The development and implementation of the ‘National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision Making’ (2015)’ in Ireland.

Dr Shirley Martin,
Co-Director Early Years and Childhood Studies,
University College Cork
Overview of presentation

Presentation will focus on opportunities for children’s and young participation in collective public decision making in Ireland and will examine number of areas:

• Key events in children’s rights in Ireland
• Development and overview of the national strategy
• Two child and youth participation case studies linked to the strategy development and implementation
Key events in children’s rights in Ireland since ratification UNCRC

• 1993 Kilkenny Incest Investigation leads to calls for Constitutional change.

• 1997 Department of Health and Children

• 1998 Education Act 1998; school councils


• 2001 National Children’s Office (NCO) established.

• 2003 Ombudsman for Children's Office

• 2009 Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse published its report (Ryan Report)

• 2011 First-ever Department and Minister of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA)

2012 Constitutional referendum on children’s rights.

Goal 1: Children will have a voice in matters which affect them
Department of Children and Youth Affairs participatory initiatives supporting the implementation of Goal 1:

- Comhairle na nÓg (34 local youth councils)
- Dáil na Óg (National Youth Parliament)
- National consultations with children
- Children and Young People’s Forum (youth allies)
- Children and Young People’s Participation Support Team (adult allies)
Examples of national consultations with Children and Young People

- National Play Policy (2003);
- National Recreation Policy (2005)
- The age of consent for sexual activity (2006);
- Irish Youth Justice Strategy (2007);
- Teen mental health (2008);
- Children in the care of the State (2010);
‘Our vision is for Ireland to be one of the best small countries in which to grow up and to raise a family and where the rights of all children and young people are respected, protected and fulfilled; where their voices are heard and where they are supported to realise their maximum potential now and in the future.’ The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014–2020

1.2m children live in Ireland (26% of the population compared to 18.8% EU average)
Transformational Goals

- Support Parents
- Earlier Intervention & Prevention
- Listen to and Involve Children & Young People
- Ensure Quality Services
- Strengthen Transitions
- Cross-Government and Interagency Collaboration & Coordination

Better Outcomes

- Active & Healthy
- Achieving in All Areas of Learning & Development
- Safe & Protected from Harm
- Economic Security & Opportunity
- Connected, Respected & Contributing

Cross-Cutting

Strengthen in the Support System around the Child and Young Person

Brighter Futures
Mechanisms for evidence-based strategy development (2011-14)

- Bi-lateral meetings with Government Departments and agencies
- Consultation with key stakeholder groups
- National Consultation with Children (66,700 children) key messages: importance of education, schools, friendships, activities and sports and concerns about the recession
- Public Consultations (1,000 response) - similar results to children’s consultation
- Development of a Research Evidence Base
  1. Literature Review (2011)
  2. Audit of Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-Making (2011)
  3. Primary Research Projects (2011-2014)
National Strategy on Children and Young Peoples Participation in Decision-making objectives:

Children and young people (CYP) will have a voice;

• in decisions made in their local communities.
• Across formal and non-formal education systems.
• in decisions that affect their health and well-being, including on the health and social services delivered to them.
• in the Courts and legal system.
Lundy Model of Participation

Space

Voice

Audience

Influence

The right to express views

The right to have views given due weight

Article 12
Government Supports for Strategy Implementation: Professional Adult Allies

**Children and Young People Support Team**

- Staff in the DCYA Citizen Participation Unit and regional Children and Young People’s Participation Officers and other support staff
- Provide support to local authorities in the running of Comhairle na nÓg;
- Support the operation of the Dáil na nÓg

**Hub na nÓg**

- National centre of excellence and coordination
- It supports Government Departments, State agencies and non-government organisations to give children and young people a voice in decision-making on issues that affect their lives, with a particular focus on those that are seldom-heard.
- Central to involvement of CYP in public policy consultations
Challenges to Child and Youth Participation

• *Adultism* (Checkoway 2011) and adult assumptions about the children's capacity – are they “rational and reliable?” (Alderson, 2008)

• **Time constraints, output requirements and bureaucracy** (Kirby & Bryson 2002).

• **Representation**: Participation is affected by issues such as race, age, disability, socio-economic class, education, and family and community context. (Checkoway, 2010).

• Multiplier effect of participation ‘grows exponentially once someone becomes connected to one network’ (Brodie et al., 2011:42).

Youth voice can become concentrated on narrow group of young people.
An examination of children and young people's views on the impact of their participation in decision-making
An examination of children and young people's views on the impact of their participation in decision-making

Study Authors: Shirley Martin, Catherine Forde, Audrey Dunn Galvin and Angela O'Connell,
University College Cork
Areas of Impact of child and youth participation

The study utilised a holistic model of participation examining four realms of impact;

- Personal
- Family
- Community
- Decision-making in Irish Society
Participation Initiatives Examined in Research

Participation Structures

• Dáil na nÓg
• Comhairle Na nÓg; including 2012 Comhairle Na nÓg National Showcase
• DCYA Children and Young People’s Forum

Consultation Case Studies

• Listen to our voices! - Hearing children and young people living in the care of the state (2011)
Participatory Research Methods

**Research Steering Group**

Qualitative and quantitative research methods were employed including surveys of past and present youth participants; interviews; focus groups and observations.

330 young people were involved as respondents and young researchers.

28 adult research participants; Comhairle na nÓg coordinators (17), support staff DCYA participation structures (6) and decision-makers (5)
Role of Young Researchers

- Administered survey of 17 randomly selected Comhairle na nÓg; facilitated 4 focus groups, and interviewed key decision-makers.
- Research Training sessions and ongoing engagement with UCC research team.
- Members of the Steering Group and involved in research design, data collection and analysis (Consensus Workshop).
Research Finding

1. Personal impacts
2. Community impacts
3. Family impacts
4. Impact on Institutions and decision-making
5. Pathways to representation
COMMUNITY IMPACTS

- Positive impact of child and youth participation on **youth spaces**
- Increased awareness of CYP’s issues.
- Local decision-making often **not youth friendly**
- **Attitudes** of some decision-makers towards youth participation problematic

CNN main contact point for consultation with children and young people

Local, relevant and achievable work most successful for CNN

CNN adopts youth-led approach
Societal Impacts

- DCYA participation spaces respect children and young people both as community members and value them as citizens in their own rights.
- **Positive impact on social justice and youth issues.**
- Changing cultural attitudes to children and young people’s participation
- Work of adult facilitators or participation ‘champions’ in pushing the participation agenda.
Examples of key achievements by successive Dáil na nÓg Councils

- **Fairsay! media campaign** highlighted the negative portrayal of teenagers
- Young people involved in developing HSE National Office for Suicide Prevention’s **Youth Mental Health advertisement** and awareness campaign
- Influenced the Minister for Health and Children’s decision to commence the **cervical cancer vaccine programme**
- Consultations on **reform State Examinations**
- **How We See It: Report of a survey on young people's body image** (2012)
Pathways to Representation: School

- Gate-keeping
- Relationships with Comhairle Co-ordinators
- Focus on Transition Year
- ‘A’ students
- Weak student council model
- Need for a network of relationships
- Limited age group
Pathways to Representation: Seldom heard Young People

- Partnerships with agencies working with seldom heard young people

  - Traveller Support Groups
  - School Completion Programme
  - Disability Support Groups
  - Youth Reach

- Dependent on networks of support

- CnÓg Steering Group Committee - Adult representation
Study Conclusions

• Comhairle na nÓg provides support and advocacy in the pursuit of issues relevant to children and young people.

• Child and youth participation spaces created by the DCYA may be viewed as attempting to create Lundy’s (2007) conditions of space (to express views), voice (opportunities to express views), audience (to be listened to) and influence (have views acted upon).

• Participants are positive about their experience of voice, space and audience, but the area of influence requires further work and support.
INCLUDING CHILDREN’S VIEWS IN HEALTH POLICY

Consultation was part of the process for the development of a National Obesity Policy [2016] in Ireland (DCYA and Department of Health).
Benefits of Child and Youth participation in policy consultations

• Helps to ground decision-making processes and policy in the lived reality of children’s worlds.

• Promotes citizenship & active inclusion. (Percy Smith, 2009)

• Research recognises the importance of consulting young people themselves in the development of health policies and initiatives which affect them (Ott et al, 2011).

• Child-proofing policies and ensure they are in the best interests of children (Martin et al 2018)
Consultation Methods

• Qualitative methodology which prioritised the voices of children and young people in policy making.

• Consultations with 48 primary school children aged 8-12 and 34 young people aged 13-17 years from Comhairle na nÓg

• Oversight Committee established by the Department of Health.

• Ethical approval from UCC SREC
Child-centred participatory methods

- Group interviews,
- Lifelines,
- Body mapping,
- Floor Mats,
- Consensus Workshops
- Voting
Findings in line with studies indicating children’s constructions of health is complex and often go beyond ‘medical constructions of the meaning of health’ (Wetton & McWhirter’s, 1998).

Highlighted key influencing factors which encourage an ‘obesogenic environment’ including access to ‘junk’ foods, reduced opportunities for physical activities and an increase in screen-based and sedentary activities in everyday life.

They point to the influence of adults on children’s dietary and physical activity behaviours.
Consultation impacted on the Obesity Policy and Action Plan in number of ways;

I. in the overall approach and in particular in relation to the importance of the family, the environment, schooling, health services and other determinants of health.

II. Specific actions included those in relation to ‘whole school; healthy lifestyles programme’, developing a health and wellbeing model for early childhood services, provision of potable water in schools, reducing the obesogenic environment and providing clinical services specifically for children
Overall Conclusions: Lesson from Ireland

- Role of adult allies and participation champions
- Child and youth friendly consultations and methods
- Evidence-based policy development
- Stakeholder input and commitments
- Measuring the impact of child and youth participatory policies
DCYA Reports and Publications


References


Percy-Smith and N.Thomas (eds.) A Handbook of Children and Young People’s Participation, Abingdon: Routledge.


