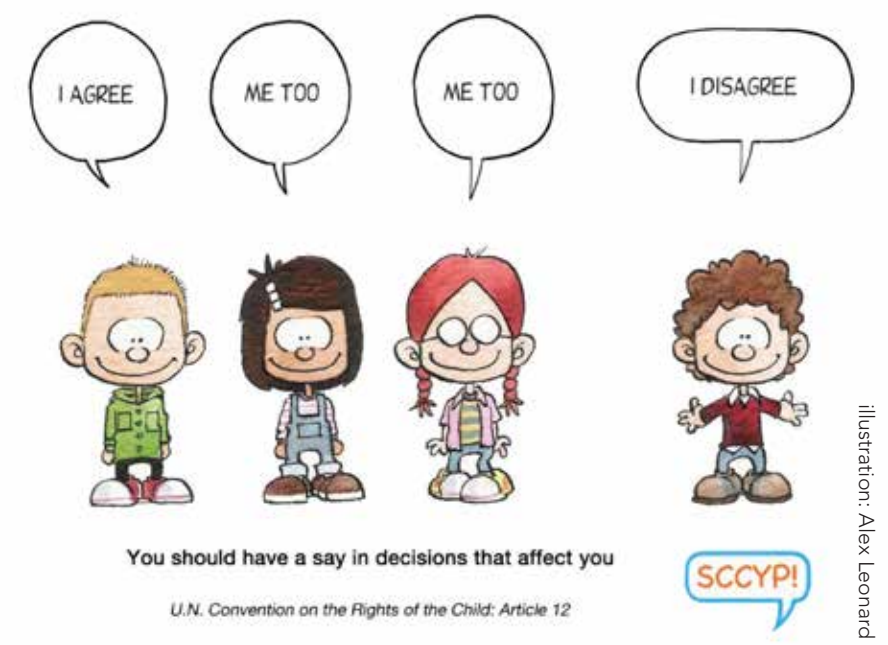
Appendix 7: Information sheet for children and young people

Seen and Not Heard? The lived realities of children and young people's participation in Ireland in their homes, schools and communities.

- **Irish Research Council-funded project** on behalf of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (DECLG).
- **Research Team** from the School of Applied Social Studies and Faculty of Law, University College Cork.
- **Team headed by Dr. Deirdre Horgan**, with Dr. Catherine Forde, Dr. Shirley Martin, Dr. Aisling Parkes and Dr. Linda Mages.
- All are **Garda-vetted**.
- **Ethical approval** from the Social Research Ethics Committee, UCC.
- **Steering Group** comprising of representatives from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government; external expert, Professor Sheila Greene, Trinity College, Dublin; parents; community stakeholders; school principal and teacher; and advisory groups of children and young people aged 7-17 years.
- **Article 12 of the UNCRC** states that all children should be provided with the opportunity to be heard in all decisions affecting them, once they are capable of forming views. Decisions concerning the child include those made within the family, at school and in the wider community, as well as at national and international level. For the purposes of this study, the extent to which children aged 7-17 years are provided with opportunities to participate in decisions affecting them within the family, the classroom and school, as well as the community, will be investigated through the use of a series of focus groups and in-depth individual and group interviews with children, families, teachers and other members of the community.
- **If you have any questions or for further information**, please contact: Dr. Deirdre Horgan, Tel: (021) 4902869; e-mail: d.horgan@ucc.ie

Appendix 8: UNCRC Information Sheet for Young People's Focus Groups

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)



The UNCRC gives children 42 rights.
Everyone under the age of 18 has ALL of these rights.

Article 12. You have the right to … have your own opinion, which is listened to and taken seriously.

Article 12 says that children have the right to express their views in all matters affecting them.

Does this mean that children can now tell their parents and other adults what to do?

No. It means that adults should listen to the opinions of children and involve them in decision-making, not that children should be in charge. The weight given to the child's views depends on the child's age and maturity.

The UNCRC encourages parents, judges, social workers, childcare workers and other adults responsible for children to consider the child's view and to use that information to make decisions that will be in the child's best interests.

Source: Used with permission of Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People (SCCYP).

Appendix 9: Interview Questions for Organisations and Groups working with children and young people

1. Does the organisation/group involve children and young people in decision-making?
2. If it does involve children and young people in decision-making, what methods or approaches are used to involve them (Board/Committee membership; meetings and discussions; voting, etc.)?
    - How often are children/young people involved in decision-making in the organisation?
    - What ages are the children and young people who are involved?
    - Does the organisation have a policy on children and young people's involvement?
3. Are the children/young people trained in decision-making?
4. Are there situations in which children/young people would not be involved in decision-making?
5. Describe one issue on which children/young people have been involved in decision-making? What was the outcome of the issue for the young people and for the organisation?
6. Please indicate the benefits of children/young people's involvement in decision-making (i) for the children/young people themselves; (ii) for the the organisation/agency/group; and (iii) for the community.
7. What are the general attitudes of people in the community towards children and young people's participation (i) in your organisation/group and (ii) in your community?
8. What needs to be done to ensure that children and young people are given a say in their communities?

Appendix 10: Focus Group/Interview Schedule for Parents

Home

1. Do you think it is important to listen to children?
2. What types of decisions affecting the children are most frequently made at home on a daily basis? (Interviewer prompts: *bedtime, bath time, clothes, DS, phone, Facebook time, what time they get up, TV, food choices, curfew; alcohol*)
3. What might impact on the extent to which your child participates in decision-making? (Interviewer prompts: *age, gender of parent/child, position in family*)
4. Can you recall a time when you didn't listen to your child, when you feel you should have? Tell us a bit about that.
5. How do your children react if they feel they aren't listened to? (Interviewer prompts: *Do your children accept parental authority where there is disagreement*)
6. Depending on family type, do you think that fathers and mothers (you and your partner) engage with children differently?
7. What has influenced your parenting views/style? (Interviewer prompts: *Did you feel listened to when you were a child?*)

School

1. Do your children talk to you about decisions made in school?
2. What do they say about their input into those decisions?
3. What types of things might affect your children having their voice heard in school?

Local area and activities outside the home

1. What sorts of issues, if any, have your children brought up with you about their neighbourhood/community? (Interviewer prompts: *places to play, hang-out, safety. Do they feel able to influence change in their community? Where? How?*)
2. Do you feel your children are listened to by other adults in the activities they are involved in, like sport, music, youth clubs?
3. How are decisions made about your children joining and leaving extra-curricular activities?

Appendix 11: Written Survey Questions for Parents

- How many children do you have and what ages and gender are they?

Child's name or initial	Age	Boy/girl	Notes

- What types of decisions do you make with your children?
- What types of decisions do you have the final say in as a parent?
- What places in the local area/community do your children use?
- What extra-curricular activities are your children involved in, if any?

Appendix 12: Summary of Parent Written Survey

Parent	Number of children			Decisions you make with your children	Decisions you have the final say on	Community places used by your children	Extra-curricular activities
	Boys (ages)	Girls (ages)	Total				
1	3 (aged 13, 11, 6)	1 (aged 8)	4	Extra-curricular Holidays Weekend activity Food choices Weekend movies	Technology use Discipline Nutrition	GAA club Soccer grounds Library Playground Park	Gaelic Soccer Music Dance Rugby Horse-riding
2	4 (aged 24, 22, 19, 13)	1 (aged 17)	5	Extra-curricular Holidays Days out Night life Food Subject choices	Privileges withdrawn for irresponsible behaviour Youngest child: Bedtime TV/ consoles off Homework Study time	Foróige Hurling club	Foróige Hurling Basketball
3		3 (aged 11, 8, 4)	3	Extra-curricular Holidays Friends 'Generally talk and decide together unless I feel very strongly'	Mainly decisions discussed Friends over Going to friends Dinners Outings	GAA club School playgroup	Soccer Gaelic Athletics Irish dancing
		1 (aged 11)	1	Buying clothes Holidays Dinners Pocket money for chores	Dinner Chores	Hall Library	Basketball Dancing
5	1 (aged 9)		1	Little say in 'serious issues' like medical procedures Supported in decisions affecting his happiness and value of life	Medical Bedtimes Routines Homework	Park Soccer ground	Gaelic football After-school club (*ceased, lack of funding*) Swimming
6	1 (aged 8)	1 (aged 11)	2	Holidays Food and drink Activities	Food and drink	Soccer ground Playground Church	Cycling Football Walking Swimming Horse-riding
7	1 (aged 12)	1 (aged 11)	2	Activities Beach Climbing TV Internet use Balance of IT	Friends over Going to friends Sleep-overs Diet Bedtime	Community hall for parties Playground Library	Skills training Speech and drama Gaelic football Soccer Swimming Guitar
8	2 (aged 19, 9)	2 (aged 18, 15)	4	Where they go Who with Times to ring Chores Homework	When due home	Hurling club Football club Soccer club School	Basketball
9	2 (aged 14, 8)	1 (aged 13)	3	'I like to make a lot of the decisions'	Where they go Who they meet Bedtime School decisions	Hurling club Football club	Football Hurling
10	1 (aged 7)		1	Food Where we go	What he wants Where he goes Times	Hurling club Football club	Football Hurling Basketball Swimming

Parent	Number of children			Decisions you make with your children	Decisions you have the final say on	Community places used by your children	Extra-curricular activities
	Boys (ages)	Girls (ages)	Total				
11	2 (aged 17, 11)	1 (aged 15)	3	*not available*	Bedtime Home time if out Homework Potential friends	GAA club Church Primary school Secondary school	Gaelic football Altar boy Badminton Athletics
12		1 (aged 15)	1	Clothes Bedtime Computer time School work	Where she goes Her school How long she stays where	*not available*	Horse-riding
13		2 (aged 13, 10)	2	Not family things Only clothes Make-up	Everything	Community Centre	Basketball
14	2 (aged 12, 7)		2	Most things	Where they go and who with	Community Centre	Swimming pool Martial arts Art Guitar lessons

Appendix 13: Profile Survey for Schools

Name of school	
Primary/Second level?	
Principal	
Secretary	
Address	
Telephone	
E-mail	
Website	
Catchment area	
Enrollment numbers	
Socio-economic indications	
Notes: ethnic/language make-up; disability supports	
Average class size	

Appendix 14: Agenda for Children's and Young People's Advisory Groups Meeting

Children's and Young People's Advisory Groups Meeting

Friday, 21st June 2013, 11.30 to 2.00pm
O'Rahilly Building, Room 203, UCC Campus

Welcome and thank you for attending our final Advisory Group Meeting for this project

Agenda

1. **Introductions:** Getting to know one another.
2. **Children and Young People's Voices:** Findings so far
   (Children's Advisory Group Room 203 and Young People's Advisory Group Room 202)
3. **Children's and Young People's Advisory Groups:**
   Facilitated discussion identifying important issues and making a poster.
4. **Feedback:** Both Groups feedback their identified issues and quotes
   (Young People's Advisory Group returns to Room 203)
5. **Presentation of Certificates of Participation**
6. **Thanks and Lunch**

Lunch 12.30 – 1.00pm

UCC Tour

- Meet at Visitor Centre 1.00pm
- Quadrangle Stories
- To the Crawford Observatory
- The Holy Chapel
- Stories of the President's Garden
- The Ogham Stones

Appendix 15: Agenda for Steering Group

Steering Group Meeting

Friday, 21st June 2013, 1.00 to 2.30pm
O'Rahilly Building, Room 244, UCC Campus

Working Lunch and Refreshments

Welcome and thank you for attending our second Steering Group Meeting for this project

Agenda

1. **Lunch and Introductions**

2. **Presentation:** Progress, Analysis and Next Steps
   - *Progress so far* – Dr. Deirdre Horgan
   - Browse posters of Children and Young People Focus Groups
   - *Synopsis of what children and young people think* – Dr. Aisling Parkes
   - *Children's and Young People's Advisory Groups' Perspectives* – Dr. Catherine Forde and Dr. Deirdre Horgan

3. **Facilitated Group Discussion**
   Analysis of the lived realities of children and young peoples participation in Ireland – Dr. Deirdre Horgan (Revisit the posters and write on flipchart paper):
   - What struck you about any aspect of the quotes?
   - What would you identify as the key issues?

4. **Initial Parent Data Analysis:**
   Reaching diverse audiences and making a difference – Dr. Shirley Martin
   - What are your expectations?
   - Raising awareness : Who and how?

5. **Shaping the report.**

Appendix 16: Posters of Children Participant Quotes for the Children's Advisory Group

Seen and not heard? The lived realities of children and young people's participation in Ireland in their homes, schools and communities.

Who?

Seen and not heard? The lived realities of children and young people's participation in Ireland in their homes, schools and communities.

Where?

Seen and not heard? The lived realities of children and young people's participation in Ireland in their homes, schools and communities.

What?

Seen and not heard? The lived realities of children and young people's participation in Ireland in their homes, schools and communities.

Barriers?

Seen and not heard? The lived realities of children and young people's participation in Ireland in their homes, schools and communities.

Help

Seen and not heard? The lived realities of children and young people's participation in Ireland in their homes, schools and communities.

Recommended

Appendix 17: Posters of Young People Participant Quotes for the Young People's Advisory Group

Seen and not heard? The lived realities of children and young people's participation in Ireland in their homes, schools and communities.

Seen and not heard? The lived realities of children and young people's participation in Ireland in their homes, schools and communities.

Where?

Seen and not heard? The lived realities of children and young people's participation in Ireland in their homes, schools and communities.

What?

Seen and not heard? The lived realities of children and young people's participation in Ireland in their homes, schools and communities.

Barriers?

Seen and not heard? The lived realities of children and young people's participation in Ireland in their homes, schools and communities.

Help

Seen and not heard? The lived realities of children and young people's participation in Ireland in their homes, schools and communities.

Recommended

Appendix 18: Children's Advisory Group – Summary of important decision-making issues

Seen and Not Heard Children Advisory Group 5th Class

Your Important decision-making issues in the home, school and community

HOME	1. Why can't brothers and sisters take turns, no matter what age? 2. Why do the younger get to pick everything? 3. Personal space, our decision is important 4. We should have our own personal space
SCHOOL	1. What days to wear your uniform and tracksuit 2. Why we have to do maths more than sport?
COMMUNITY	1. Who you get to play with in your community 2. If you want to play with someone it should be your choice 3. All friends should choose the same thing 4. Activities are important and they should be your choice 5. Activities are important because you might not like one thing and like another thing

Seen and Not Heard Children Advisory Group 2nd Class

Your Important decision-making issues in the home, school and community

HOME	1. Getting up in the morning 2. Not to watch TV too long
SCHOOL	1. What to eat, first to eat for lunch 2. Food for your lunch 3. Where to go on a school tour
COMMUNITY	1. What game to play 2. What to buy in the shop

Appendix 19: Young People's Advisory Group – Summary of important decision-making issues

Seen and Not Heard Young People Advisory Group

Your Important decision-making issues in the home, school and community

HOME	SCHOOL	COMMUNITY
1. What is for dinner? 2. How things get decided 3. Trust is needed	1. Respect of staff 2. Communication between students and staff 3. Everyone should have a say	1. How people treat each other 2. The atmosphere of the community 3. Communication

Seen and Not Heard Young People Advisory Group

Your Important decision-making issues in the home, school and community

HOME	SCHOOL	COMMUNITY
4. Social life 5. Everyone should get heard 6. Honesty 7. Communication with family members	4. Student Council 5. Limits to what can be said 6. How teachers communicate with you 7. How your peers interact with you	4. Respect for the area 5. Community association 6. Councillors

Appendix 20: Showing samples of the Young People Participants' Internet trees

Each branch of the tree represents an area of Internet use. Areas included communication that was formal and social; for educational purposes; to find information; gaming; voting, both rating and reviewing; shopping; and a branch for 'any other uses'.

Dublin City Second Level School Internet Tree

Dublin City Youth Club Internet Tree

Appendix 21: Recommendations from children and young people for facilitating their voice and participation

Home	School	Community
Definite times and spaces for discussion, e. g. weekly family meetings where parental attention is undivided.	**Participative school culture** with opportunities for engagement by children and young people in the collaborative development of school rules and policy, and a shared culture of respect and inclusiveness.	**Facilitating access in the community** through the location, timing of, information about and transport to activities, facilities and spaces.
Good family relationships. Parents actively listening to children and young people.	**Generation of good relationships with key school personnel.** Positive and respectful teacher/ school personnel attitudes towards young people.	**Development of relationships of respect** with adults in the community.
Explanation of the rationale for adults' decisions. Young people did not have an expectation that their decisions would always be acted upon.	**An appropriate learning environment**, with good facilities and small class size.	**Appealing, informal, flexible processes of participation** – fun, incentives, youth-friendly language and spaces.
Adult recognition of children and young people's agency with increasing age and maturity through communication and information sharing between parents and children.	**A more flexible and creative curriculum and availability of and access to scheduled and unscheduled structures for participation** (e.g. student councils and spaces such as a class set aside in the week to discuss issues of importance).	**Gather young people's views on issues of importance to them locally in their communities** through the establishment of youth reference groups or advisory committees and other consultative mechanisms.
		Dedicated youth spaces, such as youth cafés and youth projects. Where such services are developed for use by young people, they should be planned and managed by the young people themselves.

Appendix 22: Gantt Chart Research Phases – October 2012 to September 2014

	Oct 2012	Nov 2012	Dec 2012	Jan 2013	Feb 2013	Mar 2013	Apr 2013	May 2013	June 2013	July 2013	Aug 2013	Sept 2013	Oct 2013	Nov 2013	Dec 2013	Jan 2014	Feb 2014	Mar 2014	Apr 2014	May 2014	June 2014	July 2014	Aug 2014	Sept 2014
PHASE 1 Project Setup Ethical approval, Garda clearance, establishment of Steering Group and Advisory Groups																								
PHASE 2 Steering and Advisory Groups Meetings																								
PHASE 3 Pilot																								
PHASE 3 Sampling Recruitment of research participants																								
PHASE 4 Data collection Group and individual interviews																								
PHASE 5 Data analysis and review																								
PHASE 6 Project write-up																								
PHASE 6 Final report Following peer review process																								

NOTES

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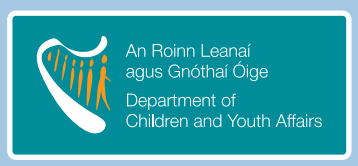

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