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Learning from children's voice in schools: Experiences from Ireland

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Abstract

In Ireland there is progressive legislation on children's participation in the education system. The Education Act 1998 advocates that school boards should involve students in the school and establish student councils in second-level schools. Since the publication of this legislation progress on realising students' participation in schools has been slow. In 2006 the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that Ireland strengthen its efforts to enable children to express their views in schools and other educational institutions. The National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making (2015), the first to be produced internationally, commits to facilitating children and young people's voice in the development of education policy, the running of schools and in other areas of school policy. This paper presents and discusses the results of qualitative participatory research with children and young people aged between 7 and 17 years, teachers and school principals, and parents, on their attitudes towards and opportunities for participation by students in schools in Ireland. The data reveal that students are keen to participate in school but recognise that their opportunities to do so are inadequate, that teachers understand participation very differently from students, and that parents have little knowledge of their children's participatory experiences in school. It concludes that effective participation in schools requires policy, practical and cultural change.

Keywords Children's participation · Children's rights · Education policy · Relationships · Student voice

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Introduction

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is concerned with children's right to express their views freely on all matters concerning them. Article 28 of the Convention recognises children's right to an education. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009) declares that

> 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 (ibid, para. 107).

In its consideration of Ireland's second periodic report the UN Committee recommended that Ireland "Strengthen its efforts to ensure…that children have the right to express their views…and to have those views given due weight in particular in families, schools and other educational institutions" (2006, p. 6). While Ireland has introduced some formal mechanisms for child participation in school, such as student councils at second level, children's experiences both within and outside these school structures have been largely unexplored (Cosgrove and Gilleece 2012). The research on which this paper draws was part of a wider study that explored children and young people's experiences of participation in the home, school and community in urban and rural Ireland. The study, which was commissioned by the Irish Department of Children and Youth Affairs, forms part of a series of Irish State-led developments aimed at understanding the lived experiences of children and young people; these initiatives are detailed in the next section. The investigative focus of the study was shaped by Laura Lundy's (2007) conceptualisation of participation under Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in terms of space, voice, audience and influence. It was also influenced by social and relational ideas which see children as active subjects in shaping their own lives, those of the people around them, and the communities and societies in which they live (Jans 2004; Smith 2007; Percy-Smith 2010; Tisdall and Punch 2012; Wyness 2012; Percy-Smith 2015; Horgan et al. 2017). These ideas are based on a perception of children and young people as individuals, but individuals who live relationally, inter-generationally and in their communities (Valentin and Meinhart 2009). The approach recognises the respective roles and positions of children and adults and that interdependence between adults and children is an important basis for participation (Wyness 2012). Wyness (2012) points out that while 'child' and 'adult' are "distinctive categories" (p. 435), children and adults develop their 'identities in and through routine engagement with each other'.

This article will focus on the study's findings relating to school and will explore the extent to which children and young people feel their right to be heard and to actively participate in both formal and informal ways is currently respected in the school environment, and compare these experiences with the perspectives of school principals, teachers and parents.

Policy background

In September 1992 Ireland ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and in accordance with Article 12 of the Convention the Irish State committed to including the voice of the child and children's views in policy-making processes. Since the ratification of the UNCRC, the Irish state has undertaken a number of initiatives to encourage and support children and young people's participation including the establishment of local and national youth councils, the establishment of an Ombudsman for Children, a series of national consultations on issues concerning children and young people and the development of the first full ministerial post and department for children and youth affairs (DCYA) in 2011.

Some Irish legislation provides for the voice of the child; this legislation includes the Ombudsman for Children Act 2002 and the Education Act 1998. Section 27 of the Education Act (Ireland 1998) states that

> Students of a post-primary school may establish a student council and…a board of a post-primary school shall encourage the establishment by students of a student council…A student council shall promote the interests of the school and the involvement of students in the affairs of the school, in co-operation with the board, parents and teachers.

Gilleece and Cosgrove (2012) argue that the potential of the Education Act 1998 to foster extra-curricular participation via student councils has been undermined by a disparity between the demands of the school curriculum and "the opportunities for students to participate in decision-making about the running of the school" (2012, p. 226). They point out that the Act is silent on the specifics of student participation in areas such as curriculum development, subject content, pedagogical processes and choice of textbooks. They also suggest that the Act is deficient because it does not require post-primary schools to establish student councils and does not provide for student councils in primary schools (Cosgrove and Gilleece 2012). Just 14% of Irish primary schools have a student council, compared with most (97%) post-primary schools (Department of Education and Skills 2014). These developments may be compared with those in the neighbouring UK where pupil voice is not specifically legislated for. Instead, in England a Statutory Guidance (Department for Education 2014) encourages pupils 'to become active participants in a democratic society' by holding youth parliaments and school councils. In Northern Ireland, the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 (Government of the UK 2003) emphasises the importance of consultation with pupils. In Wales and Scotland the regulation of pupil voice is somewhat tighter. In Wales, schools are required to have school councils under the Schools Councils (Wales) Regulations 2005 (National Assembly for Wales 2005), while in Scotland the right of children and young people to have a voice is enshrined in the Standards in Scotland's Schools Act 2000; while student councils are not covered by this Act, a majority of Scottish second-level schools have school councils (Scottish Consumer Council 2007).

In research conducted for the Health Behaviour in School-age Children Survey (HBSC), Nic Gabhainn et al. (2007) found that 24.9% of Irish children aged

9-17 years reported that students at their school participate in making the school rules; this figure is lower than the HBSC average of 33.8% and ranked Irish children seventh out of the seven participating countries. Cosgrove and Gilleece's study (2012) of data from the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) found that while Irish students value participation in school life, their opportunities to become involved in decision-making processes in school fall well below the international average.

Recent policy developments

In 2015 an amendment to the Irish Constitution providing Constitutional status to the application of the principles of the best interests of the child and hearing the views of the child in child protection and welfare cases was enshrined into law. Children have just two other explicit rights under the Irish Constitution; these concern the right to free primary education and the ability of the State to intervene when parents fail their children (Children's Rights Alliance 2012). While welcoming the Constitutional amendment, Parkes (2013) points out that it restricts children's opportunities to be heard to adoption, child care, guardianship, custody and access proceedings and does not include "any other area of a child's life such as the home, school or at community, national and international levels, where decisions are made on a daily basis that affect the lives of children" (p. 51).

In 2015 the Department of Children and Youth Affairs published a national strategy on children and young people's participation in decision-making, 2015–2020. Ireland is the first country to produce such a strategy. The goal of the strategy is to ensure that children and young people have a voice in decisions about their individual and collective lives in their communities, in education, on their health and wellbeing and in legal settings (DCYA 2015, 2016). Basing its priorities on the everyday lives of children and young people, the strategy contains a list of actions to encourage their participation in decision-making and states that government departments will "consult with children and young people appropriately in the development of policy, legislation, research and services" (DCYA 2015, p. 17). One of the four priorities of the Strategy is that "Children and young people will have a voice in decision-making in early education, schools and the wider formal and non-formal education systems" (ibid, p. 12). Accompanying actions identified in the Strategy include encouragement of all schools to establish student councils, consultation with students on teacher education and consultation with teacher bodies to strengthen the role of student councils in schools.

Literature review: Children, participation and school

This literature review explores both rights-based and social perspectives on children's participation and how these perspectives, combined, can provide significant insights into participation in school.

Children's rights and participation

Practice and literature on children's participation have proliferated in parallel with the UNCRC, although it is argued that theorisation of 'participation' has not kept pace with practice innovations (Thomas 2007; Tisdall et al. 2014; Horgan et al. 2017). Thomas (2007) points out that much of the theoretical discussion to date has been in terms of typologies of different child participatory forms. Influential typologies include Hart's ladder of participation (1992), Shier's pathways to participation (2001) and Lundy's model of pupil voice (2007). Thomas also identifies a distinction between social and political discourses of participation. The social discourse sees participation in terms of relationships between children and between children and adults (Mannion 2007; Percy-Smith 2010; Aston and Lambert 2010; Percy-Smith and Burns 2013; Wyness 2012; Fielding 2007, 2015; Horgan et al. 2017), whereas the political is concerned with student voice, power relations and effecting change (Lundy 2007; UNICEF 2009; Davey 2010; Parkes 2013; Forde et al. 2016). Both discourses have strengths and drawbacks; in particular, political conceptions have been criticised for an undue emphasis on formalised participatory approaches that tend to be adult-led, exclusionary and unrepresentative of a range of young people's experiences (Thomas 2007; Fleming 2013). Thomas (2007) suggests that a theory of participation needs to encompass both social and political elements. It could be argued that such a theory reflects the civic republican idea that encompasses the right to participate and an understanding of children as critical and political beings (Shirley 2015; Shaw and McCulloch 2009) as well as children as active citizens and "human beings rather than human becomings, children of the here and now rather than as future citizens" (Elsley 2004, p. 155).

Children and participation in school

There is a significant and growing literature on the theory and practice of children's participation in school. In their systematic review of participation in school, Mager and Nowak (2012) suggest that this literature represents four main categories of thought: citizenship education for students; student participation in school improvement; the health-promoting effects of participation; and student voice in schools or a rights-based approach. Discussions of citizenship education include Sears and Hughes (2006) and Sears et al. (2000), while school improvement perspectives are elucidated by Lodge (2005) and Mager and Nowak (2012), and health-promoting studies include those of Nic Gabhainn et al. (2007), De Róiste et al. (2012) and John-Akinola and Nic-Gabhainn (2014).

Mager and Nowak's classification does not include an explicit social and relational category, but this understanding of participation is present in many discussions of student voice in schools (Aston and Lambert 2010; McCluskey et al. 2013; Gilleece and Cosgrove 2012; Thornberg and Elvstrand 2012; Bjerke 2011; Taylor et al. 2001). In their turn, these studies reflect the complexity of participation and Thomas's (2007) contention that participation is both political and social. Lundy's

(2007) typology of participation, for instance, addresses both student voice and participation as a political and relational practice in which children's right to express their voice is embedded in their relationships with adults. The typology suggests that children's participation should constitute four elements: space, voice, audience and influence. Children need opportunities in which to articulate their 'voice' or views (space) and to be facilitated to express them (voice), an adult audience which actively listens to their views, and due weight given to these views (influence). These ideas emphasise that children have the right to express their voice but in doing so to have an audience and to be empowered to influence decisions that affect them, so that they are active change agents in the school (Welty and Lundy 2013).

Simmons et al. (2015) point out that "knowledge about how children and young people's participation might contribute to change and improvement in schools… remains very limited" (p. 131). In a qualitative study, Simmons et al. (2015) asked students aged 6–16 years to imagine their ideal school; students' ideas focused primarily on relationships and greater opportunities for students to be heard and involved in the context of teaching, school structures and school life. Percy-Smith (2010) and Mitra (2008) argue that children require a range of different spaces and opportunities to participate in school and that there should be a focus on more organic, everyday spaces where participation and active citizenship may be learned. Mitra (2008) argues that facilitating student voice in schools should

> range from the most basic level of youth sharing their opinions of problems and potential solutions; to allowing young people to collaborate with adults to address the problems in their schools; to youth taking the lead on seeking change (pp. 221, 222).

Percy-Smith (2010) suggests that while formalised structures like student councils may tackle issues of importance to children (such as playground improvements or the food in the canteen), they are unlikely to address many of the factors that influence a child's experience of school. Percy-Smith (2015) points out that children are expected to fulfil adult agendas in school and that participation is perceived as passive rather than active and joint engagement by both students and teachers. He advocates "a whole school culture of participation" (ibid, p. 16), characterised by greater self-determination for children in their own learning, the recognition of students as change agents, and respectful and democratic relationships between students and teachers. These ideas articulate well with Fielding and Moss's (2012) model of radical democratic education, which envisages schools as exemplars of participatory democracy and public spaces inclusive of all age groups, using interdisciplinary and inquiry-based approaches, and community-based in nature through drawing on a range of expertise and engagement with their communities. At its core this model involves a re-alignment of the roles of principals, teachers and students and the development of a "radical collegiality" (Fielding and Moss 2012, p. 16) between the three, based on respect, care, dialogue, openness and reciprocity.

The research findings presented here explore the perspectives of students, teachers and parents on participation in school, including student agency and relationships between teachers and students; formal and informal opportunities for participation; and possibilities for change and improvement.

Methodology

The wider study on which this paper is based focused on children and young people aged 7–17 years living in contemporary urban and rural Ireland and on parents, teachers and key adults who live or work with children in schools, youth work or local community settings.

Sampling

The research was conducted in three locations around Ireland, one rural and two urban. A multi-location approach facilitated capturing a diverse range of perspectives and the representation of urban and rural environments demonstrating a range of affluence and disadvantage.

Purposive sampling (Patton 2002) was used to select primary and second-level schools and youth and community projects in the three locations. Three primary schools and three second-level schools participated in the research, one primary and one second-level school in each of the three research sites. The youth and community projects included two local projects of large national youth organisations, one after-school project for primary school children, two youth clubs, a family resource centre, a sports club, and an urban renewal programme. Purposive sampling in schools and youth and community projects was used to recruit children and young people who fell within the specified age range. Once schools and projects were selected, a combination of purposive and snowball sampling was used to achieve participation by teachers, parents and community stakeholders.

While efforts were made to achieve an overall gender balance, this was not considered to be essential. The inclusion criteria for participation in the study were minimal:

- Living or using the services within the three locations.
- Children and young people aged 7–17.
- Parents who had experience of children and young people aged 7–17.
- Adult community stakeholders who worked directly or indirectly with children and young people aged 7–17.

In total, 74 children and young people and 34 adults were interviewed for the research.

Research methods

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. Focus groups were conducted with children and young people and parents, and semi-structured interviews were carried out with parents, teachers and community stakeholders in each of the three locations. Focus groups

were used in the fieldwork with children and young people on the basis that they would encourage open debate and shared recollection of participation in decision-making and thereby elicit rich data (Aston and Lambert 2010). All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded.

Seventy-four children and young people participated in 10 focus groups while a further 20 were involved in the pilot phase of the fieldwork and in Children's and Young People's Advisory Groups that were established by the researchers. The focus groups were conducted in primary and second-level schools and youth and community projects. Individual interviews were conducted with eleven teachers and principals, nine community stakeholders and four parents while three focus groups involved a further ten parents. The community stakeholders included professional and voluntary youth workers (six), a family resource centre manager, a sports coach and the coordinator of an area-based programme for social-economic development.

Detailed demographic and biographical data on the individual children, young people, teachers and principals and community stakeholders who participated was not collected.

Research ethics

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University College Cork Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC).

Cognisance was taken of the complexities of engaging in research with children (Alderson 2009). Voluntary informed consent was sought from all participants, adults and children, all of whom were given age-appropriate information sheets and consent forms. Consent was ongoing or 'rolling' and participants were advised that their consent was voluntary and they were free to leave the project at any time. Parental consent was also sought in the case of children under 18 years. Where school students were asked to participate, it was made clear to them that that if they wished to opt out of participation they could do so with confidence. It was not possible to fully mitigate the possible effects on children of holding focus groups in the school setting but the research team attempted to counterbalance this by running the focus groups in the most informal manner possible and by holding other focus groups with children and young people in more informal youth and community settings.

Child-centred research

The objective in 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 UNCRC, and to provide fun, safe spaces for the children and young people who took part in the research, following best practice (Barker and Weller 2003). These methods included games, visual and verbal methods, drawings, and other interactive methods that helped capture their lived experiences of participation (Horgan 2017). For example, the focus groups with child participants (7–11 years) involved the use of three interactive floor mats

in conjunction with a focus group discussion schedule. Each floor mat depicted one of the spaces of inquiry—the home, school and community. Using wipeable pens, the children were asked to draw on each mat places of importance in their daily lives within that space, and to map where they spent time, where decision-making discussions happened, what kinds of issues were discussed, with whom the decisions were discussed, and how much of a say they had in decisions made or choices agreed. Photographs of the completed mats were taken and the main points of the discussion were noted on flipcharts.

Data analysis

Five discrete datasets were generated from the primary research; these were children, young people, parents, principals and teachers, and adults working in the community. A thematic analysis of each dataset was conducted under the three locations of home, school and community. The qualitative data were interrogated using questions based on Lundy's (2007) conceptualisation of Article 12 of the UNCRC. These questions 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/are not important?
- What challenges or barriers constrain them?

Spaces for participation, types of participation, enabling factors, barriers encountered and recommendations to facilitate participation in each location were identified through systematic working through the transcripts.

Results

This section explores four aspects of the research findings: students' participation in school; the operation of student councils in schools; informal opportunities for participation in school; barriers to and enablers of participation in school and recommendations for change.

Perspectives on children and young people's participation in school

While some of the child and young people respondents viewed school as a place where they had a say, most indicated that there was little focus on reaching shared decisions in schools and that they were not recognised as partners in the school environment. This agrees with the findings of studies from other countries that the core activities of schools are not usually discussed with students and that they have very limited influence over their day-to-day activities when it comes to questions about management and rules, or teaching and education processes.

In response to direct questions about their participation, some students answered that they have an input into some decision-making, especially into classes like physical education (PE) or, in the case of older students, Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE). Any involvement, whether meaningful or not, seemed to be highly appreciated by the children and young people.

Instances where primary school students had opportunities to be heard are illustrated in the following quotes:

> We get to choose what books we read [Primary school, Rural Area 1].
> We like the comment box – we get to have a say in what happens, and anonymously [Primary school, Rural Area 1].
> In the computer room – you get to pick what kinds of things you do. We go once a week [Primary school, Urban Area 2].
> Our teacher bought us a goldfish and we got to pick the name [Primary school, Urban Area 2].

The activities and situations described are mostly relatively minor and peripheral and have little impact on the core activities in which children participate in school, such as the curriculum. They also illustrate the children's awareness of the power that teachers exert both in and outside the classroom. Perhaps then it is not surprising that there were many more examples where children and young people felt that they had no voice in issues of importance to them in school.

> We don't really get a say at all [Second-level school, urban Area 1].
> We get told what to do! If we don't, or if we try to argue, we get punished with a 'step'. It's kinda like a warning [Youth club, Urban Area 1].
> We don't get to make decisions in school [Primary school, Rural Area 1].
> The teachers, principal and secretary make most of the decisions [Primary school, Urban Area 1].

The mapping exercise and the focus groups revealed that for primary school students important decision-making issues at school included food choices in the school canteen, wearing of school uniforms and the predominance of maths over sports. Second-level students were mainly concerned with issues of respect between staff and students, the need to have a say in decision-making, teacher–student communication, the operation of student councils and interaction with peers. Both sets of students felt that they had little say on the nature of their school tours and trips:

> 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, Rural Area 1].
> The school usually decides school tours. We think we should have a say because we are the ones going on the school trip! [Primary school, Urban Area 1].

One group pointed out that their preferred destination for a school trip was overruled by teachers.

The older students appeared to have a more nuanced understanding of power and decision-making in school and were far more critical of the opportunities

available to them for involvement in decision-making processes. The students' perspective is at odds with that of many of the teachers and principals, most of whom argued that their schools had an atmosphere that supports student participation. Interestingly, these comments primarily refer to formal participation through student councils, and to relatively minor, one-off issues such as school concerts.

> 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. 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, Second-level School, Urban Area 1].
> 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… [Principal, Second-level school, Urban Area 2].

Several of the teachers indicated that parents have little interest in listening to their children or encouraging their participation.

> People are a bit apathetic towards it (participation); a bit dismissive, you know [Principal, primary school, Urban Area 2].

In their turn, parent participants appeared to have limited knowledge of their children's school experience.

> 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, Urban Area 1].
> You don't know how they are getting on in school, you know, if they are having problems there [Parent, Urban Area 2].

On the question of whether their children should have more say at school, parents' opinions differed:

> I wouldn't say they [students] have a say in school tours [Parent, Urban Area 1].
> I would say the teachers decide [Parent, Urban Area 1].
> If they all made decisions, then they would have too much of a say [Parent, Urban Area 1].
> I don't think they have enough say in school [Parent, Urban Area 1].

Parents also expressed differing views on their own engagement with their children's schools; while some parents indicated that schools make decisions "in unison with the parents" [Parent, Rural Area 1], others expressed a sense of disconnection from

the school. The results suggest a more nuanced picture than the results of the 2009 International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) in which Irish parents registered significantly lower involvement in school in comparison with parents from other countries (Cosgrove and Gilleece 2012).

Perspectives on student councils

None of the primary schools that participated in the research had a student council but children in these schools indicated that they saw student councils as an important formal participatory structure. In the second-level schools, all three of which had student councils, many young people felt that these spaces did not offer a real opportunity for expression of their views and that important decisions were not made there. Some young people questioned the representativeness of their student council and many expressed frustration at the lack of communication concerning decisions made by the council and the inadequate power of the council to make any real changes in how their school operates.

Second-level students' comments suggest a distinct sense of dissatisfaction with student councils:

> The student council tries to improve student life – small things, for example, having the water fountain fixed, but not big things [Second-level school, Urban Area 1].
> Anyone can run for the student council. They don't really do much and we don't really talk to them [Second-level school, Urban Area 1].
> 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, Rural Area 1].

In contrast with the less-than-positive feedback from the young people, school principals and teachers interviewed for the study consistently referred to the student council as a means of facilitating the participation of children and young people in the school. Generally, however, it was clear 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.

> We have two students, a boy and a girl, from every year on the student council…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, Second-level school, Rural Area 1].
> 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…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, Second-level school, Urban Area 2].
>
> (Regarding an instance of cyberbullying) 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, Second-level school, Urban Area 2].

All of these comments strongly suggest that the real power within these schools lies with the principals, who have the final say in decision-making, and that traditional or paternalistic attitudes towards the young people are still held by some principals and teachers. Kennedy-Lewis (2015) noticed similar attitudes in an alternative middle school in California and how paternalism "precluded the empowerment of students and teachers to organize and effect change" (p. 163).

In the primary schools, there were few participatory structures and principals appeared unaware of how they may be established. This may be partly explained by the lack of a legislative requirement for school councils or other participatory structures in primary schools in Ireland. Interestingly, the principal of one primary school acknowledged that structures are very important in terms of ensuring child participation in school, while admitting no such structure existed in his school.

> 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, Urban Area 2].
>
> There is no formal structure. I think a lot of it goes on, but it is not formalised [Principal, Primary school, Rural Area 1].

Several principals and teachers stated that students have input into school policies, class rules and school guidance plans. While there was evidence of the use of 'Golden Rules' in most of the primary schools visited and teachers indicated that these were 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 study were particularly concerned about. Munn et al. (2000) cite a range of studies that show the benefits accruing from pupil participation in "the negotiation of rules, rewards and sanctions" (p. 66); these benefits include a sense of ownership, the promotion of citizenship and democratic values, and the contribution to "a sense of fairness and justice about school rules" (ibid).

While occasional comments demonstrated parental awareness of student and 'green' or eco councils, there was no indication that the parent participants had significant knowledge of or expectations for these structures in relation to their

children's overall educational experience, or that they sought to be involved in decision-making about participation. They were only able to attribute relatively minor achievements to the student councils and their involvement in decisions on school life. For example:

> My daughter was elected onto the school council… They meet with teachers and principal on a regular basis. She is happy to be on it … but (I'm) not very sure what she does on it [Parents' Advisory Group, Urban Area 2].
> 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 [Parents' Advisory Group, Urban Area 2].

These findings intersect with those of Mager and Nowak (2012) who established that while student councils help with building students' life skills, they have a low impact on class decision-making, school rule or policy changing or development of facilities. Fleming (2013, 2015) notes that student councils have become the foremost vehicle for student voice in Irish schools but argues that the potential of councils to provide "engagement and participation in democratic practice" (2015, p. 235) has been largely unfulfilled and councils have instead become associated with negative experiences and tokenism.

Informal opportunities for participation in school

The results of this research suggest that children in educational settings are often not allowed to participate in "even quite elementary decision-making about the shape and structure of their everyday lives" (James 2004, p. 25). There was a clear sense from both children and young people that they had little voice in the school context, but they emphasised the importance of good relationships with adults in helping them to exercise voice. Many referred to the inadequacy of informal forums or spaces for discussion or raising issues in the school context:

> You don't really get a say in the classroom [Second-level school, Rural Area 1].
> [There is] no class where you can just talk, even if it's just after assembly [Second-level school, Urban Area 1].
> We have SPHE, but sometimes you don't want to say something in front of the whole class [Second-level school, Urban Area 1].

Some young people discussed the importance of adult facilitators who could make them feel comfortable and not judged. This facilitative role may not necessarily be part of the person's formal job in the school.

> The school councillor. Wouldn't go to the school student council. The school councillor is approachable. Year head is not approachable, it's the school principal [Second-level school, Rural Area 1].

> If you already have a good relationship with a teacher, for example, if you are involved in a sport and one of your teachers is the coach, they will advocate for you [Second-level school, Urban Area 1].

Some principals and teachers were at pains to point out that they are willing to listen to children on a daily basis in the classroom or principal's office. Where participation did occur, however, it appeared to be mainly ad hoc, informal and unplanned in nature:

> 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, Rural Area 1].
>
> I suppose there are no formal structures where children can participate, but the door is always open …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, Urban Area 2].
>
> 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, Urban Area 2].

Principals made it clear that there were areas of school policy in which children would not be given a say.

> 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, Rural Area 1].

The perspectives of students and teachers highlight the limited opportunities that students have to exercise voice in informal contexts in school but also the importance of relationships with principals, teachers and other adults in the promotion or suppression of student confidence and voice (Lundy 2007).

Barriers and enablers to participation in school

Students and teachers identified a number of barriers and enablers to the achievement of participation in school. The children and young people highlighted the hierarchical nature of the school system, large class sizes and 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 or are enforced in an inconsistent manner (Thornberg and Elvstrand 2012).

Students recognised that they had little say in anything apart from peripheral matters in school. Their dissatisfaction with their lack of agency in the school context is exemplified in the following quotes from young people:

> 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, Urban Area 1].
> Our school's awful strict, like. You can't do anything [Youth Club, Rural Area 1].

Barriers to children and young people's participation highlighted by principals and teachers included the influence of parents over children, the location and size of the school and the number of teachers and students.

Age was considered both a barrier to and an enabler of participation by the children and young people and adults. In particular, the primary school children and young people in the early years of second-level school felt that they had less voice in decision-making processes in school. Second-level students emphasised that it was not until Transition year[1] that they acquired some sense of voice in the school context. Participants agreed that as students progress through the school system, they achieve slightly more independence and voice. The frustration of "starting all over again in first year" was expressed by some of the second-level students, who suggested that this had improved by the time they reached Transition year.

> Older students have more of a say, the teachers know you better, they normally go to the 6th years for everything, they give them more responsibility [Second-Level School, Urban Area 2].
> It means the older you are, the more sense you probably make. You're more in control [Youth project, Urban Area 2]
> In 1st year, we have no say or way of getting your opinion across [Second-level school, Urban Area 2].
> Age is important in having a say. And the way you talk – the more mature you sound, the more they [adults] will listen [Second-Level School, Urban Area 2].

One principal noted that age and maturity often determine the weight that is 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, Second-level school, Rural Area 1].

Students identified a number of other potential enablers of participation in school; most of these concerned their relationships with adults. They spoke about 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 echo those of Aston and Lambert (2010) on schools in England. Key

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[1] The Transition Year (TY) is a 1-year programme taken after the Junior Cycle and before the 2-year Leaving Certificate programme in second-level schools.

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

Discussion

The research into participation in school was one part of a wider study that explored children and young people's experiences of participation in home, school and community. The findings concerning participation in school differed in two key ways from those on home and community. Firstly, of the three locations school was the one in which children and young people felt that they had the least opportunity to participate. This accords with the findings of other research (Bjerke 2011) and emphasizes that the "mutual respect and recognition" (Bjerke 2011, p. 97) that children and young people are accorded at home and in many youth and community projects (Forde et al. 2017) does not appear to be replicated in the school environment. In particular, children and younger second-level students felt that they had less of a voice in school although older students reported a movement towards greater independence, autonomy, and voice with increased age.

Secondly, the school context was the only one of the three locations researched where children's experiences and views of participation contrasted sharply with those of adults. While school principals and teachers suggested that children and young people attending their schools had plenty of time and many opportunities to contribute to decisions affecting them, the views of the children and young people themselves suggested a wholly different picture. Most of the students 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. They generally viewed schools as hierarchical institutions where even formal participation structures (including student councils) were experienced as both undemocratic and relatively ineffectual. They expressed a wish to experience more reciprocal and affirming relationships with teachers and other adults in the school setting. The significance of a relational perspective on participation is underscored by the value which students placed on good and supportive relationships with teachers and other adults. In their desire for a more positive school environment and culture, these children and young people expressed similar opinions to those in other studies (Aston and Lambert 2010; Bjerke 2011). It is clear that they see themselves as "social actors rather than just being acted upon by the adult world" (Taylor et al. 2001, pp. 153, 154) and active social agents with the desire to "critique, re-imagine and reconstruct their world for themselves" (Burke 2014, p. 437) and for their communities of which they are part. The realization that children are active and engaged citizens rather than "citizens in the making" leads to a concomitant recognition that participation needs to be embedded in all aspects of school culture and not just in formalized structures like student councils.

Generally, school principals and teachers were positive about school as a facilitative space for children's voice, with plenty of time and opportunity for young

people to contribute to decisions affecting them. While they recognised the need to involve children and young people in decisions affecting them, principals and teachers felt that adequate spaces for children and young people's voice already existed in the school context, primarily in the form of more formal, representative decision-making structures in existence in schools rather than opportunities and spaces for everyday participation by children and young people. They tended to cite relatively minor matters as instances of participation, while making it clear that more serious issues would preclude the involvement of students. The divergence in student and teacher attitudes to participation underlines the need for a greater focus on how 'participation' in school is understood (Simmons et al. 2015); this research suggests that teachers have more restricted understandings of participation than students and less awareness of issues concerning power or agency (ibid). Teachers' and parents' attitudes may be affected, and conflicted, by the hierarchical nature of many Irish schools, although enduring hierarchy and authoritarianism are not exclusive to Irish schools and are common to many school systems internationally (Thomas 2007). Teachers' and parents' attitudes are also influenced by

> the perceived pressure of curriculum delivery, by internal and external assessments of students, and by school evaluation, arguably within a performance-oriented and outcomes-driven script that reflects a neo-liberal and consumerist agenda for schools and education (Fleming 2015, p. 237).

Neo-liberalism in education tends to militate against "democratic imperatives" (Kennedy-Lewis 2015, p. 164) or the democratisation of schools in favour of student voice and participation.

The findings suggest that parents have very little knowledge of or engagement in their children's school experience. Many parents appeared to be disconnected from their children's schools, reporting a vacuum in their knowledge about their children's experiences of participation and uncertainty about their capacity to influence decisions in their children's schools. The findings on teachers' and parents' perspectives reinforce the perception of the "limited familiarity of adults with children's experiences and interests" (Perry-Hazan 2016, p. 112). They underscore the need for holistic participatory approaches and strategies that address and encompass all parties to the educational system, including students, principals, teachers and parents/guardians.

Conclusions

Bringing together the perspectives of students, teachers and parents, this study highlights that real movement towards authentic participation of children and young people in school is dependent on institutional, social and cultural change couched in a children's rights and participation approach. Efforts to effect change in the school context *only* are unlikely to be effective, given the relative ignorance of many parents about their children's experiences at school, and the reality that teachers are products of their own society and cultural experience. At institutional level, national legislation and policy need to rigorously require and enforce the establishment and

maintenance of structures and processes that underpin children and young peo-
ple's right to voice and participation. These structures include student councils
and a range of other participatory processes, both formal and informal, that enable
voice and effectual participation in both primary and second-level schools. Cultural
change will involve concerted and sustained efforts to develop the "understanding,
acceptance and support of the adult world" (Taylor et al. 2001, p. 154). Training
in children's rights and participation for parents, teachers and other professionals
who work with children would be an important step towards "a robust infrastructure
designed to monitor, support and enforce implementation" (Lundy et al. 2013, p.
463), in order to ensure that the potential of Article 12 of the UNCRC is realised
(see also Horgan et al. 2015).

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