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Hearing the Voices of Children and Youth in Housing Estate Regeneration

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Abstract
There is growing acknowledgement that citizens have the right to participate in policy decisions that affect them, especially in areas of socio-economic disadvantage that are subject to large-scale interventions such as housing regeneration. This article focuses on the voices of 78 Irish young people in relation to changes to their environment that affect their sense of identity, safety, belonging, place and community in ways that are different from adults. The article argues that it is crucial to use appropriate methods to engage with children and youth and reveals that they have many ideas on their area and a desire to influence the decision-making process.

Keywords: children's rights, participation, urban regeneration, focus group methods

Introduction
It is increasingly recognized that participation in public policy decision making is the right of all citizens. This is especially important for those who live in areas of socio-economic disadvantage, which are frequently the subjects of major public policy interventions such as housing estate regeneration programs. Housing estate regeneration can affect children's lives in terms of their living conditions and environmental surroundings, and their sense of safety, belonging, place, identity and community (Driskell, Bannerjee & Chawla, 2001). However, children's voices are seldom heard in such programs, even though the local built environment is where children spend most of their time and changes to it can have profound and long-lasting effects on their lives.

While there is a growing trend towards bringing the voice of the citizen/ service user into policy formation and program design, eliciting the opinions of adults—while a necessary and important element of good practice in its own right—does not replace the need to hear the views of children and youth. This article explores the views and perceptions of young people on the regeneration of their housing estate in relation to what they like about where they live, what they would like to change, and the ways in which they would like to participate in the regeneration program. The article outlines the methodological approach adopted and presents the findings of a research project conducted in Cork City, in the south of Ireland in 2013. The research was funded by the Irish Research Council, Irish Department of Children and Youth Affairs (Children's Participation Unit) and

the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government as part of a government strategy to enhance opportunities for children's voices to be heard across a range of public policy areas. The purpose was to contribute to the development of national consultative processes and to share the findings with the Local Authority responsible for the regeneration program.

Children and Participation Rights

Earls (2011, p. 15) argues that child rights are "the last station along the human rights succession" and one of the most important because that period of life is one of openness, change and enthusiasm. The debate about children's citizenship has moved from the subordination of children (e.g. Marshall, 1950, who argued that children should be viewed as citizens in potential only) to their recognition as citizens in their own right (James, 2011). The deficit model of childhood, whereby children are viewed as having limited competencies and as being incomplete in comparison to the adults they will become, is being challenged. Philips (2004, p. 168) has argued that children are excluded from participation in decision making on two grounds: "Their social class (euphemized as 'low educational attainment') is deemed to leave them 'unskilled' to make decisions; their generational position as 'human becomings' (rationalized through the child development paradigm) is deemed to leave them 'unready' to make decisions."

Horton, Hadfield-Hill, Christensen, and Kraftl (2013, p. 250) have critiqued the emphasis on "children-as-tomorrow's-adults" as limiting "children and young people's capacities as politicized actors (for good or for bad), activists or co-constructors of communities, here and now." Increasingly, children are seen in terms of what they contribute in the present as current citizens, not merely in future-oriented constructions of the contribution they will make as adult citizens (Lister, 2007).

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; 1989) highlights the importance of affording children the right to express their views on matters affecting them. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009) has asserted that "the right of all children to be heard and taken seriously constitutes one of the fundamental values of the convention." Respecting children as active subjects of rights means the validity and relevance of their experiences and views should be afforded due recognition in governmental processes.

Participation rights are seen as the most radical part of the UNCRC because they give substance to the agency and capabilities of children, rather than focus on their dependency and vulnerability (Earls, 2011). Some commentators argue that this could lead to significant change for the status of children in society, whereby the best interests of the child are decided through their involvement. This goes beyond a narrow legalism (where children can participate in care and legal proceedings) towards hearing children's voices in wider community and political matters, what Keane (2008, p. 16) calls "the age of the child citizen."

Justifications for children's right to participation include that their participation leads to better decisions for them; provides insights for policy making, budgeting and service delivery; helps build capacity for engaging in democratic processes; helps children stay safe; and makes adult decision-makers more accountable

(Lundy & Stalford, 2013). Participatory citizenship can enable children to develop confidence and competencies in the public sphere and is essential to young people's integration, personal development, empowerment and material well-being (Powell, Geoghegan, Scanlon & Swirak, 2012).

Lundy (2007) elaborates on Article 12 of the UNCRC by devising four elements to realize its principles: space, voice, audience and influence. Participatory processes must proactively invite and encourage children's input, "rather than simply acting as a recipient of views if children happen to give them" (p. 934). Lundy argues that children's right to a voice must be facilitated by child-friendly information, time to understand the issues that affect them and fun activities to elicit their views. In accordance with the UNCRC, children's views must be given due weight, which requires authorities to listen actively and demonstrate respect for the opinions of children.

Children and Participation in the Built Environment and Urban Planning

In terms of urban planning, however, consultations between local authorities and communities are usually between adults, with the belief that they represent the views of everybody including children (Goodwin & Young, 2013). At a global level, UNICEF (2012) has expressed concern about the absence of children from urban planning, warning of the dire consequences in terms of their health and even their ability to survive, especially in circumstances where natural disasters, conflict and unrest impact urban living conditions.

While much of the literature underscores the benefit of community involvement for both youth and adults, typical community activists tend to be older individuals who have been residents in an area for some time (Fitzpatrick, Hastings & Kintrea, 2000). Attention has also been given in the literature to the lack of representation of young people in community forums, and the marginal position of young people in terms of the political process (Fitzpatrick et al., 2000). In the context of public/social housing communities, Goodwin and Young (2013, p. 346) note that "the categories of 'residents' and 'tenants' used, for example, in resident engagement and participation strategies are inclusive only of the adults who lease properties from the housing provider."

Speak (2000) has argued that while there has been some acceptance of the need to consult with children in areas such as urban design and the environment (see also Ward, 1990; Simpson, 1997), there is a need to develop a new concept of children as agents at all levels in urban neighborhoods. Fitzpatrick and colleagues (2000) have argued that it is only very recently that children have emerged as a focus of urban regeneration programs and suggest three main reasons for this: first, a recognition of the special disadvantage of young people in deprived areas; second, the problems perceived to be caused by young people in these areas; and third, an increasing interest in extending community participation to include young people.

Children's Participation in Research about Their Environments

Kraftl, Christensen, Horton and Hadfield-Hill (2013) have pointed to "a rich seam of social-scientific research" that addresses the question of children's agency and rights in everyday life. This includes work from researchers such as Christensen and James (2008), Kraftl, Horton and Tucker (2012), and Pells (2012) and provides recognition of how children deal actively "with the complexities and

vulnerabilities of their social, cultural and material worlds" (Kraftl et al., 2013, p. 192). They also note that the recognition of children's agency has given rise to a critique of the "adultist assumptions" implicit in urban spaces (Kraftl et al., 2013, p. 192). This critique has produced a body of work concerned with children's sense of agency and their experiences of urban space and neighborhood (Chawla, 2001), mobilities (Nordström, 2009; Karsten, 2005; Skelton & Gough, 2013), and play (Gleeson & Sipe, 2006).

Methodological Approach

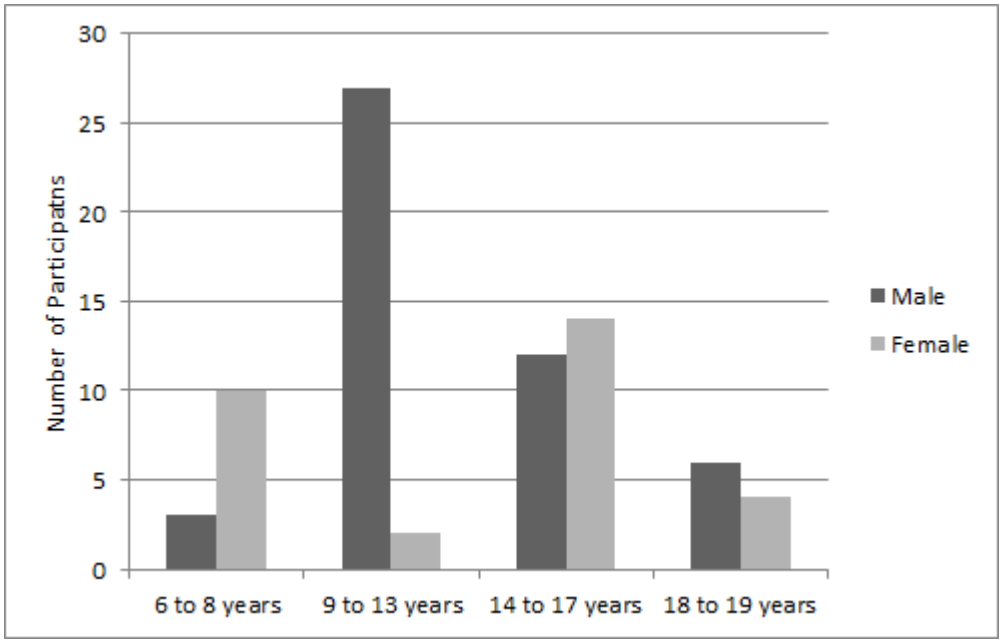
The research presented here followed Lundy and McEvoy's (2011) recommendations that children's participation in research adhere to the following principles: be voluntary and safe; be creative and child-centered; ensure children's views are carefully listened to and acted upon; ensure that children receive feedback and are engaged in research outcomes.

The case study estate was a large public/social housing development in Cork City, in the south of Ireland with high concentrations of socio-economic disadvantage. According to national deprivation indicators, it is the most deprived area within the jurisdiction of the city. Census 2011 shows that the estate is characterized by high levels of unemployment (22 percent of its population aged 15 and over are unemployed) and high levels of lone parenthood (56 percent of families with children are headed by lone mothers). The estate has particularly low levels of educational attainment (30 percent of its population aged 15 and over have no education beyond primary level) and home ownership rates (24 percent of households own their own home). The estate was originally constructed during the 1970s and is now undergoing a major regeneration program. The regeneration program entails physical, environmental, and socio-economic strands involving house demolition and rebuilding, urban design and public space interventions, and social and economic initiatives.

The research involved a series of focus groups with 78 children and youth aged from 6 to 19 years, 48 male and 30 female. Thirteen of the participants were aged 6-8 years, 29 aged 9-13 years, 26 aged 14-17 years and 10 aged 18-19 years as detailed in Figure 1. Through networking, the researchers accessed not only the general population of children and youth through primary and secondary schools, but also more "difficult to reach" young people in early school-leaving programs, training workshops and youth projects. Informed consent was sought before children, youth and adults participated in the focus groups.[1]

Figure 1. Age and gender of participants

[1] Ethical permission was granted by the University's Social Research Ethics Committee, the relevant committee of the University Research Ethics Board. The researchers were granted Garda [Police] Vetting Clearance for working with children prior to beginning the research.



There are specific advantages to focus group research with children in that the focus groups create a safe and encouraging peer environment and replicate types of group settings with which children are familiar (Hennessy & Heary, 2005). This study adopted a range of approaches to focus group research, acknowledging the capacities of different age groups (Lansdown, 2005; Hennessy & Heary, 2005). We held ten focus groups, and due to how participants were accessed, many focus groups were mixed-sex groups and the size of groups varied according to which organization facilitated the session. For example, in schools, focus groups had up to 18 participants who were broken up into smaller subgroups, while in smaller youth clubs and after-school groups, focus groups ranged from five to eight participants. The focus groups were led by the researchers, and project workers were asked to be present because of their familiarity with the young people, as recommended by Curtis and colleagues (2004). The presence of project workers helped to create a relaxed and informal atmosphere. Their presence facilitated an openness from the young people in the focus groups by complementing the researcher's enquiries and encouraging each young person to express themselves.

The main activity of each focus group incorporated a number of questions similar to the studies of Goodwin and Young (2013) and Smith and Kotsanas (2014) with Australian children in urban areas, which asked open-ended questions about their neighborhoods. Focus groups centered on a data collection method called "the Wheel" (subsequently called "the Pizza" by some of the young people). It involved a circle divided into four thematic quadrants addressing 1) What I like about my area, 2) What I don't like about my area, 3) What I'd like to change about my area, 4) The ways I would like participate. Discussions with the younger age groups were framed using the Wheel and art/drawing. For older groups, the Wheel, photography and a rap project were used.

This article relays conversations between the young people as they completed the Wheel exercise. The analysis was based on thematic coding by age cohort, identifying the categories and subcategories important to each group.

Findings

The Positives of the Area

Common opinions were expressed by all age groups in relation to amenities and facilities, and family and friends. All the children and youth involved expressed positive opinions about youth clubs and centers, sports facilities, shops, the park, and the proximity of family and friends in their area.

In terms of personal relationships, playing with friends and family is particularly important for the children under 13 years of age. Knowing people in the neighborhood gives them a sense of security and well-being. Because they are young, they are not allowed to walk to shops or friends' homes or schools without accompaniment, so proximity is very important. As one of the children (aged 6-8) said when explaining what she was writing on the Wheel: "I like having my cousins live near me. My Mam won't let me walk." Similarly, a boy said one of the things he likes best was "Having friends and family around you... Loads of terraces." A discussion held by a group of girls aged 6-8 particularly focused on personal relationships as well as some of the services in the area:

> *Girl 3: I like going to the dancing club.*
> *Girl 2: I like my BFFs [Best Friends Forever].*
> *Girl 4: I like knowing the people who are in my terrace[2]… I like staying in my terrace. Knowing the people in my terrace. I like living near the club [child and family support organization]. And you are allowed to play out because Mam knows all the people.*

Older teenagers focused more on facilities and amenities. The youth center is very important to 14-17 year-olds, with one girl noting that "The Youth Centre is very good for youth projects, café and to get young people off the streets" and they also like the new buildings and houses that are being constructed as part of regeneration. Public services also featured more substantially for 18-19 year-olds, including schools, children's day care center, library and the bus service. According to one young man, "It [the area] has everything. It is near to the city as well. What is there to complain about?"

Negatives of the Area

Two of the biggest concerns expressed by the children and youth are anti-social behavior and personal safety. For the youngest group (ages 6-8) noise is a particular stress factor, which reflects the poor built quality of their homes, lack of sound insulation, and night-time street activity.

> *Girl: Imagine, my Mam was sleeping in my bed with me and… the baby was screaming and my Mam and Da sleep next to where the dog is barking. Everyone is screaming when they walk around. They wake my baby brother.*

Concerns about safety and anti-social behavior for 9-13 year-olds centered on intimidation. One boy said: "We were walking on the road and a fella came up to me, grabbed me by the shirt, started mocking me, tried to fight me an' everything." Some of the children were also concerned about motorbikes in the estate. One girl (aged 6-8) commented, "Every day when I'm playing, they drive down and it's really noisy" while another girl (aged 9-13) said "They shouldn't

[2] Terraces are rows of similar houses joined together by their side walls.

have motorbikes in the park because of kids. Not safe." However, others interested in motorbikes imagined a special "bike park" or scrambling track as a solution. According to one boy (aged 9-13) "It wouldn't cost that much to brush up the place. A motor cross track. Nearly every child has a motorbike and they have nowhere to go."

For the older age groups, the prevalence of public drinking and drug-taking and dealing is a major concern. Young people aged 14-17 feel unsafe in their area and identify drinking and drug use as a blight on the area.

Boy 1: It is destroying it.
Facilitator: Why is it destroying it?
Boy 1: Because people can't go out on the streets because there's drugs, fighting and there is trouble…
Boy 2: Drugs are making the place a bad name, wrecking the place. That is why people are trying to move.

This impacts on their access to local amenities and sports and recreational facilities, in particular the local basketball court.

Facilitator: You don't like the basketball court?
Boy 1: It's pointless, like. There are all gangs up there. And all they are doing is smoking up there and taking drugs.
Boy 1: And it is all covered in glass…
Boy 2: They come over and they'd be wrecking the game, or something like.

Similar issues are focused on by the 18-19 year-olds who are concerned with "Heroin heads. Smoking heroin and selling heroin to all the young people" and "Junkies, smoking and hanging around." These youth are especially concerned with the reputation of the estate and were at pains to point out that not everyone is "a scumbag" and that the attitudes from elsewhere in the city towards their area are misinformed. Many take pride in being from the area, and are hurt by its constant negative depiction.

Boy 1: It does have a bad name. But a lot of that was over joyriding and a lot of that was over eight years ago. It has changed big time since then.
Facilitator: So you think the area has changed. [To other participants] Do you think the area has changed as well?
Boy 2: Yea, big time. Since they closed up the alleys, there is nowhere for scumbags to go and stuff.
Girl 1: There are scumbags out there, but we are not scumbags. Like do you know what I mean? So we are getting a bad name for what those people are doing.

They want to build their futures in their area, but are worried about employment opportunities and raising children in a stigmatized and unsafe area. According to one young woman: "Sure you couldn't even get a f***ing job up here."

Quality of the Environment

The children and youth of all ages are highly critical of the environmental standards in the area. Glass and broken swings in the local park are big issues. One boy aged 6-8 stated that "the last time I sat down I cut my leg there on the glass." Older age groups are critical of the failure of the local authority and the community to maintain the cleanliness of the estate. "They don't even clean it. It

is a manky [disgusting] place" (girl aged 18-19). The young people acknowledge that some of the problems relating to litter and dumping emanated from some residents: "There was a bin in the park and people burned it, like" (boy aged 18-19). "People be throwing rubbish and naggins [alcohol bottles] in the ground and that" (boy aged 18-19). The older groups were also concerned with the enclosed nature of the estate, that there are "Too many bars and barricades around the place," and they would like a more open environment.

Ideas for Change and for Regeneration

All the children and youth express a demand for a cleaner and more attractive physical environment. "I'd like to see more trees. Go greener" (boy aged 9-13).

(6-8 year-olds): *Girl 1: The water that is everywhere, the green water, and then people are always throwing things into it, rubbish.*
Girl 4: I'd like a bigger garden to play in. Not just room for a shed.
Girl 1: I'd like to change broken stuff... Sometimes people break glasses and just leave it there. I'd like to clean up all the glass as well.

Children and youth are positive about regeneration and think that it will bring improved housing and better facilities: "I feel happy because we'll get new ones. Better environment" (boy aged 6-8). However, there were some negatives expressed about the impact of regeneration, especially in relation to social relationships such as the impact on their networks. One young girl said: "I've a good one. I don't like all the houses being knocked down." She then drew a picture of a house and a wrecking ball damaging it, writing "Why?" on the roof. She later stated, "I don't like when people have to move out of their houses because they're our friends." Another young girl said something similar: "I don't like my friends going away." The few children in the research who had so far moved due to regeneration expressed happiness that they now live in a quieter area.

The perceptions of what regeneration will deliver differ according to each age group. Those in the youngest age group (6-8 year-olds) have practical concerns relating to play and would like a better playground. Older age groups see regeneration in terms of providing specific amenities for youth, such as a scrambling track and a better basketball court. The children aged 9-13 were quite focused on the provision of amenities in the area.

Boy 1: Put in free all-weathers [synthetic playing surface].
Boy 2: Put more stuff in the park.
Boy 3: I'd make a biking place, a huge biking place.

Priorities for ages 14-19 years reflected concerns around quality of life, employment opportunities and community safety. There was a debate among 14-17 year-olds about the closure of some of the alleys that had attracted anti-social behavior in the area. Some were supportive of this while others were critical of the closure of alleys without their input because this cuts them off from their established access to school, amenities and friends, and causes them some inconvenience: "It is a good thing that they closed the alleys. People feel safer... The only bad thing is there is no more shortcut to the shop/off-license" (boy, 14-17).

The older age groups would like the place to be made more livable, to get jobs and learn a trade (such as carpenter, plaster or electrician), and develop better

estates. The young men are keenly aware of the potential job opportunities, with one group in a training center (aged 18-19) intent on writing to the City Manager to seek local employment and apprenticeships in the regeneration program: "They [jobs] should be given to the community because it is being done in the community. You know what I mean?"

The older groups would also like to see greater commercial activity in the area, such as cafés and restaurants where they could meet and socialize freely, just like other young people in other neighborhoods across the city. All groups would like more police in the area, although the oldest age group (18-19 years) were more negative in their opinions of the police than younger groups.

The priorities of the children and youth span a wider understanding of regeneration, beyond a "bricks and mortar" approach that narrowly focuses on the replenishment of the housing stock. Young people see the links between environmental, community and economic regeneration, viewing these as having equal importance to the physical regeneration of their community. They would like to see more amenities and services for young people, improvements to the physical and environmental conditions of the area, and stress the importance of economic development such as jobs, more shops and a restaurant for the area.

Having a Say

All of the children and youth would like to be involved in the decision-making around regeneration. The 6-8 year-olds think it is very important that young people have a say in what happens in the community so that the local government will know what young people think and hence "they get smarter and brainier." They had many proposals for how the local government could engage with children and youth about regeneration, including having a representative from the City Council talk to them directly, whether in the child and family support organization they attend, through school, in their own homes or on the street. They proposed that a shorter masterplan (what they call "a book") be distributed to children. The participants suggested they could be updated about what is happening in the area through notes posted on telephone poles and trees.

The 9-13 year-olds in particular articulated a highly developed understanding of their rights as children to be involved in matters that affect them. These children had worked with their teachers and youth workers on social justice, environment and human rights issues, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, throughout the year. The human rights discourse gave them a frame of reference to articulate their views on how they could have a say on regeneration, and they wrote the following on the Wheel:

> *We should have our own say. / We should know what they are doing 'cos we live here. / We should be heard. / We are children and we have our own rights. / We have a bigger imagination. / Adults should listen to children.*

Overall, these children felt very strongly that regeneration was progressing apace and that they, and their parents, had not been consulted sufficiently, if at all. They felt they should be entitled to have a say, that they should be heard, that they had bigger imaginations than the adults and that the regeneration officials were missing an opportunity by not speaking with them. In a very

practical sense, they thought the regeneration officials should at least survey the views of young people and meet with them on a regular basis.
In contrast, the young people aged 14-19 expressed their rights as future residents and adults, rather than their rights as children in the here and now, showing the value of human rights education with children and youth from a young age. Those aged 14-17 were also very keen to have a say and to have regeneration meetings that involve young people. They wrote the following on the Wheel:

> *We are the future so we should have an opinion. / Yes, young people should have a say in this because we are the future and it should be our decision on what will help the community. / We are the ones that are growing up and have to live in [the area] when everything is being changed.*

The participants from the age of 18 upwards came across as more resigned to the reality that their voices are not being heard, and to what regeneration could actually deliver in terms of opportunities for training and employment and a better future. These youth argue that consultation with young people should happen now because they are going to grow up in the area and when they are older, it may be too late to have a say: "When we do get older, they still will be not caring about us anyway. Sure, then it will be too late anyway, it will half be finished. What we had, what should be there, what we think would help the place, wouldn't be there" (boy, age 18+). They proposed several ways of having a say, including meetings with the local government, planners and designers; participating in planning meetings; working on the building and construction sites; and having updates provided specifically for children and youth. However, some of these young people are cynical about their influence, stating that the City Council "don't care what we think about it" (girl, age 18+), that meeting with the Council would "just be a waste of time because if they wanted us involved, they would have already involved us" (girl, age 18+), and that they wouldn't be taken seriously because "they would just look at us and think 'They are just kids'." They wrote:

> *It might be a waste of time to talk to the Council because if they wanted us involved in it, we would already be involved.*
> *Even if they don't know we feel like this, they should have still considered the young people and their opinions.*

Conclusions

Children and youth are often absent from community consultations as it is assumed that adults speak on their behalf. This is despite the fact that as the literature has noted and this research confirms, "children and young people have interests in the broad spectrum of neighborhood issues" (Goodwin and Young, 2013, p. 345), and are capable of expressing their views (Smith and Kotsanas, 2014). This research has established that children have voices that must be heard as rights holders in the "here and now" and not as "adults in the making." It echoes the view of Percy-Smith and Thomas (2010, p. 357) that opportunities for participation by children and youth living in poverty and disadvantaged areas are essential and can be "a means by which to access other rights in the daily struggle to meet individual needs." The research highlights the importance of actively listening to the voices of children and young people and enabling their capacity as agents to influence change.

This project makes important contributions to understanding the perceptions of children and youth regarding their area, what should be changed, and that they should have a say in the regeneration of their estate. Their views include reflections on relationships and community, services and amenities, personal safety and security, and the reputation and stigma they feel is attached to their area. Their views range from the positive to the negative, and from the practical to the aspirational. They would like to be consulted regularly, but some—especially the older age groups—express skepticism that this will occur.

Lundy (2007) draws attention to the importance of the phrase, "all matters affecting the child" in Article 12 of the UNCRC, which necessitates policy-makers asking children and youth what matters affect them. Central to citizenship is the capacity to voice one's opinions and express needs, and to have these taken into account (Earls, 2011). Thus, efforts must be made to engage children and youth as citizens, let them speak for themselves, be active agents of change, and not always be spoken for by adults such as their parents/caregivers and teachers.

However, it is crucial to use appropriate methods to engage children and youth in ways that are meaningful and attractive to them. The effectiveness of the methods adopted in this research were confirmed by the degree of enthusiasm and participation and the quality of the feedback and responses of the young people. Despite the effectiveness of these methods and the evidence that children are not short of ideas, formal procedures at the local level in Cork City do not specifically include young people in their own right. While the findings of this research informed the goals and objectives of the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making (2015-2020) launched by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, translating this into local actions has not fully materialized.

Where appropriate methods are used, children and youth reveal that they have many ideas about their built environment with wider public policy applications. The challenge to local policy-makers and service providers is to hear their voices and respond to them in meaningful ways.

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