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Promoting the Participation of Seldom Heard Young People: A Review of the Literature on Best Practice Principles

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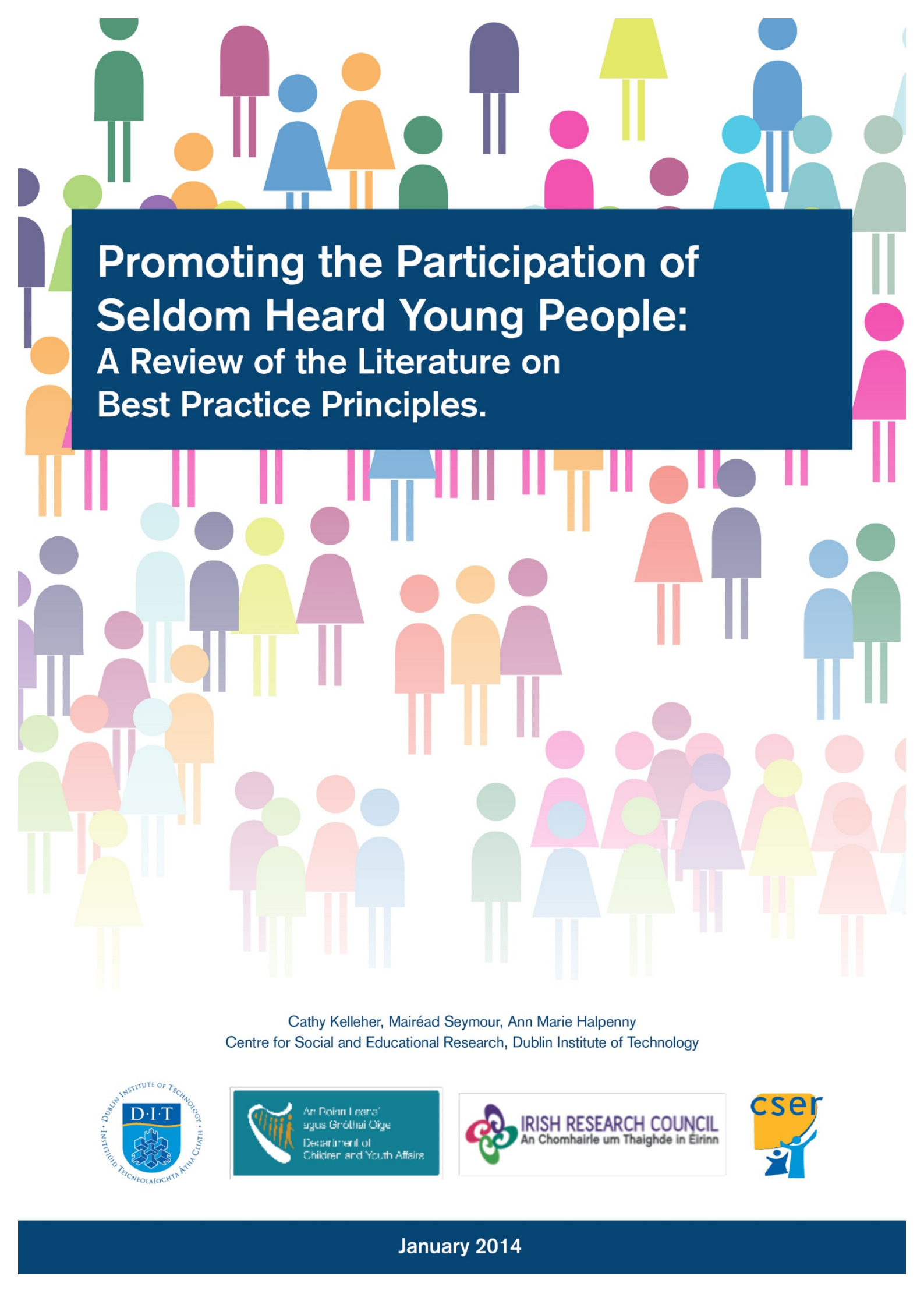
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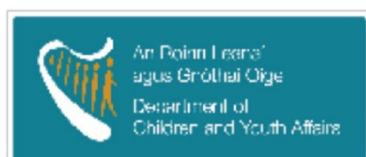
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Cathy Kelleher, Dr Mairéad Seymour and Dr Ann Marie Halpenny

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research was to review national and international literature on the participation of seldom heard young people and to identify best practice principles in the field. Key objectives were:

- to provide a detailed account of what is meant by seldom heard children and young people;
- to examine the core aspects of participation as well as the barriers and challenges to participation for seldom heard children and young people;
- to identify approaches which can improve the inclusion of seldom heard children and young people in decision-making that affects their lives.

The project aimed to integrate the experiences of young people who come into contact with the health, education, social care and/or justice system in Ireland and also the experiences of seldom heard young people who exist outside formalised systems. The outcome will inform policymakers, practitioners, and others in statutory, community, and voluntary sectors who wish to engage with young people whose voices are seldom heard.

The review was funded under the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS) Irish Research Development Initiative Strand 9: Social Policy Research Projects in conjunction with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA). This document represents the outcome of the review, which was conducted between 2011 and 2012.

1.1 Background

The current review is primarily concerned with formal participation structures and initiatives that directly engage and support seldom heard young people to have a voice in the design, delivery and monitoring of policies and services that affect their lives, and the experiences of young people within such processes. The term *seldom heard* refers to 'groups of people who do not have a collective voice and are often under-represented in consultation or participation activities' (Social Exclusion Task Force, as cited in Community Network for Manchester, 2011, p.16). Being 'seldom heard' implies that existing participation structures, organisations and services that target their needs are not adequately enabling the voice of these young people to be heard. *Seldom heard young people* are thus young people whose voices are not heard in decisions that affect them.

1.2 Who Participates?

Participation initiatives are often not well documented and demographic details of participants are generally scarce. However, the common perception is that confident, articulate, socially oriented, older children are more likely to populate formal participatory initiatives, such as youth and school/student councils, and evidence tends to support this (e.g. Carnegie UK Trust, 2008). In Ireland, youth-oriented organisations have reported that middle-class, well educated, articulate young people are most likely to be involved in participation activities and that such young people are not representative of those most in need of services and support (Roe & McEvoy, 2011). The work of the Carnegie UK Trust (2008) has indicated that the perceived elitist nature of participatory structures can serve as a deterrent to involvement for some young people. In addition, factors such as social class, geographical location, ethnicity, social networks, confidence, free time and proximity to adult decision-makers all affect the level of access young people can have to decision-making (Carnegie UK Trust, 2008).

As part of a recent audit of youth participation in Ireland, Roe and McEvoy (2011) surveyed youth-oriented organisations – organisations working with or on behalf of young people – and Health Service Executive (HSE) and HSE-funded services and asked them about the kinds of young people they try to reach to engage in decision-making. Findings are summarised in Table 1. As can be seen, it appears that certain groups, such as young homeless people, young people at risk of entering care, and young people with chronic illness and in hospital are not engaged in decision-making by many services and organisations. Notably absent, among others, are young people in new family forms¹, young people in reconstituted families², young carers, young people with mental health difficulties, young people with a parent in prison, and siblings of young people with disabilities; indicating that possibilities for these groups to be involved in decision-making with the services and organisations surveyed are likely few, if any³.

¹ *New family forms* include families created by assisted reproductive technologies (IVF, donor insemination, egg donation, embryo donation and surrogacy), and families with same-sex parents (Golombok, 2008).

² A *reconstituted family* is comprised of two adults in a relationship (e.g. cohabitation, civil partnership, or marriage) and their respective children from a previous relationship(s).

³ Data are based on practitioners' self-reports. Background data in relation to young people are not routinely gathered by youth-oriented organisations and services, on the basis of respect for the young person's right to privacy.

Table 1: Percentage of Youth-Oriented Organisations and HSE and HSE-Funded Services that Reported Involving Seldom Heard Young People in Decision-Making⁴ (data accumulated and adapted from Roe & McEvoy, 2011)

Young people	Youth-Oriented Organisations*		HSE and HSE-Funded Services**	
	n	% that involved young people in decision-making	n	% that involved young people in decision-making
Young people from ethnic minorities	55	81.8% (45)	85	89.4% (76)
Young Travellers	55	78.2% (43)	85	88.2% (75)
Young refugees and asylum seekers	55	36.4% (20)	85	70.6% (60)
Young people with a learning difficulty	41	78% (32)	72	90.3% (65)
Young people with a physical or sensory difficulty	41	63.4% (26)	72	72.2% (52)
Young people currently in foster care	16	87.5%(14)	80	77.5% (62)
Young people formerly in foster care	16	50% (8)	80	63.8% (51)
Young people currently in residential care	16	50% (8)	80	63.8% (51)
Young people formerly in residential care	16	50% (8)	80	56.3% (45)
Young people in hospital	16	12.5% (2)	80	31.3% (25)
Young people from rural areas	62	78.1% (50)	114	75.4% (86)
LGBT young people	47	57.4% (27)	95	52.6% (50)
Early school leavers	47	91.5% (43)	95	71.6% (86)
Young offenders	47	61.7 (29)	95	54.7% (52)
Other young people*	47	31.9% (15)	95	53.7% (51)

n=Number of respondents to this item.

*Respondents from youth-oriented organisations indicated that this includes young people who are in vulnerable situations; economically or socially disadvantaged; affected by drug and/or alcohol misuse; having behavioural difficulties; at risk of offending; potentially early school leavers; school-going children and young people; seldom heard; living in residential hostels; from a variety of religious backgrounds; using homeless services; and separated children. It must be noted that 40.8% (29) of all youth-oriented organisations (n=71) surveyed for this audit were Comhairle na nÓg youth councils.

**Respondents from HSE and HSE-Funded services indicated that this includes young people at risk of coming into care; at risk of offending; who are homeless or have experienced homelessness; who have complex needs; with substance misuse issues or family members who are drug users; over 18 years of age, in college and Youthreach; who have chronic illnesses and hospital users; and social, personal and health education (SPHE) students.

Just over two-thirds (67.2%) of 61 youth-oriented organisations that responded and 43.4% of 106 HSE and HSE-funded services, agreed it is difficult to reach certain young people. The groups identified were young Travellers and ethnic minorities, refugees and asylum seekers, early school leavers, young people with a disability, young people in care, young LGBT people, marginalised and disadvantaged young people, those in rural areas, and young offenders and drug users. Among HSE and HSE-funded services, other seldom groups included young people with mental health difficulties who are not engaged with services; those with disabilities; those who are disadvantaged or

⁴ Decisions that affect children and young people as a collective.

marginalised, those who have left home or care, those in hospital, very young children, inactive teenage girls and those whose parents are not open to engaging with services (Roe & McEvoy, 2011).

Kilkelly (2007) has also noted that the voices of children from rural communities, children with disabilities, children in care, children in the justice system, Traveller children, immigrant children and early school leavers are not being heard, not only in relation to policies and decisions that directly affect them as children, but also those relating to their specific circumstances. With specific reference to young people in care in Ireland, an extensive consultation conducted by the DCYA - *Listen to Our Voices: Hearing Children and Young People Living in the Care of the State* - identified that young people had little experience of expressing their views and that current mechanisms were not effective in supporting them to have their voices heard (McEvoy & Smith, 2011). Although examples exist of young people in care having opportunities to engage in public decision-making through mechanisms such as EPIC's Youth Forum, and in personal decision-making in the form of reviews of care, the evidence suggests that more could be done to support seldom heard young people's participation through the use of child-friendly meetings, assistance to help them express their views and feedback about the outcome from decision-making processes (McGree *et al.*, 2006). Frazer & Devlin (2011) report similar limited opportunities to participate in public decision-making for children at risk of poverty in Ireland; they explain however that where participation occurs, it has benefits for both the young people and their communities.⁵

The experience of having fewer opportunities for seldom heard young people to participate resonates in the broader international literature. The World Health Organisation (2010) for example outlines that young people with disabilities have fewer opportunities to participate in public as opposed to private decision-making. Research has also indicated that children with disabilities are less likely to be involved in decision-making than their peers who do not have disabilities, even when the decision directly concerns their personal health (Davey, 2010). Furthermore, Hill (1998) argues that despite knowing best about their own needs, children and young people most in need of services are often excluded from decisions about those services.

⁵ Three case study sites were selected with cognisance of the following variables associated with child poverty: rural and urban social and economic disadvantage, unemployment, lone parenting, ethnic minority populations (including Travellers), asylum seekers and refugees.

1.3 Structure of the Report

Chapter 1 introduces the review and outlines its main aims and objectives. In Chapter 2, the methodology used to review the literature is outlined. This is followed in Chapter 3 by an overview of key legislation and policy, structures, and policy initiatives relating to participation by seldom heard young people. Chapter 4 explores what is meant by the term *seldom heard*. In Chapter 5 the meaning of *participation* is defined and the barriers and challenges to participation for seldom heard young people are discussed. Chapter 6 focuses on the *representativeness* of seldom heard young people in participation and examines the strategies used to improve their inclusion in participation structures. In Chapter 7, the emphasis switches to *participation experiences* for seldom heard young people. It explores their perspectives on meaningful participation before going on to analyse the issues that shape and influence the quality and meaningfulness of participation experiences. Chapter 8 draws together the key messages from the review under four key sections: what is understood by seldom heard; defining participation; challenges and barriers to participation; and considerations for developing more effective approaches to participation.

2. METHODOLOGY

The aim of the research was to review the literature on participation involving seldom heard young people. The existing body of youth participation literature within which this literature is largely embedded is extensive, and thus required what has been described as *the scholarship of integration*; ‘an approach which draws upon various academic disciplines and professional fields in order to contribute to knowledge development and advance the field (Boyer, 1997, as cited in Checkoway, 2011, p. 340). The aim was not to complete a comprehensive review of all published material in the field, but rather to integrate major conceptual, theoretical, legal, policy, and practice issues with a view to identifying best practice principles in the field of participation by seldom heard young people⁶.

The overall methodological approach involved analysis and critical review of the literature. There were three stages to this process: (1) literature selection; (2) critical engagement and synthesis of the literature; and (3) thematic structuring of the review.

2.1. Literature Selection

The strategy for the identification and selection of literature firstly involved desk-based research which included searches of key databases and citation indexes. A range of social sciences, psychology and legal databases and citation indexes were used to search for literature. These included PsycInfo, SocIndex, Social Sciences Citation Index. Research repositories such as RIAN, ESRC Social Sciences Repository, and Children’s Database (www.childrensdatabase.ie) and the National Children’s Board (NCB) ChildData database were also utilised. Internet search engines were used to locate relevant literature produced in Ireland and internationally. Online resources of organisations such as UNICEF and of the Council of Europe were also examined.

As part of the overall methodological approach, targeted requests for information were made in order to identify both published material and grey literature in Ireland and the United Kingdom. It was envisaged that targeted requests for information would complement the desk-based research in that it may, for example, identify documented (yet unpublished) evaluations of participation activities that have been implemented, and may reveal best practice measures for facilitating participation among seldom heard young people. An email was drafted explaining the nature, purpose and scope of the research and seeking published and unpublished material relating specifically to participation initiatives for seldom heard young people.

⁶ For the purposes of the review, the term *young people* refers to those aged 12-18 years. It must be noted, however, that the age range that defines ‘young people’ differs within the literature cited throughout the review.

To identify sources in the Irish context, the email was sent to the following:

- Member organisations of the Children’s Rights Alliance which represents over 90 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Ireland. This included child welfare agencies and service providers, child protection groups, academics, youth organisations, family support groups, human rights organisations, disability organisations, parent representative organisations, community groups, and other organisations interested in children’s rights. Also included were organisations which received funding under the DCYA Inclusion Programme (Belong To, Barnardos, FDYS Youth Work Ireland, Irish Wheelchair Association, Irish Association of Young People in Care, Inclusion Ireland, and Pavee Point).
- Member organisations of the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI), which is the National representative body for voluntary youth organisations and which currently has 54 member organisations (44 full members and 10 affiliate members).
- Irish sources from the DCYA list of related agencies and organisations which includes Government bodies, statutory and independent agencies, such as the Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform, The National Children’s Advisory Council and The Ombudsman for Children Office.
- The 34 City and County Development Boards and associated Community and Voluntary Fora, and also the local authority Social Inclusion Units.
- Academics and researchers with interests related to participation among seldom heard young people.

To gather information from the United Kingdom (including Northern Ireland) a range of statutory agencies and NGOs were contacted by email. This included members and partners of Participation Works a coalition of six national children’s and young people’s agencies which includes the Children’s Rights Alliance for England, British Youth Council, National Council for Voluntary Youth Services, the National Youth Agency, the National Children’s Bureau, and Save the Children UK. The email was also sent to a number of statutory agencies in the United Kingdom, such as the Participation Teams of the Commissioners for Children and Young People (e.g. Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People).

While the strategy elicited a large number of email responses, there was a notable lack of documented evaluations on the participation experiences of groups that might be deemed seldom heard. Much of the material consisted of mainstream youth participation literature, participatory research projects, and anecdotal information in relation to participation activities. In addition,

information in relation to initiatives aimed at getting young people involved in non-public participation activities (such as sport) was supplied. Overall, formal documented evaluations of initiatives specific to seldom heard young people were difficult to identify. In contrast to expectations, limited formal documented evaluative studies were garnered from this comprehensive research exercise.

2.2 Critical Engagement and Synthesis

Literature gathered was progressively reviewed and analysed by the research team. This included consideration of the meanings of *seldom heard*, and of *participation* for seldom heard young people, and delineation of the scope of the research within this context. Models of participation were examined and their applicability to participation by seldom heard young people considered. In addition, a review of key legislation and policy documents relating to young people's participation in the Irish context was carried out. Two documents – the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and The National Children's Strategy: *Our Children Their Lives* (2000) – were identified as representing the key legislation and policy pertaining to participation among children and young people and their influence was observed in both national and organisational policy documents.

2.3 Thematic Structuring of the Review

Chapters were structured according to central themes occurring in the literature. Key themes included:

- the heterogeneity of seldom heard young people;
- the meaning of *participation*;
- barriers and challenges to participation for seldom heard young people;
- the question of representativeness in participation;
- improving the inclusion of seldom heard young people in formal participation;
- perspectives on meaningful participation;
- methods and approaches to participation for seldom heard young people;
- outcomes from participation

2.4 Research Advisory Group

A research advisory group was formed and consisted of individuals whose expertise derives from practice, research and legal backgrounds. The members were Judy Doyle, Lecturer in Social Care, Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), Claire Hickey, Senior Research Manager (Barnardos), and Dr. Geoffrey Shannon, solicitor and the Government Special Rapporteur on Child Protection.

3. LEGISLATION AND POLICY CONTEXT

The importance of the participation of all young people in public policy and decision-making is acknowledged at both an international and a national level. The legal and policy context of participation for ‘seldom heard’ young people – as defined in the introduction to this report – is embedded within this overall framework. Youth participation has also been prioritised at a European level, where the need to promote and support participation by ‘young people with fewer opportunities’ has been addressed within the social inclusion agenda (Council Resolution on the Participation of Young People with Fewer Opportunities 9133/08 of 8 May 2008, p. 4). A number of structures and initiatives for participation by young people have been developed within the overall framework, which is described below.

3.1. International Context: The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was ratified by Ireland in 1992. The Convention recognises children’s rights including the right to have a voice and to participate in decision-making that affects their lives. Accordingly, participation is a substantive right and right of all children and young people. This is most clearly stated in Article 12, which addresses the child’s right to have and express an opinion in all matters and judicial and administrative procedures that affect him or her:

Article 12

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

Children and young people’s participation and self-expression rights are further addressed in the following articles:

- Article 13: freedom of expression (including the ‘freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds’).
- Article 14: freedom of thought, conscience and religion.
- Article 15: the right to participate as a member of a group.

In addition to the right to participate, children and young people's rights to provision and protection are stated in the UNCRC. The right to participate means that children and young people have the right to influence both the protection they receive and the provision of services to meet their needs. Participation can thus function as a procedural right. The UNCRC also makes clear that children and young people should be able to exercise their rights in ways appropriate to their developmental stage. This is reflected in expressions such as 'due weight in accordance with the age and maturity' and 'manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child' (Article 12). The UNCRC therefore mandates that as children and young people mature, they can increasingly participate in decisions affecting them and in ways appropriate to their skills and abilities.

To comply with the UNCRC, governments are obligated to make sure that all children and young people receive the necessary support to ensure they can exercise their rights. They are therefore responsible for implementing structures and mechanisms to hear the voices of all children and young people in decisions that affect them. Article 2 makes it clear that all rights apply to all children without exception, and states that governments have an obligation to implement measures to promote all children's rights and to protect children from all forms of discrimination.

Article 2

1. States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.
2. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the child's parents, legal guardians, or family members.

Fundamental to the implementation of all rights are the general principles (Articles 2, 3, 6, and 12). Article 3 states that the best interests of the child must be paramount and Article 6 provides for the right of every child for survival and development.

Although children and young people's right to participate is enshrined in the UNCRC, the manner and extent to which it is reflected in domestic legislation of participating countries differs. For example, Finland has incorporated the UNCRC into its Constitution, Article 6 of which states 'children shall be treated equally and as individuals and shall be allowed to influence matters pertaining to

them ...'. Other countries have incorporated the UNCRC into specific legislation (e.g. Norway and Northern Ireland). In Northern Ireland, Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 makes it a requirement for statutory bodies to consult with all those affected by their policies, including children and young people. Despite Ireland's ratification of the UNCRC, the views of many young people are not included in public decisions that affect them. The UNCRC is not enshrined in Irish law, as it is in other countries.

Shortcomings with Ireland's implementation of the UNCRC have been highlighted by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2006) and others (e.g. Kilkelly, 2007). In particular, the Committee notes that progress needs to be made in promoting the rights of marginalised children and young people such as Traveller and Roma children and young people, and young people with mental health difficulties. According to Kilkelly (2007):

Given the failure to mainstream the participation of children and young people into policy and law reform, it is not surprising that marginalised children face additional barriers having their voices heard. Despite the clear advice of the Committee on the Rights of the Child that it is vital to listen to marginalised groups, few inclusive structures have been developed for listening to 'hard to reach' groups (p.67).

Kilkelly (2007) noted that if the UNCRC is to be complied with in full, then structures and mechanisms must be implemented to hear the voices of all children, including the most marginalised. To do this, legislation, policy and practice must reflect the general principles of the UNCRC.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006

Despite being signed in 2007, the UNCRPD has not yet been ratified in Ireland. 'Full and effective participation' of people with disabilities is a key principle of the Convention and the participation right of children and young people with disabilities is best reflected in Article 7.3:

States Parties shall ensure that children with disabilities have the right to express their views freely on all matters affecting them, their views being given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity, on an equal basis with other children, and to be provided with disability and age-appropriate assistance to realize that right.

In addition to Article 7.3, Article 21 addresses freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information, and Article 29 addresses the right to participate in political and public life, including the right to vote.

3.2 European Context

The position of the Council of the European Union in relation to the participation by seldom heard young people is clearly stated in its resolution on the participation of young people with fewer opportunities (Council Resolution 9133/08 of 8 May 2008). The resolution calls for equality of opportunity for all young people in accessing mainstream participation structures; and also, where necessary, the tailoring of structures, activities, and approaches to promote and support the participation of young people with fewer opportunities. To achieve this, national policy of member states must facilitate the development and implementation of sustainable mechanisms for the inclusion and participation of seldom heard young people. Co-operation and collaboration between non-governmental organisations, public bodies, the young people themselves, and wider society, is deemed instrumental to achieving this.

The key mechanism by which the European Union supports the participation of young people with fewer opportunities is the Youth in Action Programme 2007-2013. Youth participation is a main priority of this programme and the projects it funds must reflect participation as per the council resolution on the common objectives for participation by and information for young people (Council Resolution 2003/C 295/04 of 25 November 2003) which are:

- to increase the participation by young people in the civic life of their community;
- to increase participation by young people in the system of representative democracy; and
- to provide greater support for various forms of learning to participate.

(European Commission, 2011, p.4).

The Programme is open to all young people, but the involvement of young people with fewer opportunities is one of its key priorities. In Ireland, Léargas is the National Agency for the Youth in Action Programme. Léargas is a not-for-profit organisation that operates under the aegis of the Department of Education and Skills and the DCYA. One example of a project funded under this scheme is the 'Us, Art and the Community' project (Salto Youth, n.d.) which enabled young people from a disadvantaged area of Cork City to explore their rights and access to services⁷. Twenty-seven percent (339) of 1267 young participants in Youth in Action Projects in 2010 were young people with fewer opportunities (as defined earlier in this report).

⁷ Participation projects are typically funded under the Youth in Action Youth Democracy strand. 'Us Art and the Community' was funded under the Youth Initiative strand.

3.3 National Context

3.3.1 National Children's Strategy: Our Children – Their Lives⁸

The UNCRC serves as a basis upon which policymakers may develop, implement and promote strategies to ensure that all young people participate in decisions that affect their lives, at both local and national level. In the Irish context, the National Children's Strategy (2000) has been the key policy document in this respect. The National Children's Strategy (2000) set forth three goals:

Goal 1: Children will have a voice.

Goal 2: Children's lives will be better understood.

Goal 3: Children will receive quality supports and services.

Goal 1 proposed that 'children will have a voice' in matters that affect them, and in this way it reflects Article 12 of the UNCRC. It has thus been Government policy that children and young people are provided with the opportunity to voice their opinions in areas that affect their lives. A number of key objectives underpin Goal 1. These objectives are:

- i. to put in place new mechanisms in the public sector which achieve participation by children in matters which affect them;
- ii. to promote and support the development of a similar approach in the voluntary and private sectors;
- iii. to ensure that children are made aware of their rights and responsibilities;
- iv. to support children and organisations to make the most of the new opportunities to be provided;
- v. to target additional resources and supports to enable marginalised children to participate equally; and
- vi. to support research into and evaluation of new mechanisms to give children a voice (National Children's Strategy, 2000, p.32).

As can be seen, the fifth objective addressed seldom heard young people specifically. This objective was stated in recognition that 'some children, particularly children with a disability or from marginalised communities, will require additional supports to assist their involvement' (p.36). Children in care are considered a vulnerable group with a particular need for a formal system of representation and complaints and the Strategy highlights the role of EPIC and Barnardos in this

⁸ The term of this Strategy has expired. A consultation process for the National Children's Strategy 2012-17 is currently underway.

regard. It is also noted that participation itself can be direct or mediated through a third party as is the case with the Guardian *Ad Litem* service which was established under the Child Care Act 1991.

The overall Strategy objectives G-L are targeted at children that 'have additional needs'. Objectives G and H recognises poverty and homelessness respectively as a barrier to children's participation. Both poverty and homelessness are alluded to under Article 27 of the UNCRC. Objective J proposes the Disabilities Bill (Disability Act 2001) which includes measures to enhance the participation in society of children with disabilities. Participation in this context refers to full participation in civic society, of which participation in decision-making processes is one component. With Objective K, the Strategy recognises that there are barriers to participation for children from ethnic minority groups, including Traveller children. It proposed that 'learning from experience with measures to support Traveller children, school and community-based initiatives will be developed to promote a more participative and intercultural society which values social and cultural diversity' (p. 70). In addition, under this objective, the Government makes a commitment to providing a guardian *ad litem* for unaccompanied minors (separated children) seeking refugee status.

In addition to the objectives outlined above, Objective M (children will benefit from and contribute to vibrant local communities) addresses participation for all children and young people by proposing the implementation of the White Paper *Supporting Voluntary Activity*, which sets out measures to encourage active citizenship. The White Paper itself recognises the role of the community and voluntary sector in the involvement and participation of the most marginalised.

Structures formed to support the implementation of the Strategy include the National Children's Office [the Office became the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA), and in 2011, became the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA)], the National Children's Advisory Council and the Cabinet Sub-Committee on Children. According to The National Children's Advisory Council (n.d.), together with Goal 1 these structures provide:

- A bedrock of legitimacy for hearing children's and young people's voices;
- A means of ensuring that their right to be heard remains on the public policy agenda; and
- A foundation for the systematic development of opportunities for young voices to become structurally embedded in the democratic process (pp.2-3).

The National Children's Strategy was developed in consultation with children and young people including young Travellers, young people in care and young homeless people. In an assessment of

the Strategy, The Children's Rights Alliance (2011) cited 'impressive' progress on Goals 1 and 2, but 'limited' progress on Goal 3: the provision of quality supports and services for children and young people.

3.3.2 Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA)

The DCYA has had a leading role in implementing Goal 1 of the National Children's Strategy. In support of this work, the DCYA established a Participation Support Team, which is guided by the Children and Young People's Partnership Committee. The DCYA has overseen the establishment of key youth participation structures: Comhairlí na nÓg (local youth councils); Dáil na nÓg (the national youth parliament); and the CYPF (Children and Young People's Forum). It also worked with the Department of Education and Science to support the development of democratic student councils, as provided for under the Education Act 1998.

For all young people in Ireland – including seldom heard young people – formal opportunities for participation in public decision-making are mainly provided through the universal youth council structure (Comhairle na nÓg), the youth parliament structure (Dail na n Óg), and extended forums, such as the DCYA's CYPF. Local youth councils (Comhairlí na nÓg) and the national youth parliament (Dáil na nÓg) are funded by the DCYA and are run by the 34 City and County Development Boards across the country. The Comhairlí were set up to give young people under 18 years a voice in the development of local services and policies. Comhairlí hold regular meetings and young people can use these arenas to discuss issues that affect their lives. Each Comhairle develops a programme of work in response to issues raised at meetings. Practice varies between Comhairlí with some linking in with their local adult county councils and meeting with policy and decision-makers.⁹ Young people are selected or elected to Comhairlí na nÓg through local schools and youth organisations, and may be nominated from there to participate in the annual Dáil na nÓg.

3.3.2.1 DCYA's Children and Young People's Forum (CYPF)

Formal extended forums are enduring structures which typically have annual or biennial recruitment of members. These often take the form of an advisory panel where government can consult with members on specific issues or in relation to particular projects. The DCYA's CYPF was established in 2004 to advise the DCYA and the Minister for Children on issues of concern to children and young people and to act as a reference panel. The Forum was comprised of 35 young people aged 12 to 18 years who were nominated from across the country through Comhairle na nÓg and through

⁹ Each local Comhairle na nÓg submits an annual report to the DCYA; and an independent evaluation report on Comhairle na nÓg is compiled annually.

organisations supporting seldom heard young people. One of the strengths of this forum was the proximity of the young people involved to policymakers and to the Minister for Children. Example of consultations the CYPF has been involved in include: the design and content of the national recreation policy; the development of student council resources; the development of a youth friendly version of the UNCRC; consultations on the age of sexual consent; consultations on mental health.

Evaluation of the CYPF indicated an under-representation of seldom heard young people in its membership profile (McEvoy, 2009a) and the establishment of the DCYA Inclusion Programme was one measure taken to address this issue (see below 3.3.2.2). In addition, the recruitment procedure for the CYPF was adjusted to actively target young people from un-represented counties and from organisations representing seldom heard young people resulting in greater diversity in the membership profile of the CYPF (ibid., 2009a).

3.3.2.2 The DCYA Inclusion Programme

Targeted initiatives include those that specifically aim to increase the participation of seldom heard young people in mainstream participation structures. The DCYA commenced the Inclusion programme in December 2007 with the aims of providing meaningful participation experiences for seldom heard young people and identifying good practice in facilitating the participation of seldom heard young people in formal decision-making structures, such as Comhairle na nÓg and the DCYA's CYPF. Seven organisations (Belong To, Barnardos, FDYS Youth Work Ireland, Irish Wheelchair Association, EPIC (formerly known as the Irish Association of Young People in Care), Inclusion Ireland, and Pavee Point) were funded through the programme. Activities undertaken by the organisations largely entailed capacity building and supporting young people to attend Comhairle na nÓg and CYPF meetings. Over its two-year life course, the Inclusion programme engaged with 160 young people. Although it is not clear what level of participation young people were engaged at, what decisions they were involved in making and the specific outcomes of their involvement, the young people interviewed as part of the Year 1 programme evaluation described *benefits* of involvement such as getting involved; having a voice; making new friends; improved personal skills; having a chance to reflect; and a sense of achievement (McEvoy, 2009c). It was also reported that a small number of participants of the Inclusion Programme went on to become representatives on such forums as Dáil na nÓg, the Headstrong Youth Advisory Panel and the DCYA's CYPF (ibid, 2009c).

The most significant outcome that appears to have resulted from the Inclusion programme is the mainstreaming of young people's participation within the organisations that took part; some of whom previously did not have extensive knowledge or experience in the area. Indeed, McEvoy (2010a) outlines that a lack of clarity was reported by organisations in respect of youth participation itself and the nature of the participation structures and processes. This meant that at times the activities provided to the young people under the programme came more from a youth work approach than a youth participation approach (McEvoy, 2010a). By the end of the second year, six of the seven organisations had begun implementing changes to internal policies and practice to ensure that the young people they represented had a say in decision-making. For example, EPIC developed an internal advisory group; Pavee Point developed a permanent participation group; and BeLonG To set up a youth advisory panel, and also achieved youth representation on the Outhouse Management and Pride Committees (McEvoy, 2010a). Through the Inclusion Programme, both the organisations and the young people they represented became involved in wider initiatives. For example, the IWA and Inclusion Ireland became involved in Comhairle Steering Committees and two members of FDYS were elected to the Wexford Youth Cabinet. The implications of these findings from the Inclusion programme suggest that partnerships with organisations who work with seldom heard young people are instrumental to supporting the participation of seldom heard young people in formal structures (Bell *et al.*, 2008). To this end, it is notable that applicants to the DCYA Comhairle na nÓg Development Fund are required to outline the strategies and approaches used, and provide details of the organisations worked with, to engage seldom-heard young people with Comhairle na nÓg and improve their participation.

3.3.2.3 Other DCYA Initiatives

In addition to the Inclusion Programme, the DCYA has consulted directly with seldom heard young people on issues important to them (see below 3.3.4), and has included seldom heard voices in consultations regarding issues relevant to all young people, such as in the development of the National Youth Justice Strategy 2008-2010. Together with the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) and the Children's Rights Alliance (CRA), the DCYA also developed *Young Voices: Guidelines on How to Involve Children and Young People in your Work* (2005) with a view to providing guidelines to support organisations wishing to promote the participation of children and young people in decision-making. These guidelines address inclusiveness and engaging children and young people who may be 'hard-to-reach'. The DCYA has produced a range of publications relating to youth participation including the *Comhairle na nÓg Toolkit* which builds on the guidelines and which provides guidance for setting up and running youth councils (see McEvoy, 2011). There are, however, no national

standards for children's and young people's participation, unlike the Welsh *National Children and Young People's Participation Standards* (Welsh Assembly Government, 2007), and the United Kingdom's *Hear by Right Standards* (Badham & Wade, 2005). There is also no national participation strategy, such as England's *An Equal Place at the Table for Children and Young People: National Participation Strategic Vision* (Ward & Heam, 2010).

3.3.3 The Ombudsman for Children (OCO)

The National Children's Strategy outlined the provision of the Office of the Ombudsman for Children. A key role of the Ombudsman as outlined under the Ombudsman for Children Act 2002 is to promote the welfare and rights of all children, including the participation of children and young people in policy and decision-making. Section 7, Part 2 of the Act reflects the UNCRC and is as follows:

- (2) (a) The Ombudsman for Children shall establish structures to consult regularly with groups of children that he or she considers to be representative of children for the purposes of his or her functions under this section.
- (b) In consultations under this subsection, the views of a child shall be given due weight in accordance with the age and understanding of the child.

The Ombudsman for Children plays an important role in promoting and supporting children and young people's participation, and also in guiding other agencies in doing so. In 2003, the Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO) established a Youth Advisory Panel (YAP) in order to gain advice on all aspects of its programme of work, and in relation to specific projects. The OCO consulted young people on issues such as health, education, young people and the law, having a voice, equality, play and recreation, community and environment. The first YAP was directly involved in the recruitment of the Ombudsman for Children in 2003. The second and final YAP comprised 25 members from across Ireland who had diverse life experiences. There were just two panels since the YAP's commencement in 2003. The OCO decided not to continue with the extended panel from 2010, and instead is focusing on specific advisory groups of young people to consult regarding individual projects. This move has opened up more opportunities for groups of seldom heard young people to meaningfully participate in issues affecting their lives. To date, a number of different groups of seldom heard young people have been consulted about their experiences including homeless children (Ombudsman for Children's Office, 2012a), young people in St. Patrick's Institution (Ombudsman for Children's Office, 2011b), and separated children since entering the state (Ombudsman for Children's Office, 2011a). Young people in care, young people with physical

disabilities and LGBT young people were also involved in an OCO consultation about schools' handling of bullying and how to deal effectively with bullying in schools between September 2011-12 (Ombudsman for Children's Office, 2012b).

3.3.4 Discrete Targeted Projects – DCYA and OCO

Discrete targeted projects are one-off participation exercises involving specific groups of young people which typically focus on issues particular to the group in question.

3.3.4.1 Listen to Our Voices: Hearing Children and Young People Living in the Care of the State (DCYA)

In 2010 the DCYA conducted consultations with young people in the care of the state in order to hear their views on matters of importance to them and to make recommendations regarding the development of structures for young people to express their views (McEvoy & Smith, 2011). The 211 young people who participated included those living in foster care and residential centres, young people detained in Saint Patrick's Institution and in detention schools, and young people in residential units due to a disability. As part of this project, an advisory group was compiled of young people with experience of State care. These young people were recruited from the DCYA's existing CYPF and from EPIC. The role of the group was to advise the project team on the methodology used in the consultations, as well as on other practical matters. One of the key features of this project was the use of creative methodologies designed to 'cater for the diverse cohorts of participants so that they could be empowered to express their views, depending on their level of ability and interest' (McEvoy & Smith, 2011, p.2). Methods included body-mapping, identity boxes, and voting, which took place within a workshop structure. Some interviews were also conducted using the Talking Mats® framework, which aims to facilitate communication for people with communication difficulties (Murphy, 1997). Other methods used to elicit the views of those with severe–profound intellectual and communication impairments included proxy interviews with staff, and video recording and observation.

3.3.4.2 Separated Children's Project (OCO)

The OCO conducted the Separated Children's project in 2009 with a view to better understanding the experiences of separated children in Ireland and influencing positive change in their lives by bringing the output from the project to the attention of policy makers, legislators and other senior decision-makers. The project was undertaken with an advisory group of 35 separated children living in the Dublin area and there were three main outputs from the project: a guidebook compiled by the young people, a story book setting out their stories and a project report.

A key feature of the Separated Children's project was the strategy employed to recruit young people to the advisory group. Firstly, the OCO visited young people in their accommodation centres to invite them to an open day at the OCO. This was followed up with a personalised written invitation to each young person. Sign-up sheets were also placed in each centre and staff encouraged young people to attend. The open day was scheduled for the end of the school holidays to facilitate attendance by young people, leaflets were distributed to the young people and the project team met with them to answer questions. The young people attended three different workshops – message board, human rights, and information about the work of the OCO – and at the end of the day all of those who expressed an interest were invited back to further meetings regarding the project aims, objectives and plan. As well as the establishment of an advisory group of young people for the project, a 'drop-in' facility was created for other young people who wished to discuss their issues on a one-to-one basis.

3.3.5 Discrete Universal Projects

Discrete universal projects are one-off participation exercises that focus on issues affecting young people as a collective. One example is the Children's Rights Alliance (CRA) *Our Voices, Our Realities* (2006) report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child on the experiences of young people aged 11 to 17 years living in Ireland. The CRA produced the report in collaboration with its member organisations and 132 young people. This included young people from diverse backgrounds including seven who were using homeless services, three with disabilities, 33 separated children, and 19 young Travellers. The methodology employed in *Our Voices, Our Realities* involved consultation workshops in which organisations worked with young people to create a piece of written or art work with a view to creating a 'scrapbook' which would become the final report.¹⁰ The CRA asked young people to describe what their own lives are like and to speak from their own experience rather than on behalf of young people in general. Open questions were used to allow the young people to raise the issues they felt were important to them. Such an approach recognises young people as experts in their own lives and acknowledges both the similarities and differences among the lives that young people lead.

¹⁰ One organisation used photography and another used film.

3.3.6 Other National Legislation and Policy of Relevance

The following documents are of relevance to participation by seldom heard young people in Ireland:

- i. *Towards 2016: Ten Year Framework Social Partnership Agreement 2006* (Department of the Taoiseach, 2006).¹¹ The Agreement between the government and the social partners states one of its goals as ‘deepening capabilities, achieving higher participation rates and more successfully handling diversity, including immigration’ (p.5). The Agreement establishes key policy goals in relation to children. According to Section 30 ‘every child and young person will have access to appropriate participation in local and national decision-making’ (p. 41). The proposed measures to achieve this included the establishment of a Comhairle na nÓg Implementation Group (subsequently replaced by the DCYA’s Children and Young People’s Participation Partnership Committee) to include organisations representing seldom heard young people, and also the establishment and operation of student councils in schools, in line with the Education Act 1998 and the National Children’s Strategy 2000. According to Section 33 of the Agreement, the partners have a vision that ‘every person with a disability would be supported to enable them, as far as possible, to lead full and independent lives, to participate in work and in society and to maximise their potential’ (p. 66). The implementation of the National Disability Strategy 2004 was the proposed means of realising this vision.
- ii. *Education Act 1998*: The Education Act 1998 makes provision for the establishment of democratic student councils at post-primary level thereby giving students the potential to have a say in the affairs of their school, in collaboration with teachers, parents and boards of management. Section 27, Part 4 states: ‘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’. Unlike jurisdictions such as Wales, the Act does not make student councils a statutory requirement.
- iii. *Equal Status Act 2000*: The Equal Status Act prohibits discrimination in the area of services, including services for children, on nine grounds which are gender, civil status, family status, age, race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, membership of the Traveller community.
- iv. *Youth Work Act 2001*: Participation of young people is an underlying principle of the Youth Work Act 2001, which provides for the establishment of Voluntary Youth Councils.
- v. *National Action Plan against Racism 2005*: Participation is one of the key objectives underpinning the National Action Plan against Racism (NPAR). The UN Committee on the

¹¹ The implementation of this agreement has been negatively impacted by Ireland’s economic difficulties.

Rights of the Child (2006) recommended the full implementation of the Plan, with particular attention to be given to ensuring that the principle of non-discrimination be applied equally to all children.

- vi. *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016*: In line with the UNCRC and *Towards 2016*, the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion (NAPSI) set out a goal that ‘every child and young person will have access to appropriate participation in local and national decision-making’ (p.30). NAPSI states the intention to include measures to ensure that seldom heard young people are included in participation structures. Frazer and Devlin (2011) have pointed out that despite NAPSI’s focus on children their voices do not appear to have been taken into account in its development.

3.4 Conclusion

The value of participation for all young people in decision-making is recognised nationally and internationally. At an international level, the UNCRC acknowledges the right of children to have a voice and to participate in decision-making. Within Europe, the Council of the European Union outlines its stance on the participation of seldom heard young people in the Council Resolution (9133/08) on the participation of young people with fewer opportunities. Furthermore, the participation of young people with fewer opportunities is funded by the European Union through initiatives such as the Youth in Action Programme 2007-2013. In the Irish context, the National Children’s Strategy: Our Children – Their Lives is the key policy document relevant to the area of participation and sets out specific objectives relevant to participation under Goal 1 of the strategy: Children will have a voice.

The review of policy and other literature in this chapter indicates that the National Children’s Strategy has provided an important baseline from which initiatives and developments to improve the participation of seldom heard young people in Ireland have occurred. The inclusion of seldom heard young people in the national youth council structure (Comhairle na nÓg) has been promoted through specific initiatives such as the DCYA Inclusion Programme. It is also strongly encouraged by the requirement on local Comhairle na nÓg, when applying to the Comhairle na nÓg Development Fund, to outline the strategies and approaches used to engage seldom-heard young people, and to give details of the organisations they worked with to improve participation of seldom-heard young people. In addition, the evidence points to a range of consultations and discrete targeted participation exercises undertaken by establishments such as the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Office of the Ombudsman for Children with seldom heard young. As well as the more

specific focus on participation arising from the National Children's Strategy, a number of other policy and legislative measures exist that are relevant to the participation of all young people including seldom heard young people. These range from the Education Act 1998 where provision is made for the establishment of student councils at post-primary level to the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016 which includes a goal to provide children and young people with 'access to appropriate participation in local and national decision-making' (p.30).

Despite the aforementioned developments in the area of participation, a number of impediments to participation for all young people remain. Since Ireland's ratification of the UNCRC, the participation rights of children and young people have increased in profile, yet these rights have not been incorporated into Irish law. There is a general consensus that Ireland's legal and policy framework does not adequately address the participation rights of young people, including those seldom heard (e.g. Frazer & Devlin, 2011; Kilkelly, 2007). Furthermore, unlike other jurisdictions such as the UK, a national participation strategy in place or national standards for children's and young people's participation does not exist in the Irish context.

4. SELDOM HEARD YOUNG PEOPLE

4.1 Who are 'Seldom Heard' Young People?

The term *seldom heard* refers to 'groups of people who do not have a collective voice and are often under-represented in consultation or participation activities' (Social Exclusion Task Force, as cited in Community Network for Manchester, 2011, p.16). *Seldom heard young people* are young people whose voices are not heard in decisions that affect them and/or who are not benefitting from services designed to meet their needs. While the term *seldom heard* can apply generally to young people, in the context of this review, it applies to specific groups of young people within the general population. Who is and is not considered 'seldom heard' and the basis for this designation, is a complex issue and is one which must be considered sensitively (Williamson, Ryan, Hogg, & Fallon, 2009). Seldom heard young people are not a homogenous group, and the term *seldom heard* when used in the current context, may best be seen as an umbrella term which encompasses groups of great diversity and complexity that have in common their isolation from both mainstream and targeted participatory activities.

Within the literature, an array of terms is used alongside *seldom heard* to collectively describe people that tend not to be involved in participatory activities; however, the utility of some such terms can be questioned. Of particular note is the term *hard-to-reach* which has been defined as individuals or groups that are 'inaccessible to most traditional and conventional methods for any reason' (Health and Safety Executive, 1994, p.8) and 'whom an institution finds difficult to contact or engage for a particular purpose' (Brackertz, Zwart, Meredyth, & Ralston, 2005, p. 25). The term *hard-to-reach* is a potentially stigmatising label which is problematic and misleading (Cook, 2002; Jones & Newburn, 2001; Brackertz & Meredyth, 2008). Specifically, criticism of this term have identified that its use lacks consistency, and that it fails to recognise the diversity of the groups in question; places the responsibility for involvement on the group members themselves; and fails to consider how the specific issues for consultation can influence engagement (Begum, 2005; Brackertz *et al.*, 2005; Brackertz, 2007a, 2007b; Brackertz & Meredyth, 2008; Community Network for Manchester, 2011; Conroy, Mahon, Doyle, Reddin, & Byrne, 2008; Cook, 2002; Jones & Newburn, 2001; Robson, Sampson, Dime, Hernandez, & Litherland, 2008). According to Begum (2005):

The term 'hard to reach' can be taken to imply the individuals included in this category are of their own volition difficult to engage, rather than that their disengagement is a result of agencies' failures to proactively seek out their inclusion (p.132).

Being 'seldom heard' does not imply that there is something inherent to certain subgroups of young people that precludes them from participating, but rather that existing participation structures, organisations and services that target their needs are not adequately enabling the voice of these young people to be heard. Terms such as *hidden*, and *invisible* are used interchangeably with *hard-to-reach* in describing young people in the context of participation, but ultimately it is the case that organisations and service providers are not looking hard enough, or in the right places, and are not providing the appropriate opportunities for participation for some young people. The term *seldom heard* more appropriately reflects that certain young people are not being listened to and/or are not being given a chance to voice their opinions.

The terminology used to describe young people thus has important implications for how to go about engaging young people who tend to be outside of traditional consultation or participatory processes. Bell, Vromen, and Collin (2008) made a related point following their study of youth participation and diversity in the Australian context. They found that terms such as '*young people from a range of backgrounds*' and '*young people with different life experiences*' were more likely to be meaningful to young people, than '*young people from diverse backgrounds*' and thus concluded that 'the way diversity is framed influences which young people get involved' (p.11). As a result, they recommended that organisations broaden their understandings of diversity and that they recognise (but not highlight) the 'complex, multidimensional identities' that young people have (Bell *et al.*, 2008, p.163).

A consideration of the heterogeneity of groups to whom 'seldom heard' may be assigned is necessary if suitable and effective mechanisms to increase and enhance their participation are to be developed. Seldom heard young people are young people who tend to be underrepresented in consultation and participation exercises, both as individuals and as groups. They may be difficult to identify; may choose not to engage or not to access services where available; may or may not be affiliated with grass-roots organisations; or may be 'underserved' and 'overlooked' meaning that services may not exist for these young people and where they do, they may fail to access such services (Pryse, 2009; Ruiz-de-Velasco, Fix, & Clewell, 2000).

Seldom heard young people may exist within wider 'seldom heard' groups, such as within an ethnic minority group; or may exist as groups in their own right, such as young carers, young people with a parent in prison, young people within new family forms, and young people in reconstituted families. Commonalities can also be identified across groups that might be considered 'seldom heard' (e.g.

Community Network for Manchester, 2011; Conroy *et al.*, 2008, Smail, 2007). For example, young people may have language and/or communication difficulties; may have limited capacity or confidence to get involved; may not know how to get involved; or may not yet have even been identified as a group. Groups of seldom heard young people may be self-designated and defined, while others might result from particular circumstances (e.g. young offenders and homeless youth) and group members may not even recognise themselves as such (Hopper, 2010).

Williamson and colleagues (2009) highlighted the need to appreciate the complexity that exists within seldom heard and marginalised groupings, for example the need to consider gender, religion and social class alongside minority ethnic identity. Seldom heard groups may be seldom heard in multiple, overlapping and diverse respects and in respect of issues and needs unique to their situations, both on an individual and on a collective basis, at both the level of the individual and the level of the group in question. For seldom heard young people there is added complexity in that children and young people have traditionally been seen as lacking in competency and have been the recipients of adult decision-making within adult structures. While seldom heard young people form a heterogeneous group, they share in common the failure of adults to reach out to them and to create spaces and mechanisms for their meaningful engagement.

In appreciating the complexity of the 'seldom heard' designation, it follows that there is little value in simply listing groups of young people that might be deemed 'seldom heard', as this yields little direction regarding the development of successful participation structures and initiatives for the engagement of these young people. Brackertz (2007a; 2007b) and other authors (Health and Safety Executive, 1994; Jones & Newburn, 2001) suggest that there is more utility in defining characteristics in relation to 'hard-to-reach' groups that render them 'hard-to-reach', and in linking these characteristics to alternative and effective approaches to access and engagement (Brackertz, 2007a, 2007b). It is preferable to consider seldom heard young people primarily as young people with additional support needs, rather than labelling them as generic subgroups (McAuley & Brattman, 2002).

Brackertz (2007b) noted that 'the degree to which particular groups are hard-to-reach is context specific and depends on the population targeted, the participation method used and the issue consulted upon' (p.3). In participation terms, the characteristics of 'hard-to-reach' groups involve specific demographic, cultural, behavioural, attitudinal and structural factors (Brackertz *et al.*, 2005; Brackertz, 2007a, 2007b; Brackertz & Meredyth, 2008; Health and Safety Executive, 1994). All such

relevant factors and their interplay must be understood in order to increase the likelihood that participation structures and initiatives can be tailored, where necessary, to meet the needs of the young people in question. Such an approach means that elements of best practice can also be identified and applied across seemingly disparate 'subgroups' (Health and Safety Executive, 1994).

Some youth-specific issues for public participation by 'hard-to-reach' young people have been summarised by Smail (2007). For Smail (2007), children and young people who are 'hard-to-reach' may be so due to practical difficulties (e.g. language and communication problems); their particular vulnerability (e.g. young people in care and young carers); cultural reasons (e.g. ethnic minorities), and/or geographical reasons (e.g. those living in a remote or rural area). Smail (2007, pp. 1-2) identified the following broad groupings:

- Young people most frequently identified as 'hard to reach' (e.g. young people with physical disabilities, young carers, separated young people, and young people from travelling communities).
- Young people who are difficult to identify and difficult to engage in participation initiatives (e.g. LGBT young people; young people not in education, employment or training, young people with mental health difficulties and young people in the justice system).
- Young people who although reasonably easy to identify are more difficult to engage in participation initiatives (e.g. young people with language or communication difficulties, and young people with an intellectual disability).
- Subgroups of young people with particular experiences who are identifiable by authorities or gatekeepers though not necessarily by others (e.g. young people who are victims of crime and young people who have witnessed domestic violence).

To this may be added: young people who wish to remain anonymous, or invisible, and young people who have been over-consulted (i.e., who have had excessive exposure to consultation, participation and/or research)¹². Young people may also have insufficient knowledge of participation processes, or may be cynical or suspicious of government-led participation initiatives (Bell *et al.*, 2008). In the research context, Conroy and colleagues (2008) also identified individuals or groups who have become disillusioned with non-participatory research methods, groups that are as of yet unidentified, and those who do not come forward for research.

¹² This is also known as 'consultation fatigue'.

4.2 Conclusion

This chapter focused on examining and clarifying the question ‘what is meant by seldom heard young people?’ In so doing, it identified the complexities associated with the term and provided the basis for arguing that the heterogeneity of the seldom heard population requires diverse responses to meet their needs within the participation process. The key is to understand the nature of the underrepresentation of the seldom heard group in question and to identify and address any barriers that may exist to their participation. It follows that ‘there can be no one size fits all solution to reaching out to these children and young people to increase their level of participation in policy and decision making’ (Smail, 2007, p.3). As Sinclair (2004) noted, those tasked with engaging young people are challenged to examine their practice to ensure their approaches are inclusive.

5. SETTING THE CONTEXT: THE BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES TO PARTICIPATION FOR SELDOM HEARD YOUNG PEOPLE

The concept of participation challenges societal views that problematise young people, and requires a shift in perception from young people as ‘mere recipients of adult protection’ to ‘protagonists in the exercise of rights – as active agents in their own lives’ (United Nations, 2004, p.272). The concept of young people’s participation recognises the unique perspectives and expertise of young people and acknowledges that they have an essential contribution to make. Adapting this perspective, *participation* is defined as the process by which young people have active involvement and real influence in decision-making on matters affecting their lives, both directly and indirectly (Checkoway 2011; Couch & Francis, 2006; Council of Europe, 2008; Save the Children, 2005; United Nations, 2004). Young people’s participation is a right provided for by the UNCRC and reflected in Goal 1 of the National Children’s Strategy 2000, which requires that structures and supports be put in place to ensure the voices of all young people, including the most marginalised, are included in decisions affecting their lives. Young people can be involved in making decisions at national, local, organisational and global levels and may participate in shaping policy, in the development and provision of services, in research, in communities, and in decisions affecting them personally (National Children’s Office *et al.*, 2005; McNeish & Newman, 2002).

Broadly speaking, the context of young people’s participation can be described as personal or as public (Sinclair, 2005). Personal participation involves decisions about young people as individuals, such as in judicial proceedings and medical interventions. Public participation, on the other hand, refers to decisions about the collective interests of young people as a group, or decisions affecting the wider population. Kirby and Bryson (2002) describe public decisions as:

... collective decisions that organisations and public bodies make which govern their policies and practices and consequently the quality of services they provide for young people and others. This might be an organisation making decisions about how to provide services to young people; a local community, village, town or city planning its services; or a government institution, including a parliament or government department (p. 11).

Public and personal participation do not occur in isolation from each other and decision-making in one context may even be necessary for the fulfilment of another kind of decision-making. In the case of children with an intellectual disability, the World Health Organisation (2010) has made the case that opportunity and support for decisions at the basic individual level, such as in relation to food and clothing, must be present before more complex and longer-lasting decisions, such as schooling

and medical treatment can be made; and that support at these levels is necessary for participation in public decision-making to be meaningful. Research has also shown that through increased decision-making in the personal context, young people can develop the skills, understanding and motivation to participate in wider decision-making processes (Bell *et al.*, 2008). In addition, it may be the case that personal participation is a greater personal priority than public participation for some young people at a particular point in time (Checkoway, 2011; Percy-Smith, 2010). Bell *et al.* (2008) give the example of a separated minor who is settling into school, trying to learn a new language and trying to make new friends: public participation may not rank as a top priority in such a case. Accordingly it is argued that:

For young people who do not have many opportunities to shape decisions in their personal lives (for example, in relation to housing, study, employment, social activities) the idea of participating in decision-making processes about program or policy change is foreign and not a priority (*ibid.*, p. 167).

The current review is concerned with the participation of seldom heard young people within structures and initiatives in the public decision-making context. The rationale for young people's participation in public decision-making has been discussed in detail elsewhere (e.g. Sinclair, 2004; Tisdall, Davis, & Gallagher, 2008), and is summarised as follows:

1. To uphold children's rights
2. To fulfil legal responsibilities
3. To improve services
4. To improve decision-making
5. To enhance democratic processes
6. To promote children's protection
7. To enhance children's skills
8. To empower and enhance self-esteem

(Sinclair & Franklin, 2000 as cited in Sinclair, 2004)

Furthermore, a survey of EU member states on young people's participation indicated a range of perceived benefits for young people and for the societies they inhabit (Commission of the European Communities, 2003). These include: improved decision-making methods and processes, the acquisition and development of skills, increased social integration and the potential to change society's view of young people.

5.1 Barriers and Challenges to Participation for Seldom Heard Young People

While providing a forum for young people's voices, it is identified in the literature that the experiences, interests and perspectives of disadvantaged and/or socially excluded groups of young people are often less likely to be represented in formal, universal, public participation structures (Kirby & Bryson, 2002, Wyness, 2009). Instead, as Frazer and Devlin (2011) describe '... such types of structures tend to involve articulate children with greater capacity and opportunity to participate ...' (p.100). The existing evidence suggests that there may be a number of reasons why seldom heard young people have limited opportunities to participate within formal participation structures.

Lack of agency attributed to seldom heard young people: Active involvement in participation depends on adults' recognition of young people's confidence, skills and abilities; an element which Lansdown (2010) describes as frequently lacking:

... it seems clear that children are widely denied opportunities for decision making in accordance with their evolving capacities ... initiatives often fail because adults working with children do not recognise or promote children's potential contribution and, consequently, fail to relinquish their control over children in favour of an approach based on partnership or collaboration (p. 16).

This is a failure that Lansdown attributes to existing legislation, policy and practice frameworks which do not adequately consider the real capacities of children and young people.

In addition to a lack of agency *per se*, the conceptualisation of 'agency' has implications for the level of influence that young people are afforded in participation activities. Valentine (2009, as cited in Kiersey, 2012) proposes that children's agency and adults' agency are two differing concepts, and that failure to recognise this perpetuates the view of children as becoming adults and places emphasis on process over outcomes. Valentine (2011) further advocates a social model of agency that considers differences among children; in her view, 'the conventional emphasis of agency on articulation, rationality and strategy ... risks reinscribing a model in which privileged children will be accorded more agency than those who do not display rationality and choice in conventional ways' (p.347).

The lack of recognition of young people's agency in participation structures and processes is a particular barrier to participation for seldom heard young people. With reference to formal youth participation structures such as youth parliaments, Turkie (2010) notes that common rationalisations for not including seldom heard young people include the view that homeless young people lead lives

that are too chaotic to become involved; that young carers are too tired following their domestic commitments; and that young people with disabilities have 'evolving capacities' which render participation too difficult. These types of perspectives highlight the need to question the assumptions underlying attempts to involve seldom heard young people in youth councils and other participatory structures.

A dearth of knowledge, training and resource requirements: Although policymakers and practitioners have reported high levels of support for consultation with children and young people (McAuley & Brattman, 2002) and demonstrate positive attitudes towards their participation (Roe & McEvoy, 2011), it has been reported that organisations and services find the inclusion of diverse young voices to be challenging (ibid, 2011). This suggests that organisations working with seldom heard young people, while often best placed to encourage their participation may require training and support to promote good participation practices and to build a culture of participation within their representative organisations. Previous research has highlighted the resource intensive nature of including seldom heard young people in participation activity and suggested that a perceived lack of return on investment may act as a deterrent for some groups from actively seeking the involvement of seldom heard young people (McEvoy, 2009b; 2010b).

Personal and practical issues: In the situation where membership of formal participation structures requires individuals to self-nominate for election, it may potentially act as a barrier to the inclusion of seldom heard young people who may lack the confidence and skills necessary to put themselves forward. Practical, logistical and other difficulties may also stand in the way of including seldom heard young people in formal participation structures. For example, where venues for young people with a disability are inaccessible, where child or respite care is not available for young parents or carers, or where young people have concerns about privacy – with regard to the latter scenario, McEvoy (2010a) gives the example of a young person who was reluctant to become a youth council (Comhairle) representative for an organisation representing LGBT young people, due to a desire to maintain privacy in the local area surrounding his/her sexual identity.

Making participation structures relevant to the needs of seldom heard young people: Another hurdle that exists is where young people and/or the organisations they engage with see limited or no relevance in formal participation structures. While formal structures are unlikely to be an appropriate forum to facilitate participation for all young people, it does not detract from the need

to critically examine the relevance of these structures for seldom heard young people and the extent to which the processes and practices contained within them facilitate or thwart participation.

5.2 Barriers and Challenges to Participation for Seldom Heard Young People in School/Student Councils

Many of the barriers and challenges to participation for seldom heard young people on youth councils are also common to the experiences of seldom heard young people in relation to school/student councils. Schools are recognised as the ideal setting in which young people can learn and practice skills in democracy and active citizenship; and yet many young people do not get the opportunity to participate in this way (Commission of the European Communities, 2003; Kirby & Bryson, 2002). In the context of school/student councils, those considered 'seldom heard' are those marginalised in educational decision-making. Like youth councils, school/student councils tend to adhere to a representative democratic model of participation whereby individuals are elected or self- or adult-selected. Accordingly, there is an increased likelihood of the structures being dominated by more confident and articulate young people. In one UK-based study, young people themselves identified school councils as failing to recognise and reflect diversity in life experiences, backgrounds, age, gender, disability and ethnicity (Davey, 2010).

In Ireland, students and teachers have noted the propensity for the election/selection process to become a popularity contest; and teachers have expressed concern that certain young people, such as those with learning difficulties, and those who are shy and quiet, tend not to reach the student council (Keogh & Whyte, 2005). Research in the UK has also suggested that those with significantly less social and cultural capital are less likely to reach student councils (Wyness, 2009). This is further supported by O'Kane's (2009) study on participation in decision-making at school in Wales which drew on consultations with marginalised young people such as black and minority ethnic, refugee and asylum seekers, those with additional learning needs, looked after young people, and Travellers. The barriers identified by young people to their involvement in school-related decision-making included their perception that only those termed 'brainy' and middle class were listened to; meetings taking place in young people's free time; peer pressure not to take part; lack of confidence of young people to speak up in school or disagree with people; teachers' lack of understanding of the issues facing students; teachers' lack of confidence in dealing with young people from these groups; bullying; young people being labelled as 'difficult' by teachers. In addition, specific barriers were identified by different groups of young people. For example, as a result of frequent changes of placements and schools, young people in care reported feeling insufficiently settled at school to

have the confidence needed to be involved in making decisions about the school. Language was reported as a barrier by young people from black or minority ethnic backgrounds, or those who were refugee or asylum seekers. Some also felt that they were judged on their appearance. In another example, the scheduling of participation activities in students' free time was a particular issue for young people from Traveller backgrounds.

Many of the students' views were echoed in the perspectives from teachers and schools. While the school council was acknowledged as the main opportunity for students to have a say, it was noted that as places on the council are secured by democratic election, opportunities for this type of participation is not open to all. From teachers' perspective, factors that can prevent second-level students from accessing participation initiatives include: lack of interest, apathy, other commitments, non-attendance at school, being too shy, disabilities, and a reluctance to get involved resulting from an expectation of not being listened to (ibid.).

5.3 Conclusion

The range of barriers and challenges to participation outlined in this chapter demonstrates the complexity of issues that need to be addressed to improve involvement in participation for seldom heard young people. Coupled with earlier findings in this report highlighting the heterogeneity of seldom heard groups (see Chapter 1), it provides strong evidence to support the development of principles to guide participation practice rather than a uniform, prescriptive approach that is unlikely to meet the requirements of diverse individuals and groups. With this in mind, Chapter 6 examines the literature on improving seldom heard young people's inclusion in participation structures, while Chapter 7 focuses on strategies for enhancing the overall participation experience.

6. REPRESENTING THE PERSPECTIVES OF SELDOM HEARD YOUNG PEOPLE IN PARTICIPATION STRUCTURES

Statistical representativeness is not common in participation activities and for practitioners, representation tends to mean inclusion and targeting marginalised groups (Kirby & Bryson, 2002). Young people have emphasised that the voices of diverse groups must be represented on decision-making committees if the needs of all those who may be affected by a particular decision are to be addressed (Davey, 2010). In their opinion, this would lead to better informed decisions, which are grounded in children's lived experience and would also mean that more children get to have a say in matters affecting them. The issue of representativeness in participation initiatives is intrinsically linked to the type and purpose of decision being made. A vast array of issues affects the lives of seldom heard young people and so the focus of decision-making may be on universal issues such as the environment and housing or collective issues, including education and the legal age to vote. Equally attention may be concentrated on issues which are specific to particular groups such as the asylum process for separated minors. While it may not be possible to represent the voice of every young person in a target population, the question remains 'whose voice should be included?' According to Sinclair (2004):

If it [the purpose] is to give generalised representation to the views of children as a whole then it [representativeness] is vitally important. If it is to broaden the range of perspectives that are informing decision-making, say in an ongoing forum, then statistical representativeness may be of less relevance. Here it may be more important to focus on openness and inclusiveness, particularly the inclusion of more marginalised groups (p. 112).

Bell *et al.* (2008) recommend a move away from the need for representativeness to young people participating in relation to their own experiences; and in doing so, a move from the promotion of 'having a say' to 'making a difference' and a move beyond 'inclusion for the sake of inclusion' (p.13). Although the Youth Advisory Panel established by the Ombudsman for Children in Ireland in 2003 is no longer in existence, the recruitment strategy adopted in selecting members provides a good example of the shift away from an emphasis on representativeness towards the inclusion of a diverse range of young people. Consisting of a two-phase process involving self-nomination and peer selection (see OCO n.d), the recruitment strategy was primarily concerned with ensuring diversity as the following describes:

We emphasised that we were not looking for young people to represent their peers or to have specific knowledge, skills or experience. Rather, we would recognise members as

individuals who, by virtue of their diverse skills and experiences, could contribute individually and collectively to our work and to our understanding of young people's perspectives, interests and concerns (OCO, n.d., p.16).

A key message emerging from the literature is the importance of avoiding the monopolisation of decision-making by elite groups of young people who are not accountable to the wider target population and increasing the inclusion of seldom heard groups. It is also imperative that all young people affected by a decision have equal opportunity to participate in the making of that decision. It follows that there are a number of important questions that those hoping to meaningfully engage young people should ask before embarking on participation activity (Sinclair, 2005, p.5):

- Who is it relevant to involve in achieving the objectives or purpose of the participation?
- How do you ensure that all those affected by a decision are given the opportunity to express a view?
- Do your participation processes enable all children, including young children or those with a disability, to take part?
- What impact does the recruitment process have on who gets involved – for example, different children are likely to be included depending on whether they are selected by adults, self-selected or elected by peers.
- Does the venue or the nature of the activity exclude people – for example, do the activities require an ability to write and in English; does access to the venue require private transport?

6.1 Improving Seldom Heard Young People's Inclusion in Participation Structures

The existing research points to a number of approaches that may be considered in improving the involvement of seldom heard young people in formal participation structures. Wyness' (2009) UK-based case study research identifies that many youth councils adhere to a model of representative democracy whereby an electoral approach is adopted and a hierarchical relationship exists between elected youth councillors and the young people they are elected to represent. Wyness points out that for the most part, adult influences permeate these structures, placing them within this hierarchical relationship. Wyness (2009) suggests that a model of participation known as 'deliberative democracy' (see Cockburn, 2005) provides an alternative method to the standard 'representative democracy' approach. Drawing on the example of one youth council who adopted the 'deliberative democracy' approach, he explains that the youth council comprised self-selected members, who actively encouraged peers and interested members of other youth organisations to attend. The council displayed a commitment to representing the interests of diverse children and

young people across the city, despite lacking an overt connection to them. Members from marginalised groups were actively sought and connections were purposively formed with groups representing disadvantaged young people. Both the 'representative democracy' model and the alternative 'deliberative democracy' model face criticism for being elitist and unrepresentative. What differs between them however is that under the former, hierarchical relationships are formed, whereas horizontal relationships are created between the youth councillors and other groups under the 'deliberative democracy' model. In discussing this configuration, Wyness (2009) outlines that:

... formal accountability to a constituency of young people is less important than groups of committed youngsters being in a position to influence decisions made locally in favour of diverse groups of children. In these terms, the city youth council was one among a number of ways of representing the interests of disparate groups of children, rather than a central reference point for 'youth' politics (p.550).

On the basis of his case-study research, Wyness (2009) concluded that in terms of participation in the public domain, 'formal structures of representation may need to be revised' (p.535); and proposed that there may be value in exploring 'alternative and formally unrepresentative forms of participation' (p .550) in order to engage diverse groups of young people.

Developing partnerships and capacity building

As acknowledged in Chapter 5, organisations representing seldom heard young people have knowledge and experience about the needs of the young people they represent. As a result, these organisations are in a strong position to inform youth council co-ordinators, and others tasked with developing participation initiatives, about young people's needs. Furthermore, they are often best placed to support young people's participation on youth councils or other formal participation mechanisms. Some organisations will however lack the awareness and specific skills training required for encouraging young people's participation. To this end, a partnership approach between youth councils and organisations working directly with young people offers greater potential to overcome the challenges of including seldom heard young people in formal participation structures. Participation approaches are fostered and developed in many formats from targeted initiatives that seek to build participation capacity (see for example, the DCYA Inclusion Programme in Chapter 3) to the inclusion of organisations representing seldom heard young people on the steering groups of youth councils, to the establishment of individual contacts and professional working relationships on

a case by case basis.¹³ In terms of the effectiveness of partnership approaches the evidence suggests that key components include: the availability of the necessary resources; a commitment from individual youth councils to engage seldom heard young people; and the perception among organisations that engage with seldom heard young people that the youth council structure is relevant.

The development of capacity building measures focusing on confidence building, communication skills and exploring participation itself may also play an important role in supporting seldom heard young people to become involved in participation. In the Irish context, some capacity building initiatives have been developed to support the participation of seldom heard young people in the youth council structure (Comhairle na nÓg). These measures – alongside the partnership approach – have yielded a certain degree of success in increasing the numbers of seldom heard young people at council (Comhairle na nÓg) meetings (McEvoy, 2009b; 2010b). In one example, the Carlow Comhairle na nÓg had 15 seldom heard young people in attendance at its AGM, four of whom were elected to the main committee following a capacity-building programme initiated by partner organisations some time in advance of the event. While further research is required into the opportunities created for seldom heard young people through capacity building programmes, the existing information suggests that expanding the provision of such programmes is likely to better equip participants with the skills, knowledge and confidence for participation.

Directly targeting the inclusion of seldom heard young people

Evidence suggests that directly targeting the involvement of seldom heard young people in mainstream participation structures can increase the likelihood that they will become involved in them (Bell *et al.*, 2008; McEvoy, 2010a). Measures have been adopted in a number of jurisdictions to directly target the inclusion of seldom heard young people. In Wales, for example, the Funky Dragon Grand Council comprises a total of 100 young people representing the views of a wide range of both voluntary and statutory organisations. Four places for young people on the Grand Council are offered to all local authority wide forum in Wales. Each forum is responsible for democratically electing their representatives, based on conditions which include that:

- One young person should represent the statutory sector (e.g. youth clubs, schools, social services etc).

¹³ As outlined in Chapter 3 of this report, youth council (Comhairle na nÓg) funding criteria in Ireland stipulates that connections are made between the Comhairle and organisations working with seldom heard young people and that seldom heard young people are encouraged to become involved.

- One young person should represent the voluntary sector (e.g. local charities, uniformed group, young farmers etc).
- One young person should represent the local school councils.
- One young person (the equality rep) should represent young people from specific interest groups. These are: LGBT, disability, young carers, looked after, and black and minority ethnic, homeless, been in the juvenile justice system, long term health problems (not disabled).

Funky Dragon also operates a co-option process for 12 empty Grand Council spaces. The aim is to make sure that the Grand Council is as representative of children and young people in Wales as possible. If the Grand Council feels that it is under represented in anyway then it can actively seek organisations to access young people representing a particular interest group (Adapted from The Children and Young People’s Assembly for Wales, n.d.).

In the Irish context, individual youth councils (Comhairle na nÓg) have adopted different mechanisms to enhance the inclusion of seldom heard young people within the council structure in order to meet the requirements of the DCYA Comhairle Development Fund.¹⁴ Notable examples include:

- Cavan Comhairle na nÓg asked organisations engaged with seldom heard young people to directly nominate members to join the Comhairle committee, resulting in two seldom heard young people being elected to the committee. Members of Cavan Comhairle also gave presentations to the organisations that had not attended the annual meeting, resulting in the co-option of another seldom heard young person (McEvoy, 2010b).
- Fingal Comhairle na nÓg sought nominees from partner organisations engaged with seldom heard young people and introduced a ‘buddy system’ for support between new nominees and existing members (McEvoy, 2009b).
- Fingal Comhairle na nÓg undertook outreach type consultations with young people who tend not to be represented at Comhairle events. Young people were accessed through local

¹⁴ Substantial variation exists between areas regarding the extent to which the inclusion of seldom heard young people in Comhairlí na nÓg is prioritised. According to figures from the Evaluation Report of the Comhairle na nÓg Development Fund 2009-2010 there were no seldom heard members in Comhairlí in Clare, Cork County, Donegal and Waterford County and they made up 10% or less of the membership of Comhairlí in Dublin City, Laois, Mayo and Meath (McEvoy, 2011b). In contrast, the membership profile of approximately one-third of Comhairlí consisted of 25% or more seldom heard young people. Within this category Comhairlí in Westmeath and Offaly appeared to have a very high level of seldom heard young people accounting for 66% and 75% of the membership respectively. While it was identified that 21% of the total membership of all Comhairlí na nÓg in Ireland were seldom heard young people, McEvoy (2011b, p.13) warns of ‘measurement difficulties’ and describes the reliability of the data on seldom heard young people as ‘somewhat questionable’ given that a number of Comhairlí were unable to establish the background of the young Comhairle members or deliberately avoided doing so.

youth services and were given the opportunity to raise issues of importance to them and to have these issues represented in the programme of work of the Comhairle (Fingal Comhairle na nÓg, 2010).

- Westmeath Comhairle na nÓg reserved eight places for seldom heard young people linked in with its partner organisations. Young people with disabilities, young Travellers, young people at risk of offending and early school leavers are among the seldom heard young people who became members (McEvoy, 2010b).

The available research on school/student councils suggests that where measures have been taken to enhance inclusion and representation in school councils for seldom heard young people that they tend to be focused around co-option and the reservation of council seats for seldom heard young people. O’Kane’s (2009) research on school councils in Wales provides a comprehensive account of strategies to improve the inclusion of seldom heard young people on school councils. It reports that student representatives were co-opted from other voluntary groups operating within the schools, such as fair-trade, eco, or extra-curricular groups, and also from learning support groups. Teachers also identified marginalised or vulnerable students and suggested they participate, or encouraged council members to invite them to get involved. In such cases, an adult liaison person played a vital role in supporting co-opted students. Separate councils such as an autistic spectrum disorder council, and a language acquisition council were also formed for groups of students that tended to not be represented on school councils. Representatives from such councils were elected to the main school council by their peers and were then supported appropriately to participate in the school council through mechanisms such as a bilingual support teacher/assistant.

As demonstrated in the examples above, providing equal opportunity to participate does not necessarily mean the same procedures must be applied across all young people. However, measures to facilitate the participation of seldom heard young people may draw attention to differences between seldom heard young people and others. Existing research suggests that ‘positive discrimination’ – such as the use of quotas – has received mixed reviews (McEvoy, 2009b; 2010b; Turkie 2010). McEvoy (2010b) notes that transparency of process is required for quotas to be accepted and for labelling and stigmatisation to be avoided. In this regard, it is proposed that this might be achieved by explaining that there are committee seats reserved for ‘special interest groups’ or ‘youth organisations’. The optimal situation is likely to be where young people are adequately supported to enable them to come through the standard process of recruitment, avoiding the use of quotas and other measures which may be potentially stigmatising.

6.2 Conclusion

Drawing on the available literature, this chapter identified approaches and strategies for improving the *inclusion* of seldom heard young people in formal participation structures such as youth and school/student councils. Recognising that meaningful participation extends beyond 'having a voice' to 'making a difference' the chapter that follows focuses on key messages from the literature on ensuring that participation experiences for seldom heard young people provide genuine opportunities for participation and influence on decisions that matter to their lives.

7. IMPROVING PARTICIPATION EXPERIENCES FOR SELDOM HEARD YOUNG PEOPLE

If the goal of participation is to listen to young people, to empower them, and to have real influence in the issues that matter to them, then it is essential that the focus of participation moves beyond the inclusion of seldom heard young people in formal participation structures to an examination of the quality and scope of experiences and opportunities provided within such structures. This chapter commences with an overview of the existing literature on young people's perspectives on meaningful participation before moving on to explore a number of issues that are likely to influence the nature of participation experiences afforded to young people. These include levels of participation; the ethos and philosophical approach underpinning participation practice; methods of participation; the role of informal participation; the 'whole-systems' approaches; and outcomes from participation.

7.1 Young People's Perspectives on Meaningful Participation

Participation extends beyond 'having a voice' and meaningful participation involves the views of young people being respected and valued and having the power to effect lasting change. For meaningful participation to occur, young people must have equal opportunity to be present in; to have their voices heard within; and to have real influence within participation structures. Although a dearth of literature exists about what constitutes meaningful participation, the available evidence based on young people's perspectives provides some useful insight. Drawing on the viewpoints of 124 marginalised young people who were under-represented in youth participation processes in Australia, Vromen & Collin (2010) identified a number of key issues relating to their motivation to become involved in decision-making.¹⁵ Young people wanted the focus of participation to reflect the everyday issues of *personal relevance* to them, such as education, work, public spaces and personal experiences. Equally they reported wanting to 'make a difference', to 'give something back' and to have the outcome of their participation result in improvements for young people and their communities. Young people also had interesting things to say about the approaches used in promoting meaningful participation. They believed that decision-making processes should be appealing and that this can be achieved through the use of fun activities, incentives, and youth friendly language and spaces. In essence, meaningful participation was described as fun, informal and youth-led (Vromen & Collin, 2010). The authors concluded that 'where young people see relevance to their lives – in all aspects of the process: atmosphere, relationships, activities, role and outcomes – they are more likely to consider participation opportunities as a priority' (p.108).

¹⁵ Participants included young people with a disability, young people who had been in the care of the state, young people from an indigenous or culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background, and young people from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds.

Percy-Smith (2010) presents a similar line of argument to Vromen & Collin (2010) in suggesting that in order for participation to be meaningful, it should reflect the most salient issues for young people at that time, and not the agendas of the organisations and services involved. This is further reiterated in the Irish context where it is reported that feedback from youth council (Comhairle na nÓg) participants identified their desire for a more youth-led approach, with young people being more involved and choosing their own agenda (McEvoy 2010b). Overall, the evidence suggests that young people from diverse backgrounds will be more committed and engaged in decision-making if they are involved in shaping both the process and content of participation (Bell *et al.*, 2008).

7.2 Levels of Participation

Lansdown (2010) outlines a model of participation that demonstrates the different levels of participation or participation opportunities that may be provided to children and young people.¹⁶ These include:

1. Consultative participation: An adult-led activity where information is exchanged and/or the views of young people are sought on specific issues, but are not necessarily incorporated into decisions and subsequent actions.
2. Collaborative participation: Young people share responsibility to various degrees with adults at any or all stages of decision-making and can influence both the process and the outcome.
3. Child/Youth-led participation: Young people are supported to pursue their own agendas and make decisions autonomously. Adults may provide information, advice and support.

The levels reflect the distribution of power between young people and adults, and hence how much influence young people are afforded in decision-making. On this basis *consultation* can be distinguished from *active participation*. Each approach outlined can engage young people at different points of the public decision-making process: for example, during needs assessment; policy design, implementation and impact assessment, or throughout the process.

Considering participation in the manner outlined by Lansdown (2010) recognises that different approaches may be appropriate for different groups of young people and for different kinds of decisions and so no one approach is superior to another. There may be times when consultative participation is preferable to a collaborative or child/youth-led approach, despite the level of

¹⁶ This classification is similar to the four-level model described by Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin, and Sinclair (2003a), and which was adopted for the *Young Voices* guidelines (National Children's Office *et al.*, 2005). Kirby and colleagues described shared decision making at two levels, whereas Lansdown described shared decision making as one level with different degrees within it (collaborative participation). Treseder's earlier (1997) five-stage non-hierarchical model placed emphasis on the initiator (child or adult). Others have noted that it is not so much who initiates the process, but rather that it is meaningful (Checkoway, 2011; Couch & Francis, 2006).

influence favouring adults. Matching the approach to the needs and circumstances of the young people is therefore vital. Lansdown (2010) notes, in line with the UNCRC, that as young people gain confidence, skills and abilities, they may be able to exert more control in the decision-making process and so an initial consultation may progress to more active forms of involvement.

Advocacy

Although it is generally accepted that participation is beneficial to the young people involved, participation that is poorly executed may be detrimental and runs the risk of young people becoming disillusioned and disengaged (Carnegie UK Trust, 2008). Barber (2007) notes that trying to pursue a child/youth-led approach when it is not appropriate (such as when a young person does not feel sufficiently comfortable or motivated to participate) might be considered as tokenistic. There may be times when an advocacy approach is more suitable, such as for separated minors seeking refugee status; or in care proceedings where a guardian *ad litem* represents the wishes and feelings of a child or young person. In some cases, therefore, 'advocacy, or acting on behalf of some vulnerable young people, may be more honest than some forms of pseudo participation' (Barber, 2007, p.30). One of the main difficulties that arise, however, is the potential for young people's issues to be lost in translation by adults, either consciously or unconsciously, ending up as representations of adults' interests rather than young people's. Despite this pitfall, adults are potentially powerful representatives of young people's interests and Wyness (2009) has suggested that an adult who is committed to young people's voices is 'in a far stronger position to move children's interests onto the political agenda than children themselves' (p. 542).

7.3 Youth Development versus Youth Involvement Approaches

The ethos and philosophical approach underpinning participation practice is likely to influence the methods used in the participation process, the outcomes of participation and by implication young people's experiences and perspectives on participation. Bell *et al.* (2008) identified two broad approaches to participation by seldom heard young people: a 'youth development' approach and a 'youth involvement' approach. A youth development approach is characterised by a skills development ethos emphasising *individual change* in areas such as cognitive, social, and emotional competency and focuses primarily on how young people can be supported in the transition into adulthood. In contrast, the emphasis in a youth involvement approach extends beyond individual change in young people themselves and 'argues that through participation ... young people are able to change policy making, organisations and society' (White & Wyn 2008: 108-112 in Bell *et al.* 2008). In essence, an approach based on youth involvement links the process of participation with

outcomes for young people and the wider community and society they inhabit. In addition, young people are more likely to be perceived as capable of exercising agency about decisions that affect their lives. Bell *et al.* (2008) point to a further distinction between approaches based on youth development and those based on youth involvement. In particular, they refer to the emphasis on principles of equality and justice as prerequisites of a youth involvement approach. Based on this analysis it is not difficult to see that the structure, substance, and outcome of participation, in addition to the level of power sharing between adults and the young people involved is determined by whether a youth development or youth involvement approach is adopted at national, local, or organisational level. A key message from the research evidence is that an approach based on youth involvement principles offers the strongest potential to develop effective and meaningful participation practice with all young people, but particularly those who are seldom heard.

7.4 Methods of Participation

The literature identifies a wide range of methods used to involve young people in public participation activity including surveys and focus groups, the use of councils, forums, and committees, public meetings, youth conferences, youth advisory groups, user panels, online technologies, email and text messaging, youth-friendly literature, activity based workshops, informal chats, ongoing informal consultation, games and writing (Bell *et al.*, 2008; Brodie *et al.*, 2009; Kirby & Bryson, 2002; Roe & McEvoy, 2011). Less apparent in the literature is specific detail about the nature of the methods used, the types of young people involved, or how the methods are employed to engage young people in participation activity. That said the key message to emerge from existing knowledge in the field is that the methods used must be targeted and aligned to the specific needs and preferences of young people in order to facilitate meaningful participation. Lansdown (2005, p. 4, as cited in Leverett, 2008, p.17) highlights the importance of acknowledging that children choose different mechanisms to communicate their perspectives within the realm of participation: ‘children find creative ways of expressing their feelings and ideas that both include, and move beyond, verbal and written communication’ to activities such as drawing, painting, singing and drama. In addition to identifying the methods that are most preferential to encourage young people’s participation, participation practitioners must also question the extent to which their methods and approaches exclude young people, based on practical, cultural, geographical and vulnerability factors. To this end, methods must be chosen with the circumstances of the specific young people in mind. Examples from the current information in the field include the use of a workshop format with various ‘stations’ including focus group discussions, projective exercises, role plays, photo language and sentence completions that young people could choose to engage with (Vromen & Collin, 2010);

symbols-based interviews for young people who communicate non-verbally (McEvoy & Smith 2011; Mitchell & Sloper, 2011); and the use of body mapping, 'Agony Aunt' letters, a walking debate and statement boards to enable less confident young people to participate more effectively. Participation methods embrace the full range of formal to informal activities and while formal participation structures such as youth councils may be daunting for some young people, the use of informal methods within them is likely to create a more inviting environment for young people to participate in relation to issues that are relevant to them.

7.5 Informal Participation

Informal participation refers to "the use of mechanisms that have no [structure] or a 'loose' structure, are 'casual' in their tone, require limited planning and resources, are quite often short term and are usually not executed through formal policy" (Bell *et al.*, 2008, p. 23). It includes casual chats between service providers and service users, one-off discussion groups and online interaction (ibid, 2008).

Despite a lingering view of young people as disengaged from democracy and civic engagement, some authors have pointed out that there are many different ways in which young people can and do participate outside of formal mechanisms (Barber, 2007; Checkoway, 2010; Vromen, 2003; Vromen & Collin, 2010). The recently reported trend toward non-participation in middle- and upper-income young people has been attributed to factors such as declining social capital and increased use of technology and telecommunications (Checkoway, 2011). This trend may, however, reflect a change in the nature of public participation away from formal structures toward other forms of engagement, such as individual participation through boycotting, volunteering, ethical purchasing, blogging, or joining campaign groups via social media websites¹⁷. Coleman (2004, p.2, as cited in Barber, 2007, p.31) describes this observation as 'mass generational migration from old-fashioned forms of participation to newer more creative forms'. The potential for ICT to facilitate participation by young people is significant. The EU Kids Online study of 1000 children in Ireland demonstrated that 'over half of children in Ireland use the Internet daily or almost daily (53%) [and] a further 36% use it once or twice a week' (O'Neill, Grehan, & Ólafsson, 2011, p.7). In addition, the study found that 75% of 13-14 year olds and 88% of 15-16 year olds have their own social networking profile. The role of the internet and other communication technologies in young people's political engagement is also becoming increasingly acknowledged (e.g. Vromen, 2008, as cited in Vromen & Collin, 2010). One recent example of this is the President's (2012) Being Young and Irish Initiative where young

¹⁷ Brodie and colleagues (2009) have outlined a broad spectrum of activities that can be described as 'participation in practice'; including voting, joining a political party or trade union, striking and purchasing fair-trade products.

people were invited to express their views by emailing their contributions in a number of formats such as typed text, audio material, or video material, and in a number of forms, including, narratives, poetry, song, and sign-language.

Vromen and Collin (2010) have cited research that indicates young people are now more likely to participate in relation to causes or issues, rather than in institutional forms of participation (e.g. Bang, 2005). In addition, they observed that the influence of states' institutions on young people's political thinking has diminished and instead, political involvement is being shaped in 'micro-territories of the local', which include home, friendship groups, school and neighbourhood (Harris & Wynn, 2009, as cited in Vromen & Collin, 2010, p. 99).

While current policy frameworks in a number of jurisdictions emphasise participation in formal structures, the role of informal participatory activity outside of formal participation structures is increasingly recognised as a platform for participation for seldom heard young people. Vromen and Collin's (2010) study reports that policymakers and marginalised young people were of the view that participation opportunities that were more informal and flexible than those offered through formal participation mechanisms had the potential to increase the attraction of participation for young people from more diverse backgrounds. Informal participation initiatives may also offer participation opportunities to non-organised young people and others not linked in with services, those who are most disaffected, and those who are not 'reached' even when targeted measures are used. The success of promoting informal participation opportunities for seldom heard young people is contingent on the existence of a culture of participation and a knowledge base within organisations that work directly with young people at school, in the community, and/or in relation to their specific needs. More broadly, it requires a broader societal commitment to the principles of children's rights and respect for the child's voice and the value of their contribution within any decision-making about matters that affect their lives. With this in mind, the following section examines the importance of adopting a whole-systems approach to improving formal and informal participation opportunities for seldom heard young people.

7.6 The 'Whole-Systems' Approach

Approaches to participation cannot be separated from the wider governmental, organisational and service context in which they are situated. Young people who are 'seldom heard' are so, because of a failure of public and non-statutory sector bodies to put in place mechanisms to effectively achieve their meaningful participation. It is increasingly recognised that effective participation requires an overall approach that combines four key elements within an organisation: structure, culture,

practice, and review. This is described as a 'whole systems approach' whereby each element needs to operate together to increase the organisation's ability to implement effective participation processes (Robson *et al.*, 2008; Wright *et al.*, 2006). In a report for Barnardos, Wright and colleagues (2006) defined these elements as follows:

- Culture: the ethos of an organisation, shared by all staff and service users, which demonstrates a commitment to participation.
- Structure: the planning, development and resourcing of participation evident in an organisation's infrastructure.
- Practice: the ways of working, methods for involvement, skills and knowledge which enable children and young people to become involved.¹⁸
- Review: the monitoring and evaluation systems which enable an organisation to evidence change effected by children and young people's participation.

(p.13)

Kirby *et al.* (2003) addressed organisational culture in the publication *Building a Culture of Participation*. According to the authors, participation must be embedded within the infrastructure of an organisation if participation is to be effective. From their study of 29 organisations, they identified three 'cultures of participation':

- Consultation-focused: involves consultation with young people to inform services, policy and product development.
- Participation focused: young people are involved in making decisions within participation activities that are time bound or context specific. Often it is a sample rather than all relevant children and young people that are involved.
- Child/Youth focused: young people's participation is central to the organisation's practice and a culture is established in which it is assumed that all children and young people will be listened to about all decisions that affect their lives.

(p.6).

¹⁸ Practice features more prominently in the youth participation literature than do structure and review processes. A number of 'how-to' guides exist; for example, *Young voices: Guidelines on How to Involve Children and Young People in your Work* (NCO *et al.*, 2005), *Children's Participation Projects: How to Make it Work* (Council of Europe, 2004), and *Blast Off! Guide to Increasing Participation of Children and Young People, 7: Ensuring Inclusion* (Smail, 2007). See also: The National Youth Council's (2009) publication *Why Don't We: Youth Participation Resource Pack*, and the DCYA *Comhairle na nÓg Toolkit* for setting up and running youth councils (McEvoy, 2011a).

Organisational culture will influence the approach to participation and consequently the quality and outcome of the participation process. It is generally accepted that participation needs to progress beyond one-off, discrete activities, to become an on-going embedded process whereby young people are listened to and are enabled to effect change within services and organisations (e.g. Sinclair, 2004; Wright *et al.*, 2006). In addition, Lansdown (2010) has highlighted the need to develop indicators to assess the cultural climate of bodies engaged in participation activities.

The existing knowledge suggests that changes at the structural, organisation and attitudinal level, consistent with a 'whole-systems' approach are required to improve seldom heard young people's inclusion and involvement in participation activity (Robson *et al.*, 2008; Wright *et al.*, 2006). What this means in practice is the need for increased participation training for individuals and organisations working with seldom heard young people in school, community, or residential contexts; capacity building as well as awareness and skills training for young people; the adoption of participation practice standards; opportunities for practitioners and organisations to network and share information about participation practice; and the need to embed a culture of participation within organisations whereby young people feel that they are valued, listened to, and play an important role in influencing decisions that affect their lives. Specifically in relation to the school context, O'Kane (2009) points to the importance of providing whole class or whole school participation initiatives in order to minimise the exclusion of any student and to enhance the opportunities for all students to have their voices heard and to participate in decision-making processes. Such an approach also increases the likelihood that participation by students is 'taken forward in a holistic and consistent way' in a way that is beneficial to all school participants (Welsh Government 2011, p.10).

7.7 Outcomes from Participation

Previous research points to a number of outcomes that young people seek from their involvement in participation initiatives and processes. Bell *et al.* (2008, p.13) explain that 'participation is most appealing to young people from diverse backgrounds when the focus is on more than just having a say' and extends to making a difference in the lives of young people and their communities (Vromen & Collin, 2010). This requirement extends beyond the wishes of seldom heard young people and resonates in the broader literature on participation outcomes for all young people. For example, in response to questions about the impact of their participation in youth councils (Comhairle na nÓg) in Ireland, young people highlighted the need for them to have greater impact resulting from their participation, a desire for their involvement to effect meaningful change, to engage more actively

with the media and new technologies in order to communicate their views to a broader public audience, and a need to be more closely connected to decision-makers and the local community (McEvoy, 2010b).¹⁹

Bell *et al.* (2008) recommend that participation activity is not only purposeful and linked to outcomes, but that these outcomes are *demonstrated* to young people [emphasis added]. Participation experiences that do not lead to demonstrable outcomes risk cynicism, disillusionment and consultation fatigue among participants (*ibid.*, 2008). Supporting this view, McEvoy and Smith (2011) report that in recruiting young people to participate in a consultation process about their experiences in State care in Ireland, some young people were not interested in taking part due to what they perceived as a lack of positive outcomes arising from their previous experiences of sharing their views. In the school context, particular challenges to participation identified in previous research point to student dissatisfaction with the levels of consultation, participation and feedback provided, resulting in disillusionment and disengagement among students (Kendall & Merrill, 2008; Lloyd-Jones & Sims, 2009, as cited in O’Kane, 2009).

Identifying the actual impact of young people’s participation in public decision-making processes is hindered by a dearth of documented evaluations of participation initiatives. Young people’s voices are largely under-represented in the existing national and international literature on outcomes from participation, and even less is known about the direct experiences of seldom heard young people and the extent to which they perceive themselves to have meaningful influence in public decision-making processes.²⁰ The available information on outcomes from participation primarily documents *practitioners’ perspectives*. McEvoy (2011b, p. 53), for example, reports that 61% and 32% of youth council (Comhairle na nÓg) organisers respectively were of the view that the council was either ‘very influential’ or ‘somewhat influential’ on the changes that arose on the issues being worked on. Furthermore, a recent audit of youth participation in Ireland reports predominantly on practitioners’ views of the influence of children and young people in public decision-making (Roe & McEvoy, 2011).²¹ It states that young people’s participation impacts on policy development, service and

¹⁹ Focus groups were conducted as part of an analysis of information arising from the in-depth evaluation of four Comhairlí na nÓg (Cork City, Donegal, Dublin City and Offaly).

²⁰ It is acknowledged that participatory research provides one mechanism by which the concerns of seldom heard young people can be communicated to policymakers. However, the current review is concerned with formal structures and initiatives that directly engage and support seldom heard young people to have a voice in the design, delivery and monitoring of policies and services that affect their lives.

²¹ The methodology adopted for the audit involved the use of an online survey with four different groups. These included organisations working with young people (Comhairle na nÓg and other organisations primarily in the youth sector); HSE and HSE-funded organisations; student councils; and student councils liaison teachers.

programme development, and youth facilities. Specific examples include that children and young people in care participated in the development of the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) standards for young people in care settings, as well as impacting policy on variation orders in court, staff training, complaints system, anti-bullying, healthy eating and residential policies; LGBT young people participated in relation to two regional development plans regarding service provision to LGBT people in schools and youth projects; and children and young people were involved in the development of youth groups for ethnic minorities, LGBT youth groups, teenage antenatal classes, young parents services, and sexual health service for teenagers (ibid, 2011). One group who were directly involved in the audit by Roe and McEvoy (2011) were young people involved in student councils. Of those surveyed, 75% reported that the student councils were having a medium impact in their school. Findings from the audit also reported a shortfall in relation to the overall impact of the student council on decision-making in relation to school rules and school policies. So, for example, while 78% of student councils were consulted about school rules, only 62% had been responsible for changes in school rules.

In addition to the dearth of research that reflects young people's experience and perspectives on participation outcomes, Kirby and Bryson (2002) suggest that existing evaluations pay inadequate attention to the quality of decisions being made or influenced by young participants. Reflecting on its ten-year programme to promote youth participation in decision-making, the Carnegie UK Trust (2008) identified that:

Public decision making bodies often appeared reluctant or unwilling to review and reflect on their participation processes, preferring instead to publicise the volume of activity they were undertaking, the numbers of young people involved in consultations, rather than the impact that such activity had generated (p.10).

Against the backdrop of considerable gaps in the knowledge about young people's perspectives on participation outcomes, there appears to be considerable merit in McAuley & Brattman's (2002) suggestion to build in processes of review, evaluation, and dissemination into participation initiatives so that elements of effective practice can be identified. Lansdown (2010) proposes that indicators of effectiveness of participation should be jointly identified by young people and the adults who work with them. Such indicators may address some or all of the rationales put forward for public participation including enhancing young people's skills, improving decision-making and upholding responsibilities under Article 12 of the UNCRC (Sinclair & Franklin 2000 as cited in Sinclair, 2004).

7.8 Conclusion

Through participation seldom heard young people have the opportunity to have their voice heard and to listen to the voices of others; to make decisions about matters of importance to them as individuals and as group members; and to become empowered to bring about change in their life situations. For participation to be meaningful it must reflect the experience and concerns of the young people in question and must also occur in ways appropriate to them. The absence of seldom heard young people in public decision-making forums does not reflect any deficit within them, but reflects the capacity of those who want to engage them. Thus, a precondition for the meaningful, effective and sustainable participation of seldom heard young people is an appropriate organisational infrastructure, including a cultural climate that values inclusiveness, empowerment and participation.

8. DRAWING KEY MESSAGES TOGETHER

This review was undertaken in the context of the DCYA's intention to build national capacity for participation with seldom heard young people. The aim was to examine national and international literature on the participation experiences of seldom heard young people and to identify good practice principles and guidelines in the field. As this review identifies, formal participation opportunities for young people in Ireland, including those defined as seldom heard, predominantly occurs through mainstream structures, such as youth or school/student councils. There are some examples of good participation practice in the Irish context and the potential exists for their broader application in the development of participation practice with seldom heard young people. Notwithstanding these examples, it remains the case that many seldom heard young people in Ireland continue to be excluded from opportunities to participate in decisions that affect their lives. In addressing the key question of the current review, this concluding chapter attempts to draw together key messages from previous chapters to guide practice and improve the inclusion of seldom heard young people in decision-making that affects their lives.

8.1 What Do We Mean By 'Seldom Heard Young People'?

A core message to emerge from the literature is the importance of understanding what is meant by 'seldom heard young people'. The term 'seldom heard' is an umbrella term which is used to denote young people from an extensive range of backgrounds and life experiences whose voices typically are not heard in decisions that affect them and who tend to be underrepresented in consultation and participation exercises, both as individuals and as groups. The challenges associated with identifying, accessing and engaging with seldom heard young people have been identified as contributing to their under-representation in decision-making.

Seldom heard young people may exist within wider 'seldom heard' groups such as ethnic minority groups or as groups in their own right such as young carers or young parents. Young people may be seldom heard in multiple, overlapping and diverse respects in accordance with their gender, religious beliefs, social class, ethnic identity, and/or in relation to the issues and needs that are specific to their situation. In other words, a complex interplay of factors is likely to impede their participation and the complexity of such factors must be understood in order to generate more creative, flexible and effective strategies which can enhance the opportunities for participation for *all* young people. Overall, it is important to highlight that young people are seldom heard, not as a consequence of an inherent characteristic that precludes them from participating, but rather due to

the absence of appropriate participation structures and supports to facilitate their voices being heard.

8.2 Defining Participation

In this review *participation* has been defined as the process by which young people have active involvement and real influence in decision-making on matters affecting their lives, both directly and indirectly (Checkoway 2011; United Nations, 2004). Participation means more than young people 'having a voice'; but rather aims to empower them and to facilitate transformation of their life situations. In this way, participation is about recognising that young people have an essential contribution to make in the decision-making process about issues that affect their lives.

Personal versus Public Participation

The context of young people's participation is described as personal or as public (Sinclair, 2005). Personal participation relates to decision-making that affects young people personally, while public participation refers to participation involving decisions about the collective interests of young people as a group, or decisions affecting the wider population. The World Health Organisation (2010) suggests that public and personal participation should not be viewed in isolation. This is because decision-making in one context may be necessary for the fulfilment of other kinds of decision-making. For example, research has demonstrated that through increased decision-making in the personal context, young people can develop the skills, understanding and motivation to participate in wider decision-making processes (Bell, *et al.*, 2008).

8.3 Barriers and Challenges to Participation for Seldom Heard Young People

This review identified a number of barriers and challenges to participation for involving seldom heard young people in participation. The main issues are outlined below, and provide the context within which guidelines for improving practice are discussed in the section to follow.

Legislative and Policy Barriers

Legislation and policy frameworks constrain both the kinds of participatory experiences provided to young people and the level of influence that they have within them. Despite Ireland's ratification of the UNCRC which includes the right to participate, the UNCRC has not been adopted in Irish law and many young people continue to remain excluded from public decisions that affect their lives.

Practice standards for participation provide guidelines and assistance for those wishing to engage with seldom heard young people. While standardized approaches are not recommended given the heterogeneity of the seldom heard population, the absence of a national participation strategy or national standards for participation in the Irish context hinders the development of consistent and effective approaches to practice when working with children and young people.

Real influence in decision-making requires proximity to decision-makers, yet participation mechanisms available to children and young people are not always fully integrated into adult decision-making structures such as local and central government structures. While service providers are most closely linked to young people, they tend to be distant from high-level government decision-makers (Vromen & Collin, 2010). The distance between government decision-makers and young people means the former may not be aware of the existence of certain seldom heard groups. The issue has been raised in previous research in Ireland, namely by Kilkelly (2007, p.77) who notes that all children's voices are not adequately heard in decisions affecting them and recommends that they 'be integrated into the mainstream political and administrative decision-making structures at local and central levels'. While this occurs to some degree within existing participation structures for young people in Ireland (see for example, McEvoy 2010b), there is considerable scope for further integration.

Attitudinal barriers

Adults' perceptions of young people as lacking capability results in fear and mistrust and leads to restrictions on the kinds of participation experiences provided to young people (Lansdown, 2010). Adults' inability or unwillingness to recognise young people's agency in decision-making is likely to be heightened in relation to seldom heard young people. Here, perceptions of the circumstances of young people's lives, such as the view that homeless young people lead lives that are too chaotic to become involved in participation, potentially contributes to them being further marginalised from participation opportunities. The UN (2004, p.284) sum up the point in suggesting that:

Adults remain a major barrier to the effective participation of children and young people. It is easier for youth to learn the skills necessary to engage in active participation than for adults to 'unlearn' attitudes and assumptions built deep within their cultures. While there are significant benefits for adults in opening up opportunities for young people to participate, it is often the immediately perceived threats of doing so that inform their attitudes; for young people the benefits are more evident and immediate.

Practical and Personal Barriers

The extent to which individuals are 'hard-to-reach' is context specific and practical challenges to engaging seldom heard young people often relate to their particular circumstances (Brackertz, 2007b). For example, it may be the case that young parents or young carers do not have access to child care or respite care; young Traveller girls may not be permitted to attend unaccompanied, and those in rural locations may not have the necessary transport. Similarly, young people with a physical or an intellectual disability may need additional supports such as transport and personal assistance (WHO, 2010). Each of these factors acts as potential barriers to participation unless measures are taken to overcome them.

Membership of formal participation structures often requires that young people nominate themselves for election, making participation a formidable challenge for those who lack the necessary inter-personal skills and self-confidence to do so. This is reflected in the existing literature where it is well-documented that participation structures such as youth and school/student councils tend to be dominated by middle-class socially-orientated confident and articulate children and young people (Carnegie UK Trust, 2008; Roe & McEvoy, 2011). Addressing personal barriers to participation requires the development of appropriate mechanisms to support seldom heard young people. It may also necessitate that practices within existing formal participation structures are altered to facilitate greater participation by seldom heard young people.

Dearth of Knowledge, Training, and Resource Requirements

The existing literature suggests that policymakers and practitioners generally report and demonstrate positive attitudes towards children and young people's participation, however it is also suggested that some organisations and service providers experience challenges in including seldom heard young people in participation (McAuley & Brattman, 2002; Roe & McEvoy, 2011). Such findings indicate that while organisations working with seldom heard young people are often best placed to encourage their participation, they may require training and support to promote good participation practices and to build a culture of participation within their representative organisations. Coupled with the need for knowledge and training is the resource intensive nature of securing and sustaining seldom heard young people's participation. Securing and sustaining young people's participation requires the involvement and commitment of trained staff as well as the costs associated with providing access to youth-appropriate locations, training, transport, and other supports to ensure that young people have opportunities for meaningful participation.

Unfortunately, the literature suggests that insufficient resourcing is one of the most significant barriers to engaging young people from diverse backgrounds in decision-making (Bell *et al.*, 2008).

Barriers and Challenges to Participation for Seldom Heard Young People in Schools

While the issues identified above emanate primarily from the literature on participation in youth parliaments and youth councils, similar issues emerge for seldom heard young people in relation to their participation on school/student councils. School/student councils tend to adhere to a representative democratic model of participation whereby individuals are elected or self- or adult-selected. As a result, there is an increased likelihood of the structures being dominated by more confident and articulate young people and not reflecting diversity in life experiences, backgrounds, age, gender, disability and ethnicity (Davey, 2010; Keogh & Whyte, 2005; Wyness, 2009). In one of the more comprehensive studies of marginalised young people and participation in decision-making in schools, O’Kane (2009) reports that the barriers to participation identified by the young people include: their perception that only ‘brainy’ and middle class young people are listened to; meetings being scheduled in their free time; peer pressure not to take part; their lack of confidence to speak up in school or disagree with people; teachers’ lack of understanding of the issues facing students; teachers’ lack of confidence in dealing with young people from these groups; bullying; young people being labelled as ‘difficult’ by teachers. Specific barriers to participation were also identified including language barriers among young people from black or ethnic minority backgrounds, or young refugee or asylum seekers.

8.4 Considerations for the Development More Effective Approaches to Participation

Adherence to Principles rather than Blueprints: Understanding Young People and the Context of their Lives

McAuley and Brattman (2002) suggest that it is important to consider seldom heard young people as those who require additional supports to enable them to participate in meaningful ways. Such an approach emphasises the need for flexible practices tailored to the unique circumstances of the young people in question. To this end, the evidence strongly suggests that a case is made for the adherence to ‘principles’ for engaging young people, rather than to ‘blueprints’, thus avoiding what Couch and Francis (2006) refer to as a paradox in participation: a tendency to standardise approaches, which ‘appears to be contradictory to the goal of participation, in which the direction of a project is theoretically molded and shaped by the participants themselves’ (p.274). As stated by the UN (2004):

... there are no blueprints for developing participatory practice, nor should there be. The imposition of pre-defined methodologies denies young people the opportunity to develop approaches best suited to their unique situations and concerns. What is vital is a commitment to working on the basis of shared principles, rooted in respect for young people's capacities as agents of change, and a willingness to recognize them as partners.

Prescriptive approaches for participation are contradictory to the ethos of participation as described by the UNCRC, as they do not enable young people to participate in ways appropriate to themselves and their unique circumstances. The key factors in deciding the approach to participation should be based on the needs of the young people in question and the kinds of decisions being made. Understanding the structural, procedural, and circumstantial factors that render young people seldom heard in a given context is vital if structures and initiatives are to adequately meet the needs of the young people in question. Practitioners must therefore question how the processes and mechanisms used, facilitate or impair participation by seldom heard young people.

Representativeness of Seldom Heard Young People in Participation

Representativeness in participation initiatives is fundamentally linked to the type and purpose of decision being made. Where a generalised view of children and young people's perspectives is required, statistical representativeness may be centrally important. If, however, the purpose is to expand the range of perspectives informing decision-making, then the inclusion of a range of seldom heard voices, rather than numerical representativeness, is considerably more important (Sinclair, 2004). The inclusion of a diverse range of young people's voices avoids the decision-making process being dominated by elite groups of young people who are neither accountable nor representative of the wider population. Young people must also be viewed as experts in their own lives, participating in relation to their own experiences, rather than on behalf of the wider population of young people.

Overcoming Practical Barriers to Participation

For seldom heard young people to have the same opportunities to access participation, consideration needs to be given to identifying practical barriers to their participation and the implementation of measures to remove or at least minimise any obstacles to participation.

Developing Partnerships and Capacity Building with Seldom Heard Young People

Ensuring that the voices of seldom heard young people are represented in participation means gaining insight and access to them and opening up channels of communication. Building

partnerships with organisations representing seldom heard young people has been proven to be a useful strategy in facilitating their access to decision-making structures (see Chapter 3 on the DCYA Inclusion Programme). Where young people are not engaged with services, the literature suggests that it is advisable to establish contacts with other frontline individuals, such as outreach workers, who have knowledge of the group in question and who have gained their trust (Vromen & Collin 2010).

Organisations representing seldom heard young people are in a strong position to inform youth council co-ordinators, and others tasked with developing participation initiatives, about young people's needs and are often best placed to support young people's participation. At the same time, some organisations will lack the awareness and specific skills training required for encouraging young people's participation. Here the development of a partnership approach between youth councils and organisations working directly with young people offers strong potential to overcome the challenges associated with the inclusion of seldom heard young people. Partnership approaches may take the form of targeted initiatives (such as the aforementioned DCYA Inclusion Programme), the inclusion of organisations on the steering groups of youth councils or the development of professional collaborations at local level.

In tandem with partnership approaches, capacity building measures focusing on confidence building, communication skills and exploring participation with young people have been identified as effective in increasing seldom heard young people's access to mainstream participation structures (McEvoy, 2009b; 2010b). While further evaluative research is required, on the basis of current research it would seem that there is considerable merit in developing capacity building initiatives to support the participation of seldom heard young people in mainstream participation structures.

Linking Young People to Decision-makers

Participation mechanisms available to young people are not always fully linked or integrated to adult decision-making structures such as local and central government structures (see for example, McEvoy, 2010b). To improve the influence that young people have in decisions that affect their lives, the evidence suggest that the avenues of communication between formal participation structures for young people and decision-makers are 'integrated into the mainstream political and administrative decision-making structures at local and central levels' (Kilkelly, 2007, p.77).

Directly Targeting the Inclusion of Seldom Heard Young People

Directly targeting the involvement of seldom heard young people in mainstream participation structures increases their opportunity for involvement in participation (Bell *et al.*, 2008; McEvoy, 2010a). The most common strategy identified in the literature relates to the reservation of seats on youth and school/student councils for seldom heard young people (McEvoy, 2010b; O’Kane, 2009; The Children and Young People’s Assembly for Wales, n.d.) followed by approaches such as the use of partnerships with organisations representing seldom heard young people, co-option, the use of a ‘buddy system’, and outreach work (Fingal Comhairle na nÓg, 2010; McEvoy, 2009b; 2010b; O’Kane, 2009). The downside of directly targeted measures to facilitate the participation of seldom heard young people is that they risk drawing attention to the differences between seldom heard young people and others. In this regard, it is suggested that transparency of process is required for quotas to be accepted and for labelling and stigmatisation to be avoided (McEvoy, 2010b). Overall, best practice suggests that the optimal approach is where seldom young people are supported in a way that enables them to come through the standard process of recruitment, thus avoiding the use of potentially stigmatising non-standard mechanisms.

Provide Opportunities for Young People to ‘Make a Difference’ through Participation

One of the biggest challenges for practitioners in facilitating the inclusion and involvement of seldom heard young people in participation activity is to ensure that the experience of participation is actually meaningful to the young people involved. For this to occur, it is imperative that practitioners understand what constitutes meaningful participation for the young people in question and that efforts move beyond their token inclusion toward their meaningful participation. The current literature indicates that from the perspective of young people, meaningful participation involves focusing on issues that have personal relevance to them, provides them with opportunities to ‘make a difference’ and to ‘give something back’, and culminates in improvements for other young people and their communities (Percy-Smith, 2010; Vromen & Collin, 2010). It also involves them influencing or choosing their own agenda and having a sense of ownership of the process (Bell *et al.*, 2008; McEvoy, 2010b). Having a sense of ownership, amongst other factors, is not only relevant to engaging young people in the first instance, but is also ‘key to sustaining the involvement of young people from diverse backgrounds’ in the longer-term (Bell *et al.*, 2008, p.15). Against this backdrop, it is clear that for participation initiatives to be meaningful they must provide both the opportunity for seldom heard young people to be involved and the potential for them to have real influence.

Adopting Methods that are Appropriate and Responsive to the Needs of Seldom Heard Young People

Meaningful participation also involves the use of methods that are appealing to young people. Those identified by seldom heard young people include the use of fun activities, incentives, the use of youth friendly language, and youth friendly spaces (Vromen & Collin, 2010). As identified earlier in this review, methods vary from structured activities such as surveys and focus groups, the use of councils, forums, committees, public meetings, youth conferences, youth advisory groups, and user panels to more flexible initiatives including online technologies, email and text messaging, youth-friendly literature, activity based workshops, informal chats, ongoing informal consultation, games and writing (Bell *et al.*, 2008; Brodie *et al.*, 2009; Kirby & Bryson, 2002; Roe & McEvoy, 2011). Although there is a dearth of literature available on the detail as to *how* methods are specifically employed when working with seldom heard young people, a consistent message emerging from the research is that the methods adopted must be aligned to the specific preferences and needs of young people for participation to be meaningful. Children and young people express different preferences with regard to the mediums through which they communicate their feelings and perspectives. For some verbal and written communication may be their favoured method, while for others, it is likely be drawing, painting, song, or drama (Lansdown 2005, p. 4, as cited in Leverett, 2008, p.17). By facilitating children and young people to express themselves through their preferred medium, it provides opportunities for more meaningful involvement and a stronger sense of connection to the participation process.

Practitioners involved in participation activity with seldom heard young people must also question the extent to which the methods used promote inclusion based on practical, cultural, geographical and vulnerability factors. To this end, methods must be chosen with the circumstances of the specific young people in mind. Examples include the use of symbols-based interviews, body mapping and statement boards with young people who communicate non-verbally or have a preference for non-verbal communication (McEvoy & Smith, 2011; Mitchell & Sloper, 2011).

Integrating Informal Participation into Practice

Participation tends to be narrowly defined in terms of formal structured mechanisms for public decision-making such as school or youth councils, for example. However, the role of informal participatory activity outside of formal participation structures is increasingly recognised as a platform for participation among young people. Informal participation approaches typically include casual chats between service providers and service users, one-off discussion groups and online interaction (Bell *et al.*, 2008). Some research suggests that participation approaches that offer more

informality and flexibility are especially attractive to young people from more diverse backgrounds or those who are not 'reached' even when targeted measures are used (see for example, Vromen & Collin, 2010). In practice, informal participation opportunities for seldom heard young people should be an integral part of their experiences and interactions with the organisations and services that address their specific needs. However, without an organisational culture or context that actively promotes their inclusion and involvement in participation, it is unlikely to occur (see also Chapter 7). While informal participation may operate as a stand-alone approach, it is also the case that informal activities may be used within existing formal participation structures to create an environment that is conducive to young people's style of engagement. Participation spans the range of formal to informal structures and methods of engagement. While participation by children and young people has been more commonly defined in terms of their participation at a formal level, it seems that further channels for meaningful engagement might be opened up by promoting a wider definition of participation; one that acknowledges the many ways in which young people can and do participate such as joining political parties or lobbying groups, joining in social media led campaigns as well as informal modes of participation such as casual chats.

Levels of Participation

Lansdown (2010) draws attention to the different ways that participation may be approached in practice. She outlines three broad levels of participation which may be appropriate for different groups of young people and for different types of decisions. The first, *consultative participation* refers to activity that is adult-led and seeks to ascertain young people's views but does not automatically incorporate them into subsequent decisions. The second, *collaboration participation* involves young people sharing responsibility with adults at any or all stages of the decision-making process. The potential exists here for young people to influence both the process and outcome of participation. The third level of participation relates to *child/youth-led participation*. Here, young people are supported in pursuing their own agendas and making autonomous decisions. Lansdown's (2010) framework broadens the realm of what participation entails and provides flexibility in matching the approach used in promoting participation to the specific needs and circumstances of young people's lives.

The UN (2004) emphasises the need for a partnership approach between adults and young people, where young people are empowered to 'create new collaborative approaches' (p.283). It is further suggested, that in line with *participation* as specified by the UNCRC, those planning to engage in participation activity with seldom heard young people be guided by principles that are grounded in

respect for young people's real capacities and in a commitment to sharing power in decision-making (UN, 2004). The research presented earlier in this review surrounding the desire for seldom heard young people to have greater input into key decisions surrounding participation suggest a shift towards more youth-led approaches whereby young people are partners in decision-making with adults. The implication is that young people need to be appropriately supported to take increasing responsibility in decision-making, with an acknowledgement that as their confidence and skills develop, so too will their ability to make decisions autonomously (Lansdown, 2010).

Using Advocacy-based Approaches

Participation that is poorly executed may be detrimental to young people and runs the risk of them becoming disillusioned and disengaged with the process (Carnegie UK Trust, 2008). In other situations, efforts to pursue a youth-led approach to participation may be tokenistic where young people are not sufficiently comfortable or motivated to engage (Barber, 2007). In such cases, the literature suggests that an advocacy-based approach may be preferable to non-participation (ibid., 2007). Advocacy-based approaches include the use of an adult or peer nominee to represent the young person's views. Alternatively, in cases where young people are unable to participate, possibilities for them to feed their views into the mainstream decision-making process should also be considered (Turkie, 2010). Finally, where young people are unable to participate within existing formal participation structures, the use of an approach known as 'deliberate democracy' whereby young people act in an advocacy-type role on behalf of other young people has also been suggested (Wyness, 2009). One of the main challenges with advocacy-based approaches is that young people's issues may be lost in translation by adults, ending up as representations of adults' interests rather than young people's. Against this standpoint, it is argued that adults are potentially powerful representatives of young people's interests and are well-placed to progress children's interests onto the political agenda (Wyness, 2009).

Youth Development vs. Youth Involvement

Young people's experiences and perspectives on participation are likely to be influenced by the ethos and philosophical approach adopted by organisations involved in participation practice. Two broad approaches to participation are identified in the literature: a 'youth development' approach and a 'youth involvement' approach (Bell *et al.* 2008). Under a youth development approach, there is a strong emphasis on skills development and *individual change* in areas such as young people's cognitive, social, and emotional competency. This approach focuses primarily on how young people can be supported in the transition into adulthood. On the other hand, where a youth

involvement approach is adopted, the emphasis extends beyond individual change in young people themselves and links the process of participation with outcomes for young people and the wider community and society they inhabit. Young people are also more likely to be perceived as capable of exercising agency about decisions that affect their lives (ibid., 2008). The structure, substance, and outcome of participation, in addition to the extent of power sharing between adults and young people is determined by whether a youth development or youth involvement approach is adopted at national, local, or organisational level. The research evidence strongly suggests that an approach based on youth involvement principles offers the strongest potential to develop effective and meaningful participation practice with all young people, but particularly those who are seldom heard.

Outcomes from Participation

The absence of a solid knowledge base means that the impact of public participation on young people's lives is not always clear. As highlighted by Kirby and Bryson (2002), evaluation research often pays inadequate attention to the quality of decisions being made or influenced by young participants. There is a tendency for documented accounts of participation initiatives to be confined to descriptions of the activity undertaken with less information available on the types of young people involved, the processes employed to recruit and engage young people, and details of the outcomes from participation. Despite these shortcomings, two clear messages emerge from the available literature. Firstly, it appears that what young people seek from their involvement in participation activity is that the outcome makes a difference to their lives, the lives of other young people and their communities (Bell *et al.*, 2008; McEvoy, 2010b; Vromen & Collin, 2010). In light of such findings, Bell *et al.* (2008) recommend that participation activity is not only purposeful and linked to outcomes, but that these outcomes are demonstrated to young people. Secondly, outcomes from involvement in participation are unlikely to be immediate and may emerge over time. Given the tendency for the temporal perspective of young people to be more strongly focused on the short-term, the evidence suggests that mechanisms to provide incremental feedback to young people are an important strategy in avoiding disillusionment and disengagement from the process.

Embracing a 'Whole-Systems' Approach

Effective participation requires an approach that combines four key components within an organisation: structure, culture, practice, and review. Referred to as a 'whole systems approach', each component needs to operate together to increase the organisation's ability to implement

effective participation processes (Robson *et al.*, 2008; Wright *et al.*, 2006). Without an organisational ethos that is committed to participation (culture), an adequate level of planning, development, and resourcing of participation (structure), the methods, skills and knowledge to engage young people (practice), and a system to monitor and evaluate participation activity (review), the likelihood of creating opportunities for effective and meaningful participation are greatly reduced (see Wright *et al.*, 2006).

Building a Culture of Participation: Training and Capacity Building for Practitioners

Being seldom heard reflects the capacity of services, organisations, and government bodies to engage young people and therefore capacity-building is an essential component of ensuring that the voices of more young people are heard. In Ireland, the establishment of dedicated participation units and teams in government structures has been a positive step toward increased capacity building. However, as outlined earlier in this chapter, some organisations and practitioners may lack the skill sets required to include and engage young people in meaningful participation (McEvoy, 2010a). Furthermore, where organisations do not fully appreciate what constitutes public participation or what potential it offers, it can hinder the participation opportunities provided to seldom heard young people (*ibid.*, 2010a). Another skill deficit identified in the literature is the absence of knowledge among some practitioners and organisations about how to gather sufficient information about the issues concerning young people's lives and how to use the output or knowledge generated from young people's participation activity (Vromen & Collin 2010). Without correctly understanding and interpreting young people's perspectives, and using the information to inform and affect change, the possibilities offered by participation are minimised if not lost completely.

The skill sets of practitioners and other organisational and front-line workers can be strengthened through training in the nature and methodologies of participation. This in turn has the potential to enhance the national capacity for participation by seldom heard young people and increase the likelihood that existing participation mechanisms are maximised. Training, support and awareness-building are key tenets of a strategy to mainstream participation into services and organisations for seldom heard young people. Ongoing, embedded participatory activity is especially suited to personal participation, as well as to participation in relation to ongoing collective and universal issues. The mainstreaming of user participation into organisations will likely mean that organisations will be better able to support young people to participate in other structures, and that young people themselves may feel empowered to access them independently. Adapting a 'whole-systems' approach to participation would increase the likelihood of young people's effective participation in

services and organisations working for and with them. Kilkelly (2007) has previously recommended the establishment of a dedicated programme to provide training, support and information to those who wish to involve the views of young people in their work. Findings from this current review support this recommendation for the provision of such a programme.

Gaps in Evidence-based Knowledge & the Need for Monitoring, Evaluation and Dissemination

A major challenge to the development of effective participation practice with seldom heard young people relates to the scarcity of evaluation research undertaken in the area. In the present study, it became apparent that a limited amount of evaluation research existed following an extensive trawl of the published literature and from completing a targeted request exercise undertaken with a wide range of organisations and networks in Ireland and the UK (see Chapter 2). The exercise which sought published and grey literature on best practice in relation to participation activities and outcomes for seldom heard young people elicited a large amount of material on mainstream youth participation, participatory research projects, and anecdotal information. In contrast to expectations, limited formal documented evaluations were garnered from this substantive research exercise.

Participation initiatives often do not build in processes of review, monitoring, evaluation, and dissemination thus restricting the potential to identify process, method, and outcome effectiveness. Knowledge-sharing and development is vital if the national capacity for participation by seldom heard young people is to be strengthened. Monitoring and evaluation are key requirements of any system that seeks to identify best practice and improve overall effectiveness in the area of participation. Evaluation methodologies need to address both the process and the outcome of participation for young people; and wherever possible, they need to trace the impacts of participation on decisions using indicators developed together with the young people involved.

Insufficient resourcing has already been identified as a barrier to the development and enhancement of participation practice in this review. Adequate resources are essential in order to create meaningful participation opportunities for young people, to overcome barriers to participation, to raise awareness, and to develop organisational and national capacity in the field of participation.

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