

SUMMARY

The study

The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) was commissioned by the Carnegie Young People Initiative to examine the involvement of young people in decision making in the Republic of Ireland as part of a study undertaken in five jurisdictions in the UK and Ireland. The research involved a ‘mapping exercise’ surveying organisations that might involve young people in decision making.

Methodology

Quantitative and qualitative data was collected via self-completion questionnaires and through interviews. In all, NYCI devised three surveys. The first was a questionnaire mailed in mid-August 2000 to a database of 295 named individuals, representing 15 different categories of organisations that work with young people and were geographically spread. Questionnaires were mailed along with a reply paid envelope and cover letter addressed from the National Youth Council outlining the objectives and purpose of the research, and a follow-up letter was sent in early September as a reminder.

These methods aimed to establish contact with a wide range of organisations in order to collect data on a diverse number of initiatives. In total 104 responses were received. From these 104 respondents to the survey, six organisations were identified as being potential models of good practice in the area of the involvement of young people in decision making and were selected for a more in-depth study: this involved telephone interviews with the worker responsible for the initiative and reviewing project evaluation reports and research studies.

While the survey method used attempted to capture all organisations that might involve young people in decision making, no guarantee can be made that all relevant organisations and groups are included within the study. The study, does, however,

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gather information from a very broad range of organisations and groups, and suggests strengths and gaps that merit further investigation.

The secondary piece of research encompassed a postal survey of school principals sent out in September 2000, followed by a student survey, to gather information regarding student councils currently in existence in schools throughout Ireland. There are 752 post-primary schools and the list was sourced from the Department of Education. All 752 schools were targeted and the response from the principal's survey was 300 completed questionnaires.

The student survey sent out in October 2000 was based on the research among principals and ten schools were surveyed. In order to conduct a more detailed examination of student councils currently in existence in Ireland, case studies were carried out involving student councils from three separate post-primary schools.

The organisations surveyed

The following organisations are represented in the data collected. A more detailed description of their main functions is outlined in Chapter Three:

- Community Development Projects
- County Councils
- FÁS Training & Employment Authority
- Higher Education
- Local Area Partnerships
- Udarás na Gaeltachta
- Vocational Educational Committees
- Voluntary Youth Organisations
- Youth Information Centres
- YOUTHREACH

Key findings

The key findings can be summarised as follows:

- 70% of the respondents have directly involved young people in decision making and an additional 10% plan to involve young people in the near future.
- 51% of organisations involve young people as part of their everyday work,

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asking them for ideas, consulting with them and involving them in planning.

- Over half the respondents involve young people at an operational level, but their involvement in an advisory capacity was limited.
- 91% of the respondents feel that the views of young people have made an impact on their organisation.
- 84% of respondents felt that there have been changes to the way new initiatives are planned as a result of youth participation.
- 50% of the respondents work with young people who are socially or educationally disadvantaged.
- 56% of the organisations provide or plan to provide training to facilitate the involvement of young people in decision making.
- Only 40% of the organisations have evaluated the impact of young people on decision making and 79% of these involved young people in that evaluation.
- 83% of respondents indicated that young people had received feedback on their input into the initiative.
- The largest response came from Health Boards describing Health Promotion Initiatives – a total of 22 responses.
- The response from government departments was poor and of those, not one addressed the issue of the involvement of young people in decision making.
- There was a low response rate from Vocational Education Committees and Local Area Partnerships.

Chapter One

THE CONTEXT

Young people in Irish society today

The total population in the Republic of Ireland in April 2000 was estimated at 3.79 million, the highest since 1881.¹ There are 1,071,972 children and young people under 18 years of age according to the 1996 census and Ireland has the highest proportion of children within the EU, representing approximately 29% of the population compared with the EU average of 21%. The youth proportion of the population, i.e. those aged under 25, stands at 42%, also the highest in Europe. Ireland also has the highest percentage of households with children in the EU with 43% of households including at least one child.²

Statistically, Ireland has the second highest level of child poverty in the EU³ and the highest concentration of poverty amongst Western countries outside the US;⁴ according to recent research one in four children are living in poverty.⁵ Recent years have seen a transformation of the Irish economy, resulting in a growth of over 50% in additional jobs⁶ and a significant drop in unemployment. Early school leaving remains a challenge, nearly one in five young people leave school before completing the Leaving Certificate. These young people are more likely to be paid less, to have less job security and to become unemployed. It is generally recognised that most young people who are unemployed or in low paid jobs will be at risk of poverty and may live in persistent poverty. In light of these statistics, the need for young people to have a voice and to participate fully in decisions that affect them becomes all the more important. As noted below, steps are now being taken to improve the environment in which young Irish people can participate, but there is still some way to go.

¹ Central Statistics Office, *Population and Migration Estimates*, September 2000

² *Our Children – Their Lives*, The National Children's Strategy, Government Publication, November 2000

³ *Statistics in Focus: Population and Social Conditions*, Eurostat, 1997

⁴ *Human Development Report*, United Nations, 1998

⁵ *Child Poverty in Ireland*, Combat Poverty Agency, July 2000

⁶ Between 1987 and 2001, total employment grew from approximately 1.1 million to approximately 1.7 million.

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Governance

Governance in Ireland has traditionally been heavily centralised. The Oireachtas (National Parliament) is composed of a President, the Dáil (lower house), and the Seanad (Senate), following the European norm. Government is usually elected each four to five years and holds most powers at a central level. Government ministerial responsibilities, departments and state agencies are generally structured on a functional basis and are headquartered in Dublin. There has been some decentralisation of personnel and offices to other cities and towns in recent years.

There are 26 counties, with 32 local authorities (county and city councils) having responsibility for a number of areas, including social housing, waste and planning, but without significant tax-raising powers. A plethora of structures exist on a regional, county and local basis with responsibility for other areas, including Regional Health Boards (11), County Enterprise Boards, etc. New structures have been established in the areas of community and local development over the last ten years, the most important of these being Local Area Partnerships (varying between county and local levels).

The development of local government and the need to devolve power has long been a subject of political debate, leading to some moves towards a greater role in planning and coordination at a county level. These include the use of greater 'partnership'-type approaches between the state and other sectors through the formation of Strategic Policy Committees in local authorities. The most significant of these developments is the formation of County and City Development Boards (CDBs) to plan and coordinate state provision and initiatives at a county level. Despite these developments, there is still much confusion of roles and responsibilities and there has been no significant devolution of power from central to local level.

A particularly obvious gap, from a youth perspective, in the state's infrastructure at a local or regional level is in the area of education. Vocational Education Committees (VECs) operate at a county level, but their responsibility is limited to some aspects of second and third level education, adult education and youth work.

Ireland has developed a system of social partnership which is unique in Europe. The four 'Pillars' of social partnership, representing Employers and Business, Trade Unions, Farming Organisations and the Community and Voluntary Sector are involved with Government in processes contributing to decision making regarding economic and social policy and planning. The most concrete manifestation of these is the negotiation, agreement and review of 'National Programmes', currently the Programme for Prosperity & Fairness (2000–2003). Along with agreements on wage

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and tax policies, the current agreement sets out a series of commitments affecting areas of young people's lives in areas such as education, equality, housing and social inclusion.

European influences in the governance of Ireland have developed significantly since Ireland joined the EU. Ireland's active engagement in European institutions has led to some legislative and policy shifts, but has also encouraged the growth of local development structures and the formation of new regional boundaries. The most significant recent development in this area is the division of the country into two new regions, the Southern and Eastern Region (SE) and the Border, Midlands and Western Region (BMW), together with new 'Regional Assemblies' and some funded 'Programmes' under the National Development Plan (NDP).

The Good Friday Agreement (1998) marks a watershed in the development of relations on a north/south basis. The agreement sets out new structures for common policy making and common implementation in various areas, along with British/Irish institutions. There is considerable potential for the development of structures and policies of importance to young people's lives through these new arrangements.

Young people's participation in decision making in all the above institutions varies considerably, but can be generally characterised as low. This report outlines some evidence of current practice among some of these structures.

Young people and decision making

What young people say about their participation

A number of studies and initiatives in recent years provide an insight into young people's own analysis and thinking regarding their own participation in decision making in a range of arenas. Below we have outlined the most recent pieces of evidence.

'Youth Future' Conference (European White Paper on Youth)

Data collected at the 'Youth Future Conference,' organised by the Youth Affairs Section of the Department of Education and Science in conjunction with the National Youth Council of Ireland, in July 2000,⁷ indicates that young people in Ireland are very clear about the difficulties they face. This conference was held as part of the Irish phase of Europe-wide consultations for the development of the European

⁷ Youth Future Conference, 'Europe and You,' July 2000, Conference Report

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White Paper on Youth. The 85 young people, aged 15 to 24, participating in the conference outlined what they believed to be the key challenges, under the headings:

- Taking Part (Civil Society);
- Work and Money (Economic Structure and Employment);
- Feeling Good (Wellbeing);
- On My Own Two Feet (Youth Autonomy); and
- Young in Europe (Europe).

The report on the 'Taking Part' workshop indicates the concerns of participants regarding the complex decisions they must make that have a long-reaching impact on their life and their lack of confidence in the education system to help them prepare for modern life. They held that active, participative, educative processes are a key to making education relevant to them. They recognise that they themselves bear responsibility for pursuing their own agendas, but *'they also recognise that they are only empowered to do so with the aid of parents and key people within the community if the activities are to be self-sustaining. Young people know what they want. They want to participate at a higher level in society in order to have more control over their own existence. What they need, however, is practical support from parents and others to deliver on it'*.

While they expressed concern with the growth of consumerism and the marketing pressures being applied to children and young people, they pointed out that their voice was at least being listened to by manufacturers!

They were more scathing of politicians and the political system.

“Politicians were seen as motivated by power and greed rather than a commitment to serve the public who elected them ... Young people felt that they were irrelevant to the politicians and therefore their views were not listened to. Young people can't vote or access their politicians locally to any appreciable extent. Education was seen as an obvious, though currently absent, avenue to learning the skills of political engagement.”

They expressed an unease with the demands of contemporary society: the lack of time to enjoy their youth, pressure to work while studying, pressure to leave education early and take up low status employment. They feel invisible, partly because they feel they have no voice. They resent being seen as irrelevant in the political arena, 'except as the receiver of protective measures to counter perceived problems. They are not viewed as contributors in any relevant way'. Particular groups of young people

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are subject to greater difficulties in this regard than others. Young Travellers at this workshop expressed their frustrations at the barriers to their civil participation resulting from discrimination.

They held that

“the main vehicles for political engagement for young people in Ireland are community and voluntary work, issues based organisations and political parties. It was further acknowledged that there are larger groups of young people who do not politically engage and some of those barriers were cited as:

- **lack of information/skills;**
- **social disadvantage; and**
- **consumerism.”**

This indicates an unease with the way society currently deals with young people. The report outlines that participants at the ‘Taking Part’ workshop believed that young people know what they want. They want to participate. They made several recommendations on how improvements could be made, including:

- Developing a more democratic ethos in formal education, including the establishment of student councils, inclusion of political engagement and active citizenship in the curriculum.
- Support for youth organisations to encourage active citizenship among young people, particularly those outside the formal education system.
- Access for young people to forums which include policy influencers and decision-makers.
- Decentralising power, developing programmes to encourage young people to vote and reducing the voting age to 16.
- Encouraging greater participation through funding of voluntary organisations and opening avenues for employees to engage in voluntary activity.
- Involvement of young people in determining performance indicators for policy measures.

Young people and voting

Research undertaken by NYCI demonstrated that youth participation in the electoral process is declining and is an obvious threat to Ireland’s democratic system.⁸ In the

⁸ *Voting At The Crossroads, the 21st Century, Politics, Democracy and Young People*, NYCI, 2000

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1999 local and European elections as many as two-thirds of young people (aged between 18–25) did not vote. As young people are less likely to vote, their interests are less likely to be represented. Anecdotal evidence might suggest that opting out of the democratic process is an indication of the cynicism that young people feel about politics and the people involved in it.

A recent NYCI survey of second level students reinforces these views: when asked if students would vote in a general election if one was held in the morning, 26% of students sampled stated that they would not⁹. Reasons given for their disinterest include the following:

- politics is corrupt;
- the political system is not relevant to young people;
- young people are too lazy to vote;
- young people are too busy with work and study;
- young people don't know how to vote; and
- young people don't register to vote.

Nevertheless, it should also be noted that the young people surveyed showed an acute awareness of the social and political issues facing Ireland today, highlighting the potential of mechanisms through which young people could have their say.

Youth work legislation, policy and planning

The aim of youth work, as described in the White Paper on Education published in 1995, is to 'offer young people, on the basis of their voluntary involvement, developmental and educational experience that will equip them to play an active part in a democratic society, as well as meeting their own personal developmental needs'. Approximately 750,000 young people participate in youth work provision in the Republic of Ireland, supported by over 40,000 voluntary adult leaders and 1,200 paid staff.

Many youth organisations hold events and have mechanisms which provide opportunities for young people at local, regional and national levels, to air their views on matters concerning their involvement in these organisations and wider issues. Much of the information and thinking emanating from these events is utilised within the organisation, rather than being systematically applied in influencing other structures. An example of this is the application of learning from focus groups of members in the strategic planning process of one youth organisation, enabling the

⁹ *Share It With The Rest of the Class*, NYCI, 2001.

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organisation to adapt to changing needs and interests.

The *raison d'être* of some youth organisations could be characterised as the engagement of young people in public decision making. Ireland has, in common with many other European countries, seen some growth in 'special interest' and 'neo-political' movements of young people which consciously promote such participation. These include youth environmental groups under ECO, Irish Congress of Trade Unions Youth, the youth wings of the main political parties and the Union of Students of Ireland (USI). Despite their different focuses, each organisation contributes to public decision making through the direct involvement of young people in developmental work and campaigns related to young people's interests. The National Youth Parliament (NYP) specifically addresses young people's participation in decision making at a national, regional and local level. A profile of its work in this area is included as one of the Case Studies in Chapter 4.

There are two current developments in the youth work field which will have a key influence on youth participation mechanisms: Youth Work Legislation and the National Youth Work Development Plan.

The **Youth Work Bill 2000** seeks to ensure that there is greater cooperation between the state and voluntary youth organisations in how youth work is organised and supported in Ireland. Under the Youth Work Act 1997 a National Youth Work Advisory Committee was established and reports to the Minister for Youth. The Youth Work Bill (2000), currently before the Oireachtas, provides for new responsibilities to be given to Vocational Education Committees (VECs) in the formulation of a local Development Youth Work Plan, in partnership with local voluntary youth work organisations. Under the terms of the bill, new structures will be set up at a county level, 'Local Voluntary Youth Councils', representative of voluntary youth organisations in that area. At least one-fifth of the members of these councils must be under 25.

The **National Youth Work Development Plan** is currently being prepared by the National Youth Work Advisory Committee. The plan will set out a framework for the development of youth work in Ireland for the next five years. An extensive research programme was carried out by the Children's Research Centre in Trinity College for the NYWAC, the key results of which were outlined at a Consultative Conference in February 2001. While this research is not yet available, there is evidence of quite mixed levels of young people's participation in decision making within youth work provision. One indicator is that approximately one-third of youth organisations surveyed and one-fifth of community-based youth projects surveyed had representation of young people on their governing bodies.

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As part of the research, Arnstein's 'Ladder of Participation' was applied to a survey of community-based youth projects regarding who made decisions, i.e. youth workers or young people, and the degree of involvement in decision making. This analysis measures decision making along a continuum of levels of participation, using a list of 14 tasks, from Non-Participation, Consultation, Partnership, Participation to Self-Managing. None of the projects indicated youth participation being characterised at either of the two highest levels, *Self-Managing* or *Participation*, with most projects indicating high *Partnership* levels and considerable *Consultation*. Some types of decisions were reported to be made by youth workers only, i.e. *Non-Participation*, in areas such as applying for grant aid.

It is likely that the National Youth Work Development Plan will include significant recommendations encouraging the development of youth participation structures and mechanisms in the youth work sector, including the further development of 'youth led' youth organisations and resources to support optimum youth participation within existing and new forms of youth work.

North/South initiatives

Some tentative steps have been made in developing the theme of youth participation in decision making through the development of relations between the youth sector north and south. The relations between the Northern Ireland Youth Forum and the National Youth Parliament have contributed to thinking concerning the development of youth participation structures in the Republic of Ireland. Other recent examples include a cross-border action research programme for rural young people (2000), run by Youth Action (Northern Ireland) in association with the National Youth Federation, and the 'Youth Bridges' Programme¹⁰ run by NYCI, Youthnet (NI) and ADM/Combat Poverty. Proposals for the deepening of relations between the youth sector north and south, as well as on a British/Irish basis, have emphasised the potential for considerable growth in building joint youth participation strategies through greater cooperation. The inclusion of education as one of the areas for joint cooperation offers opportunities for such growth.

Formal education

The Irish education system promotes a broad-based education to the end of second level with no specialisation until third level college. The education system is geared towards academic success in two major examinations: the Junior Certificate and the

¹⁰ *Youth Bridges Report*, Eamonn Keenan, Youthnet, NYCI, CPA/Combat Poverty, 2000.

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Leaving Certificate. A Transition Programme is now used by considerable numbers of students, offering them the opportunity to take part in a year of study between Junior and Leaving Certificate levels which offers a broader curriculum through more experiential learning. Some schools now offer the Leaving Certificate Applied, a qualification aimed at preparing students for the transition from the world of school to adult and working life and encompassing a community dimension into the curriculum.

Whilst there are 33,851 students participating in Government aided third level education,¹¹ 'there continues to be unacceptably high levels of underachievement and dropout from second-level schools. Of the almost 70,000 school leavers who left school in 1996–97, 13,300 (19%) left without a Leaving Certificate, of these 2,500 (3.5%) left with no second level qualification. In addition, an estimated 800 failed to transfer from primary to second-level school.'¹² The Department of Education has as one of its main objectives, the retention of as many students as possible to continue in full-time education after the end of the Junior Cycle.

In the current educational climate young people have little opportunity to participate in decision making, as they and the adults they live and work with are, in the main, focused on their academic success. Despite the encouragement of school councils in recent legislation (Education Act 1998) the participation of young people in decision making in formal education is considerably retarded and there are many barriers that exist currently that need to be overcome.

Union of School Students

The recent industrial action in second level schooling led to considerable frictions between the various interests involved in education – teachers, parents, students, school management and Government. A wave of student protests led to the establishment of a new 'Union of School Students' (USS) at a national level, with the support of other organisations. There has been considerable comment on the dynamic which this new movement has created in affecting change in the direction of the dispute. This emerging organisation holds considerable potential to ensure that school students' voices contribute to decision making in formal education and other areas. The formation of student councils at school level will now be complemented by a national movement where school students themselves can have a voice in their own education at second level.

¹¹ *Statistical Report for 1998/1999*, Department of Education and Science, November 2000

¹² *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education*, Department of Education and Science, July 2000

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Other structures encouraging youth participation

There are a number of existing structures and initiatives which, in different ways, have developed spaces through which young people can contribute to the decision making process. These include:

- The Children's Rights Alliance
- 'Open Your Eyes to Child Poverty' Initiative
- Barnardo's
- The Irish Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC)
- St Vincent de Paul Society

National Children's Strategy

"An Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own; where all children are cherished and supported by family and the wider society; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential."¹³

The recent publication by the Government on a National Children's Strategy recognises that children have a significant and active contribution to make and that it is vital for children to feel valued and appreciated. This strategy demonstrates a commitment by the Government to the increased participation of children and young people in decision making. The measures that will be put in place in order to achieve this objective include:

- the establishment of 'Dáil na nÓg', or Children's Parliament, to provide a national forum where children can raise and debate issues of concern to them; and
- the establishment of the Children's Ombudsman by legislation as an independent office to promote the welfare and rights of children, raise public awareness and promote children's issues at government level.

The strategy was launched in November 2000 by the Minister for State with special responsibility for Children. The strategy is rooted in the vision of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and aims to improve the quality of children's lives in Ireland. The strategy reflects a commitment to listening to children's views, acknowledging their contribution to society and recognising their role as citizens.

¹³ *Our Children – Their Lives*, The National Children's Strategy, Government Publication, November 2000

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This initiative is a response to the growing pressure from organisations around the country to ratify the status of young people in Ireland and to ensure that what they have to say is listened to and acted upon. The strategy has also been established in response to the statutes laid down under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Ireland ratified in 1992. The strategy has three national goals:

- Children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.
- Children's lives will be better understood; their lives will benefit from evaluation, research and information on their needs, rights and the effectiveness of services.
- Children will receive quality supports and services to promote all aspects of their development.

There is no doubt that the National Children's Strategy marks a new chapter in Irish policy making that has the potential to widen children's and young people's participation in public decision making. Work is currently underway in arranging the first 'Dáil na nÓg' and in seeking to influence the roll-out of the strategy to the county and local levels through existing local government structures, including the County and City Development Boards. Significantly, it is intended that mechanisms for facilitating children's and young people's participation will be established at the county level. However, it must be noted that the strategy is at an embryonic stage and much work needs to be done by government departments, children's and youth organisations and other interested parties to push forward the goals laid down in the strategy. It is, nevertheless, the first step in validating at a national level the experiences of young people and the contribution they have to make in the growth and development of Irish Society.

Other recent legislation and policy measures

The past five years have seen the enactment of vital legislation and the development of policy in a number of key areas which have or will have a bearing on young people's participation in decision making. These include:

The Freedom of Information Act, 1997 established the legal right for each person to access information held by public bodies.

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The Protection for Persons Reporting Child Abuse Act, 1998 provides immunity from civil liability to persons who report abuse to officers of the Health Boards or to members of the Garda Síochána.

The Employment Equality Act of 1998 outlaws discriminatory practices in relation to and within employment, prohibits direct and indirect discrimination and victimisation in employment and defines sexual harassment for the first time in Irish law.

'Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children,' 1999. The guidelines were intended to assist people in identifying and reporting child abuse and to improve professional practice in both statutory and voluntary agencies and organisations that provide services for children and families. The guidelines embody the principles contained in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was ratified by Ireland in 1992.

The Equal Status Act 2000 promotes equality and prohibits discrimination, sexual harassment and harassment. The Act prohibits discrimination on the grounds of: gender, marital status, family status, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability, membership of the Travelling Community or race.

The Programme for Prosperity and Fairness, 2000 (see above under 'Governance') seeks to address the issues of poverty and social exclusion by building a fair and inclusive society in Ireland.

The National Anti-Poverty Strategy, 2001 is currently being created to place the needs of the poor and the socially excluded among the issues at the top of the national agenda in terms of government policy development and action. A 'cross-cutting' strategy addressing children in poverty will be a feature of the new strategy for the first time.

The National Health Strategy, 2001 is also currently being developed. It offers an opportunity to address young people's health needs and to set in place strategies by which young people's voices will be heard in the health field.

Conclusion

Attempts are underway to improve young people's decision making power at both statutory and voluntary levels. The launch of the National Children's Strategy clearly shows the Government's vision for youth participation. There are many other opportunities for youth participation strategies to be built into public policy making and planning processes. It remains to be seen, however, whether this vision will be made a reality. At a voluntary level, many organisations show an eager approach to improving the conditions in which young people can participate in public decision making. Their ability to do so depends on adequate funding and an ongoing commitment by young people and volunteers to the ethos of youth participation in decision making. While there is much work needed to be done, efforts are being made to create a climate in which youth participation in decision making can thrive.

Chapter Two

PARTICIPATION: WHAT, WHY AND HOW?

What do we mean by 'participation'?

Hart (1992) asserts that participation '... is the means by which a democracy is built and it is a standard against which democracies should be measured. Participation is the fundamental right of citizenship' (p5). As with many powerful and popular concepts, 'participation' is used (and abused?) to describe many different relationships and activities.

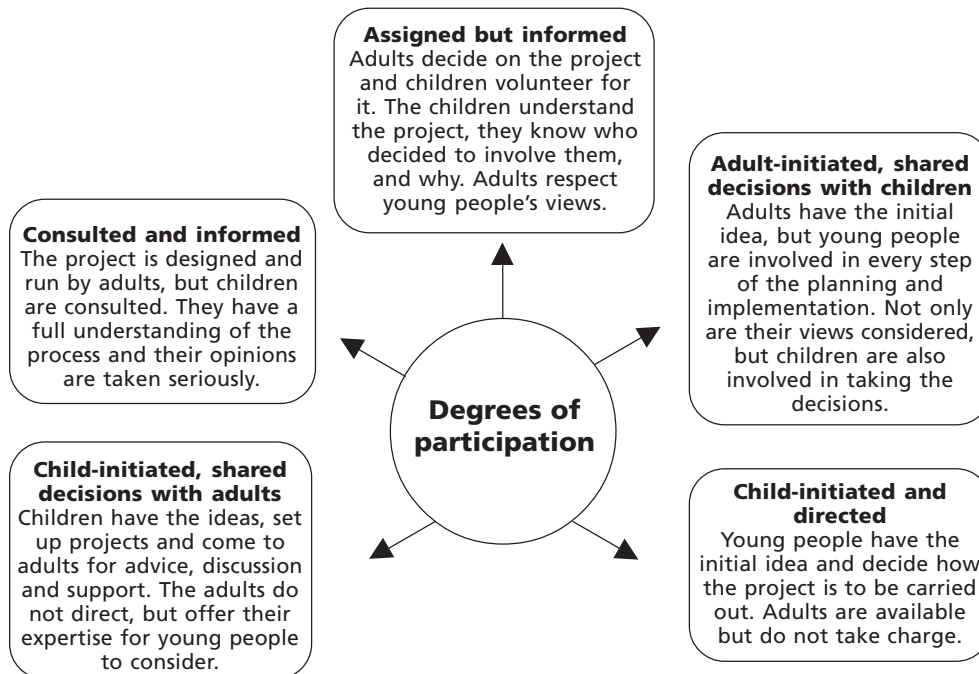
Writing on children and young people's participation has increasingly sought to emphasise 'real' (i.e. meaningful) versus tokenistic participation. For example, Bartlett (1999) states that participation is defined by 'a real engagement, according to age/ability, in all stages and development of a programme, from conceptualisation, through operation to evaluation' (p1). This engagement should also include the confident expression of views, perceptions, feelings, ideas and reactions of those involved (Bartlett, 1999). Green (1999, p213) advocates a distinction between consultation and participation, arguing that consultation is a chance to express views and opinions whereas participation implies a more active involvement in deciding which issues are important enough to be consulted upon in the first place.

Hart (1992) provides an alternative typology that incorporates consultation as one of the many methods of participation. Hart adapted Arnstein's model of citizen participation, which ranks projects by means of a 'ladder of participation'. There are eight levels of participation on the ladder ranging from 'manipulative' and 'decorative' at the bottom to child initiated projects and sharing decision making with adults at the top. For a project to be participatory four requirements must be met:

- The children must understand the intentions of the project.
- They must know who made the decisions concerning their involvement and why.
- They will have a meaningful, rather than a merely 'decorative', role.
- The young people will themselves have volunteered for the project after the project and what it entails has been made clear to them.

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Hart's ladder seems to suggest that all participation of children and young people should be on the highest rung. However, Green (1999, p205) states that this should not be presumed, as choice is the key measure for participation in a project. Some children and young people may not wish to take full direction of a project. They may simply wish for adults to listen to their opinions and to take them on board when deciding the work and activities of the project. To force or to coerce the young people into taking full direction would be against their wishes and therefore non-participatory. As Willow (1997, p2) argues, there is no one way of involving children and young people and methods must be tailored to the needs and priorities of those involved. Perhaps a more useful model would be that illustrated below, which moves away from Hart's hierarchical model and displays the degrees of participation in a circular layout. Such a model moves away from the assumption that project or organisations should always aim for the highest rung on the ladder, and recognises that different approaches may be best for different projects.



From: *Empowering children & young people training manual: promoting involvement in decision making* (Save the Children). Phil Treseder, 1997.

Why have participation?

Willow (1997) puts forward three cases – political, legal and social – for the participation of children and young people in decision making.

Political

In the last number of years there has been some public debate, particularly around election time, concerning the declining levels of voter participation, particularly among young people. This has become a key focus of work in the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI). Five surveys have been published by NYCI to date exploring youth voting levels and the reasons why young people do not generally participate in the electoral arena. NYCI, in particular, has been so concerned with voter apathy that a commitment was included in the current national agreement, the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness, stating that:

“A new Electoral Participation Initiative will be instituted with the task of encouraging maximum voter participation in elections, including a voter education programme. The initiative will focus particularly on communities experiencing disadvantage and on young people.”

The Government's commitment to this objective is a crucial step in tackling the levels of apathy and disinterest with the current political climate that are expressed by young people and people in disadvantaged communities. When implemented, this initiative may play an important part in creating greater levels of awareness among young people of the importance of voter participation and ultimately, another avenue for increased decision making by young people on the issues that most affect them.

In NYCI's 1997 publication *The Voice of Youth – Are You Listening* and in the 1998 survey *Get Your Facts Right*, it was made clear that young people are affected with many issues of political and social concern and prioritised the following issues:

- Drugs
- Unemployment
- Crime
- Northern Ireland
- Environment
- Emigration
- Racism

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In NYCI's survey examining the issue *Voting at the Crossroads? The 21st Century, Politics, Democracy, and Young People* (1999), the following points were noted:

- the Report of the Referendum Commission on the Good Friday Agreement and Amsterdam Treaty Referendum (1998) found that the turnout of voters under 25 years of age was 38%;
- 29% of the 18–25 year olds surveyed stated that they were not registered to vote; and
- 6% stated that they were not interested in voting.

In April 1999, NYCI's *Celtic Cubs? – An Opinion Poll of Young Voters on Politics, Local Government and Europe in Advance of the June 11th European Parliament and Local Elections*, found that:

- 14% of the 18–25 year olds surveyed were not registered to vote proportionately representing 70,000 people under 25 years of age; and
- 48% of those surveyed said that they were either not going to vote or were undecided.

While young people are extremely concerned about the society in which they live, there is a sense that the political system does not relate or listen to their needs. There is room for improvement in order to engage young people in political participation and improve their chances of influencing decision making on issues that affect their lives.

Legal

Ireland ratified the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992. Article 12 of the convention clearly states that the child has the right to express his or her opinion in all matters affecting them. This assertion now has the backing of the Government in the National Children's Strategy, published in November 2000, that has established structures and procedures allowing for increased decision making by children.

The 1998 Education Act provides for the establishment of student councils in every second level school. This provision has legally allowed for increased participation by young people on issues that affect their school life on a day-to-day basis. In a country where most educational decisions are carried out centrally, student councils give young people the opportunity to tackle local issues and influence decision making that directly affects their lives.

Social

Studies have been carried out that show that social 'connectedness', i.e. links with friends and the wider community, is one of the most powerful determinants of individual health and wellbeing. Furthermore, the lack of social connection has a negative influence, which rivals the 'old faithfuls': smoking, obesity, high blood pressure, lack of exercise, etc. Social connectedness also affects our psychological wellbeing. Harvard University's Robert Putnam estimates that in terms of life satisfaction, regular club attendance or doing voluntary work, entertaining friends at home, even once a month, and attending a religious service twice a month has the same positive effect on happiness as more than doubling one's income does (*Bowling Alone*, 2000).

The social impact of voluntary and community participation offer enormous physical and psychological benefits to those who give up their time. Coupled with the ability to affect decision making within the youth sector, the social benefits of participation also add more weight to the need for young people's participation.

What needs to be in place for children and young people to participate?

Green (1999, p205) asserts that there are three key conditions which must be satisfied in order to ensure that people in general, and children in particular, are included in decision making processes:

- Cultural attitudes must be such as to encourage participation.
- Political, legal and administrative structures must be in place in order to ensure rights to participation.
- Economic and social conditions must be such as to enable people to exercise their rights.

True participation must also take account of the diverse needs, circumstances and aspirations of the children and young people involved. This means that children and young people cannot be viewed as a homogeneous group. Differences will arise as a result of personal experience, ethnicity, sexuality, gender and disability (Green, 1999, p213). Further, children and young people will only be able to participate if they are able to exercise their rights to take part. As Green (1999) argues: 'Involvement in the exercise of rights and the ability to participate in decision making cannot be understood in isolation from the inequalities of power, status and resources' (p209).

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Those children who are most often excluded from the activities of mainstream society by disability, homelessness or poverty are, therefore, those children whose voices are least likely to be heard in decision making. Further, when young people in these situations are included and asked for their views it can be on the basis of the very issues which exclude them. This means that disabled young people are asked about their disability, homeless young people are asked about homelessness and so on (Roberts, 2000, p236). Efforts must be made to reach these young people and to include them in decision making in the whole spectrum of issues. A failure to do so will mean that projects will only be relevant or available to certain groups of children and young people – usually those who already have opportunities to participate (Willow, 1997, p105). Recognising diversity and ensuring that participation processes are accessible to all are, therefore, essential to ensure that all children and young people have a voice.

Conclusion

The case for participation is strong. Not only does participation enable children to engage as citizens within their communities and society, it also sends powerful messages about the value placed on the opinions and aspirations of the young. Participation means children, young people and adults working together to find solutions and initiate change. Adults have a central role to play in participation. As Hart (1992) argues, the involvement of adults is crucial, not only for the guidance and support they can offer but also for the lessons which they too can learn (p5). One of the greatest benefits of participation is the dialogue which it can stimulate between different generations (Willow, 1997, p2).

The aim, therefore, must be to promote participation for all. If children participate in their early lives, they will be enabled to grow into confident, active adults who are able to make decisions and accept responsibility for those decisions. To exclude children from decision making is to impoverish society and its citizens, both now and in the future (Green, 1999, p221).

Chapter Three

THE MAPPING STUDY

The mapping study sought to address six main questions:

1. Which types of organisations are currently involving children and young people in decision making?
2. Which groups of young people are involved in such organisations?
3. By what methods are young people involved in decision making?
4. What perceived impact does the involvement of young people have on decision makers?
5. What are the main outcomes of the initiatives?
6. What lessons would the organisations like to pass on to new initiatives?

The survey

In July 2000 the National Youth Council of Ireland compiled a list that represented 15 categories of organisations that either work directly with young people or have a remit to support them. The final database of 295 was geographically spread and a questionnaire was mailed to named individuals, and a follow up letter was sent as a reminder. The survey aimed to contact a wide range of organisations in order to collect data on a diverse range of initiatives.

The survey was split into four sections:

- Section 1 asked for general background information on organisations.
- Section 2 asked for information about the initiatives.
- Section 3 asked specific questions about the involvement of young people in decision making.
- Section 4 asked questions about the impact of the involvement of young people. (See Appendix A for questionnaire.)

The survey was thus an evaluation by organisations of the work that they are engaged in with young people and the involvement of those young people in decision making,

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both internal and external to the initiative described. In total 104 responses were received. Microsoft Excel software programme was used to analyse the 'tick-box' questions and the other answers were considered thematically.

The case studies

From the 104 respondents to the survey, five organisations were selected for a more in-depth study. The criteria for selection was that they should represent diversity in four key areas:

- Geographic location.
- The primary focus of the organisations and the work carried out by them.
- The groups of young people served by the organisation.
- The ages of the young people involved in the organisation.

The case studies involved telephone interviews with workers and study of the evaluation reports produced by the organisations.

The organisations surveyed

Community Development Projects

Established in 1990 in recognition of the role of community development in tackling poverty and disadvantage; there are 120 of these organisations working at a local level and managed by voluntary committees. Funded by the National Lottery they are directed by the Department of Social and Family Affairs. They act as a catalyst for change, support the community to identify needs and facilitate any capacity building required to initiate and sustain initiatives.

County Councils

The elected local authorities are the county councils, county borough corporations, borough corporations, urban district councils and boards of town commissioners. The members of these authorities are elected on a system of proportional representation. Since 1996 a number of reports have been published on local government. The present Government has incorporated the key objectives of 'Better Local Government' into its 'Action Programme for the Millennium'.

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FÁS Training and Employment Authority

Established in 1988 under the Labour Services Act, 1987. Its functions include: the operation of training and employment programmes, the provision of employment/recruitment services, an advisory service for industry and support for community-based enterprise. FÁS has 53 Employment Services Offices and 20 Training Centres throughout the country.

Higher Education

Ireland has seven universities and 14 Institutes of Technology, 12 of which were formerly regional technical colleges. There are currently over 106,000 students taking part in third level education. The 1995 White Paper on Education set a target of 45% of the age cohort entering higher education. These institutions are funded by the state. Current trends in higher education include new funding mechanisms based on unit cost studies, modularisation of courses, closer links with industry, the establishment of performance indicators in the interests of quality assurance and greater coordination of the university and non-university sectors. There are five Colleges of Education for primary teachers.

Local Area Partnership Companies and Community Groups

Their function is to prepare a local development plan to counter disadvantage for their area and then seek to have that plan implemented. The intention is to accelerate local economic development and thereby increase employment, to tackle exclusion and marginalisation resulting from long-term unemployment, poor educational attainment, poverty and demographic dependency. There are 38 partnership companies operating, 20 urban and 18 rural.

Udarás na Gaeltachta

A regional government agency whose task it is to develop the economy of the Gaeltacht so as to facilitate the preservation and the extension of the Irish language as the principle language of the Gaeltacht community. To this end Udarás promotes productive schemes of employment through the development of local natural resources, skills and entrepreneurial abilities.

Vocational Educational Committees

These statutory committees function under the Vocational Education Act, 1930. There are 33 operating in county council areas. These committees have their own corporate status and do not come within the system of city and county management.

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They provide and manage vocational schools and community colleges, employ administrative and teaching staff, and provide vocational and continuing education for their administrative areas.

Voluntary Youth Organisations

There are over 40 national youth organisations in operation in Ireland, which involve young people in non-formal, personal and social education, including uniformed groups, youth club organisations and special interest organisations. In addition some youth organisations run youth projects and general youth services in many parts of the country.

Youth Information Centres

The service provided by these centres is based on the needs of young people, is confidential, has a personalised, friendly approach and is open to all and free of charge. The service works in close cooperation with local youth services providers and is supported by the Youth Affairs Section of the Department of Education and Science

YOUTHREACH

Is an integral part of the national programme of second-chance education and training. It operates in out of school settings. Under its general umbrella, there are 65 YOUTHREACH Centres, 45 Community Training Workshops and 27 Traveller Training Centres operating throughout the country. YOUTHREACH is jointly managed by two government departments – Education and Science and Enterprise, Trade and Employment and is funded by the Exchequer and the European Social Fund.

Survey responses

The 104 responses received can be broken down as follows:

- Voluntary Youth Organisations 21
- Statutory Bodies 66
- Community Voluntary Sector 17

The responses from the Health Boards were received from several main departments namely: childcare, community work and health promotion. The high response and

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quality of the response from the Health Boards indicated a considerable interest in consulting with young people and a commitment to involving young people at every stage of the process.

Table 1

Category	Organisations	Responses	Number contacted
1	Youthreach Centres	10	29
2	Traveller Training Centres	3	13
4	Youth Information Centres	5	14
5	County Councils	4	12
6	Local Areas Partnerships	3	12
7	Vocational Education Committees	3	14
8	Unions	1	3
10	Health Boards	22	30
11	Youth Organisations	16	26
12	Community Development Projects	14	31
13	Third Level Colleges	8	31
14	Government Departments	6	
15	FÁS Training Authority	9	29
Total Responses/Contacted		104	295

Table 1 shows that the majority of organisations that responded to the questionnaire were Statutory Bodies. These included: Youthreach Centres, Traveller Training Centres and FÁS Training Centres. These bodies respond specifically to the needs of young people who are socially and educationally disadvantaged by the provision of education and training initiatives. These bodies demonstrated a clear commitment to devising initiatives that build the confidence and self-esteem of young people.

The responses from the Voluntary Youth Sector encompassed a variety of different organisations all aiming to support young people with developmental initiatives in an out-of-school context and work with young people to build self-esteem and assertiveness.

The response from Local Area Partnerships was limited. Seven of the 14 Community Development Projects which responded have been directly involved in facilitating initiatives that actively involve young people in decision making.

Taking the initiative

It is clear from **Tables 2 and 3** that the majority of respondents to the survey feel that they do involve young people in decision making, or plan to do so in the near future.

Table 2 – Has the organisation directly involved young people in decision making in the past year?

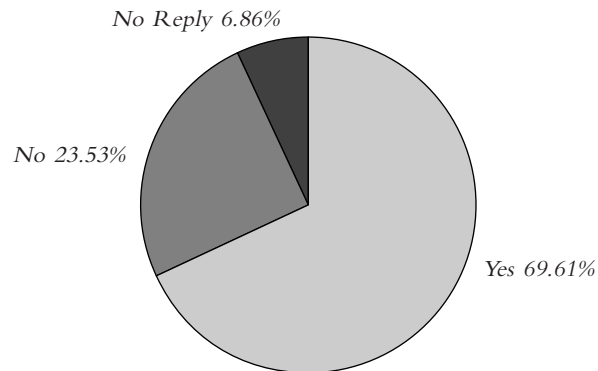
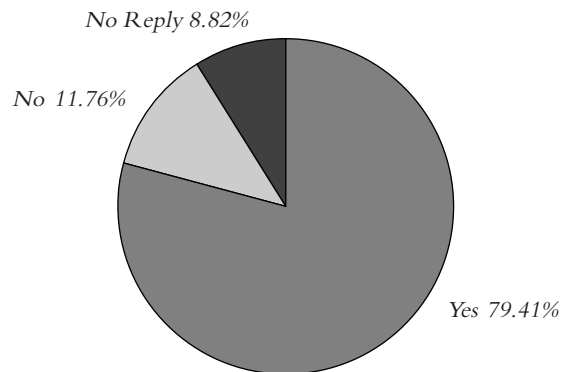


Table 3 – Do you intend to involve young people in decision making in the near future?

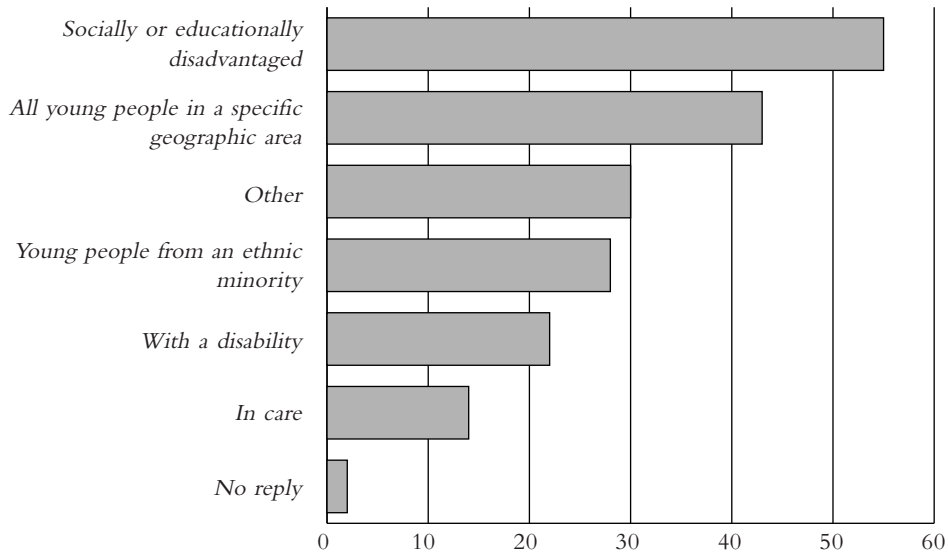


Some 85% of the respondents work with young people of both sexes. **Table 4** shows that 43% of organisations aimed to support youth within a particular geographic area.

Just over half of the respondents focus their work with young people who are educationally or socially disadvantaged, whilst 50% work with people from an ethnic minority or with a disability.

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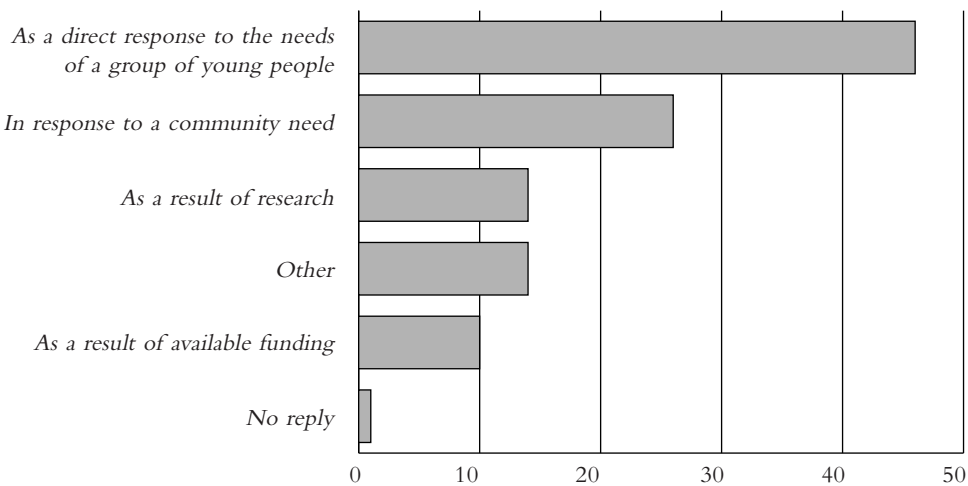
Table 4 – Please indicate the groups of young people that you work with.



Questionnaire section two: description of the initiatives surveyed

Some 72 of the 104 initiatives surveyed described themselves as needs based

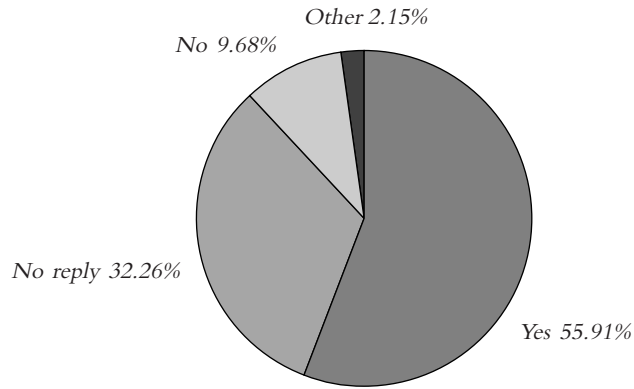
Table 5 – What was the reason that the initiative was set up



Almost 56% of organisations surveyed provide training for young people to support them in the process of decision making or see the importance of doing so in the near future.

Taking the initiative

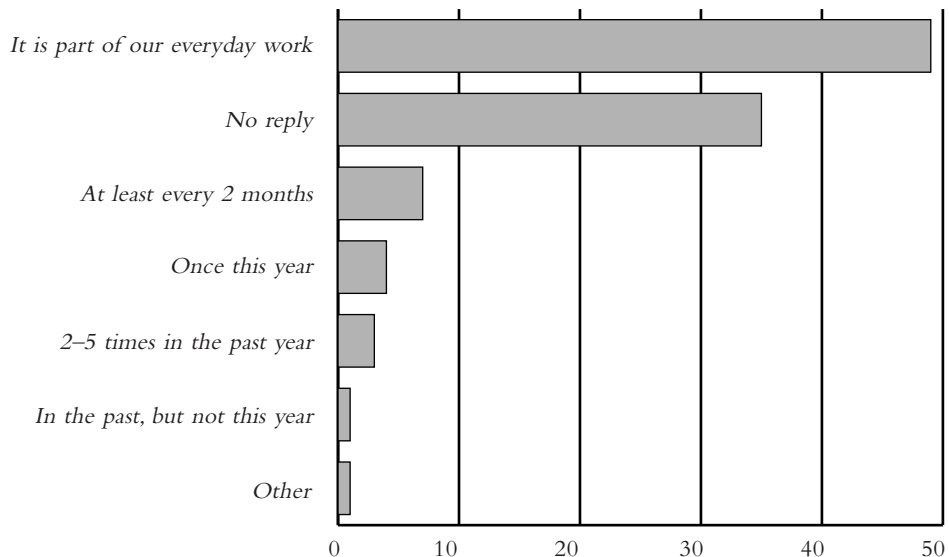
Table 6 – Do you provide, or plan to provide, any training for young people around decision making



Questionnaire section three: youth involvement in decision making

Nearly half, 49 of the 104 organisations, involve young people in decision making as part of their everyday work; it is part of the ethos of the initiative that young people's opinions are heard as part of the ongoing work.

Table 7 – How often do you involve young people in decision making?

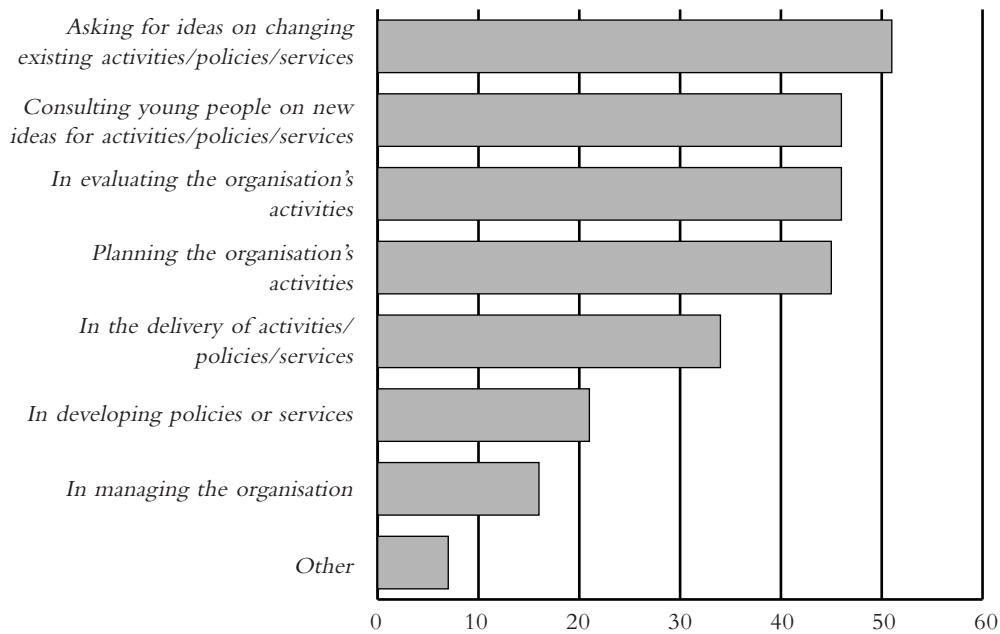


The participation of young people appears to be mostly in the areas of planning,

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changing or suggesting ideas on the organisation's activities. There is limited involvement of young people in the management or policy areas of organisations. Those organisations involving young people in management were mainly Third Level Colleges and Community Development Organisations. Importantly nearly half of the organisations involve young people in the process of evaluation.

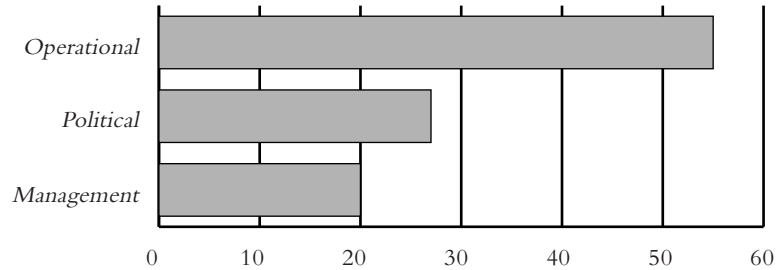
Table 8 – In what areas do you involve young people?



Over 50% of organisations described the involvement of young people being at the operational level. Those organisations that described young people as having a political involvement, i.e. informing policies within the organisation that affect young people, were in the main Community Development Organisations and Youth Organisations.

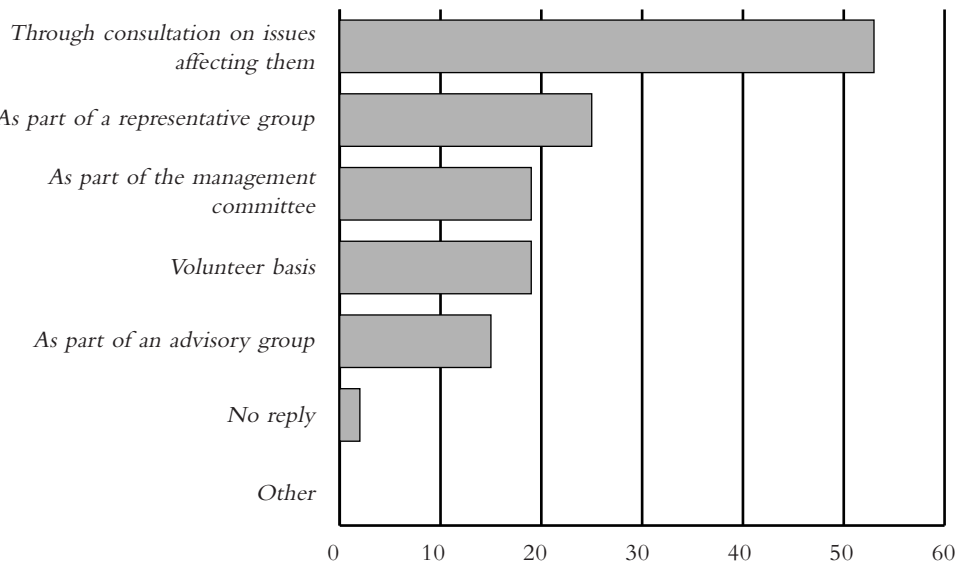
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Table 9 – In what sphere(s) would young people’s participation in decision making best be characterised?



Over 50% of the respondents involved young people in a consultation process and 25 of the initiatives had a process whereby young people were part of a representative group. Community Development Projects and Youth Groups involved young people at an advisory level or as part of a management committee.

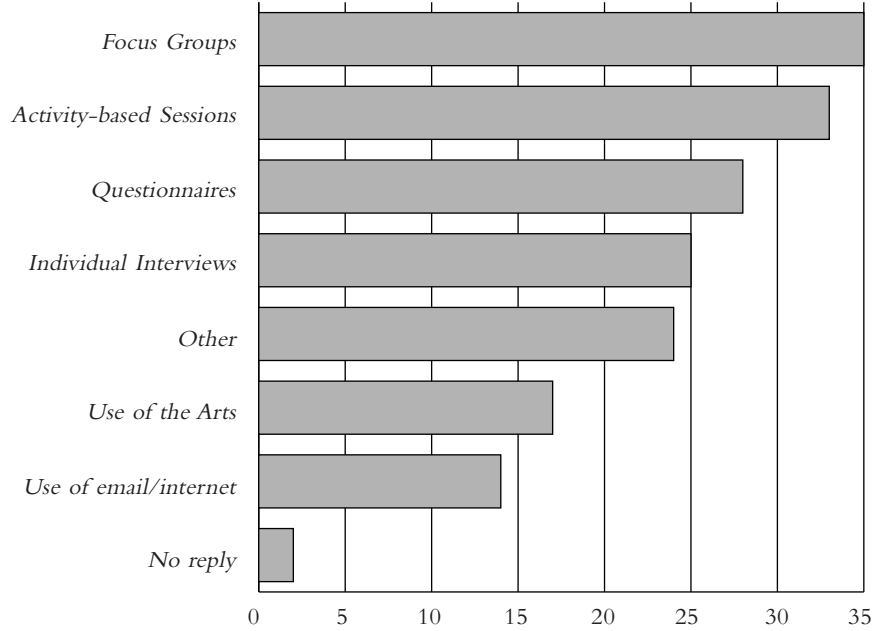
Table 10 – How are young people involved in decision making within your initiative?



Most organisations used a variety of methods to involve young people in decision making; most often mentioned were focus groups, activity-based sessions and questionnaires. There was limited use of electronic mail or the arts.

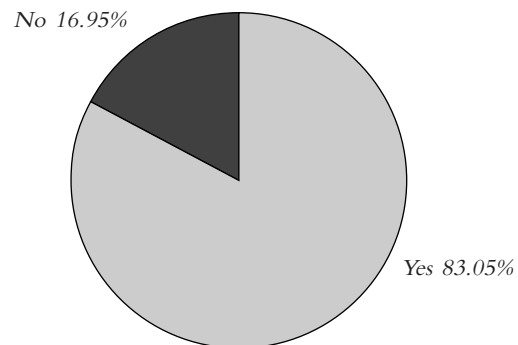
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Table 11 – What methods do you use to involve young people in decision making?



Of those organisations, which involved young people in an evaluation process, 83% of them gave feedback to the young people on their input; this was an indication of the importance that organisations placed on responding to the expressed needs of young people.

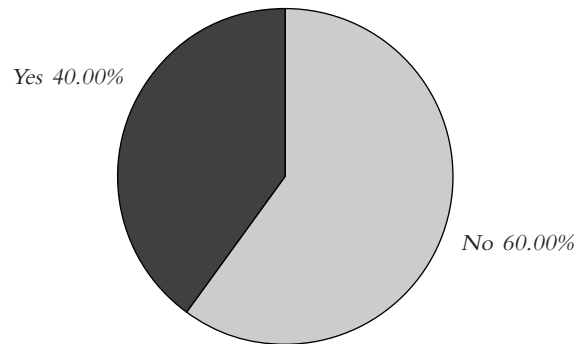
Table 12 – Did the young people receive feedback on their input into the decision making process?



Questionnaire section four: impact of the involvement of young people

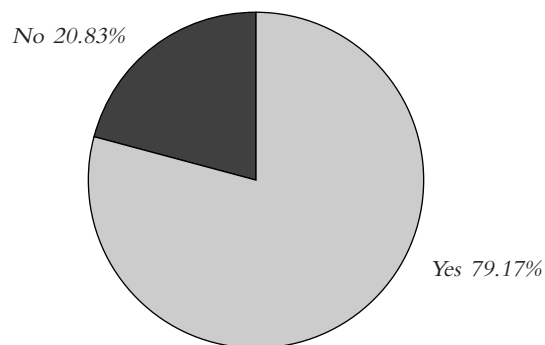
Only 40% of the respondents had evaluated the involvement of young people in decision making. A number of those who had not evaluated the involvement of young people expressed that they felt there was a need to do so and that the initiative planned to do so in the future.

Table 13 – Has the organisation evaluated the involvement of young people in decision making?



About 79% of the organisations that had evaluated the involvement of young people in decision making involved young people in that evaluation indicating the importance that those organisations place on the views of young people.

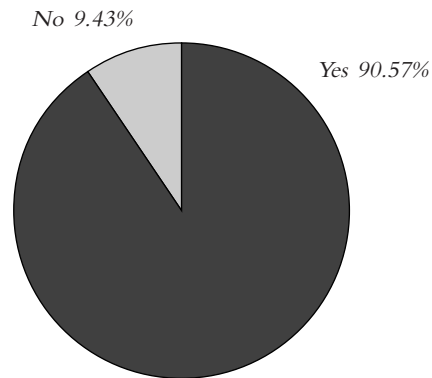
Table 14 – Were the young people involved in evaluation?



Significantly over 90% of the organisations who had evaluated the involvement of young people in decision making, and who had involved them in the evaluation process, felt that the views of the young people made an impact on the decision makers in the organisation.

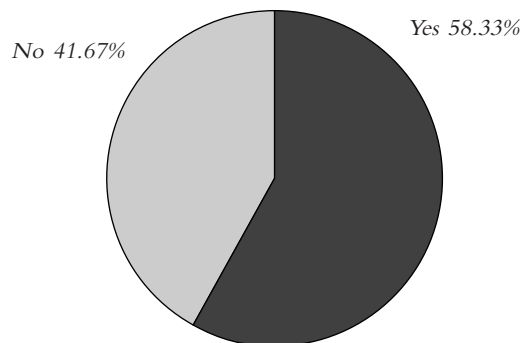
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Table 15 – Have the views of young people made an impact on decision makers in the organisation?



Nearly 60% of the organisations indicated that young people were involved in decision making outside of the initiative. Respondents indicated that young people were encouraged to do so and in some cases were actively supported in the process. The majority of organisations where this occurred were Community Development Projects and Youth Organisations.

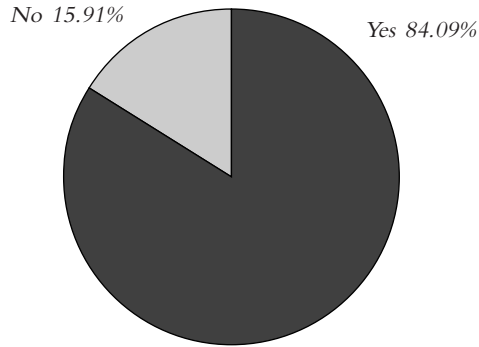
Table 16 – Are young people involved in decision making outside the initiative?



About 84% of the respondents felt that as a result of the participation of young people in decision making and their input, changes have been made to the way in which new initiatives are planned, indicating that the views of the young people have been taken seriously and that organisations have been willing to make change.

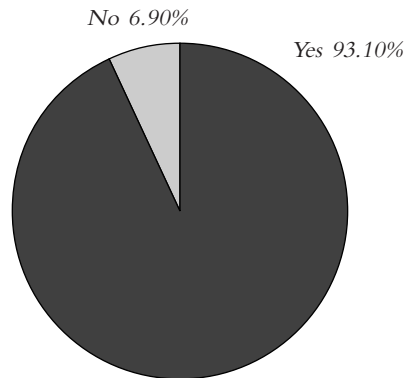
Taking the initiative

Table 17 – As a result of youth participation have there been any changes in the way new initiatives are planned?



Some 93% of the respondents felt that their initiative had resulted in key learning experiences for the organisation. The most commonly referred to were: the importance of involving young people in the planning of the initiative from the beginning, of listening to and respecting the views of young people, of implementing changes as a result of young people's input and of articulating the reasons why changes were not made as quickly as possible.

Table 18 – Has the initiative resulted in any key learning experiences



Key learning experiences from the initiatives

The following quotations indicate the importance that initiatives place on the participation of young people. It is evident from the data collected that staff working on the initiatives place great importance on listening to the expressed needs of young people and consulting with them in planning and organising initiatives. Organisations

Promoting young people's involvement

indicated that in this manner they could best prepare young people for the challenges and decisions they are faced with in the community. Staff on projects were realistic about the time that is required to work with young people in this way, seeing it as a slow process, but one that has real learning for both staff and young people.

“They are really listened to, their opinion has a value and this builds self-esteem.”

Youthreach Centre

“Empowerment and involvement are a good thing.”

Traveller Training Centre

“Sourcing information builds new interpersonal skills, responsibility, administrative skills, reliability and team work.”

Youth Information Centre

“Services to young people cannot succeed unless they have a say in their design.”

Youth Service

“Group members have become aware of the various influences which affect how a decision is made and of the importance of assessing the impact of any decisions made.”

Health Board

“The importance of consultation and aspects of active citizenship with regard to representation, how to delegate, how to listen as well as to inform and respond, the value of the democratic process.”

Youth Organisation

“This is a slow and difficult process. The young people we work with have decisions thrust upon them constantly without consultation.”

Organisation working with the Traveller Community

“The young people learn about the community and the project acts as a springboard into the community.”

Community Development Organisation

Taking the initiative

“There is greater confidence and an ability to face challenges in a practical way.”

Third Level College

“You need the input and views of the young people if an initiative is to be successful.”

FÁS Training and Employment Centre

Main outcomes for young people’s participation

Organisations were asked to describe what were the main outcomes for young people’s participation in decision making as a result of the initiatives. A considerable number mentioned the increased self-confidence that young people now have as a result of their participation in initiatives, others indicated that some young people had moved on to further education and training as a result of participating in initiatives, and some mentioned the benefits to the wider community such as the establishment of networks and further research projects as a result of the work accomplished. The outcomes were numerous and varied between internal decision making within initiatives and also the potential to influence external public decision making through involvement with organisations that influence decision making in the wider community.

“Successful placement, achieved qualifications, self-confidence and increased maturity.”

Traveller Training Centre

“Personal development: the provision of an information service to a school, which is unique, improved community and social relationships and the feasibility to transfer the project to other areas.”

Youth Information Centre

“By recording the expressed needs of the young people and circulating this report to relevant people and organisations, this has resulted in the setting-up of a research project that will complete a strategic plan for the youth workers and youth services in the area.”

Youth Service

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“The implementation of social, personal and health education programmes in schools. The development of more health promoting school communities.”

Health Board

“Greater involvement of young people in making serious decisions concerning their lives.”

Health Board

“Crime levels decreased, better relations with the Gardaí. It has encouraged the interest of the young people in certain activities. A sense of ownership has been given to the young people.”

Community Development Organisation

“Appreciation of their own talents, gifts and limitations. Ability to work with others. More complex decision making.”

Third Level College

Important lessons to pass on

Initiatives were very clear about the messages they wanted to pass on to other bodies that may be planning initiatives for young people in the future and hope to promote their participation and involvement in decision making. Foremost was the importance of respecting youth and their opinions, initiatives indicated that it was vital to really listen to what young people have to say and to trust their judgment.

Initiatives displayed an openness to examine the manner in which they currently work, most felt that young people should be involved in the planning of an initiative from the very outset in order to encourage maximum participation; those who had not been involved in such a process were strongly recommending that it should be employed on new initiatives undertaken by their organisation.

“Young people should be respected. Address the issues most important to them. They should be encouraged to take on responsibility and be supported to do this by staff.”

Youthreach Centre

Taking the initiative

“The involvement of young people is integral to our success, working with their recommendations, implementing them and explaining honestly.”

Traveller Training Centre

“Explain carefully, give young people time to practise and allow them to build their confidence. Let young people see and appreciate the tangible difference their participation makes.”

Youth Information Centre

“Our efforts to date to involve young people have been minimal. However, they have been very productive and essential to our overall plan. Lessons we have learnt: trust young people, encourage their participation, be prepared to accept and take on board their views and decisions.”

Youth Service

“Include young people from the start, involve as many agencies and youth workers as possible in a consortium.”

Local Area Development Partnership

“The importance of confidentiality, building trust and follow through cannot be overemphasised. There is a power imbalance that facilitators must be aware of in a mixed group. Supplementing discussion with anonymous questionnaires can give a more accurate picture.”

Health Board

“Use focus groups and individual interviews as tools keeping in mind the differences in rural and urban environments. Make sure the young people understand they are being consulted over and what will be done with the data.”

Youth Organisation

“Be prepared for more work. The involvement of young people in decision making alongside the youth workers is a lifelong path and must not be treated as a ten-week course. It must underpin your work ethos.”

Community Development Organisation

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“Projects which have a definite structure or methodology but are adaptable to the needs of those involved. The initiatives must be seen to relate to and have an impact on the realities of young people's lives. They need to have a length of commitment that is acceptable to the young people.”

Third Level College

“Need to involve young people in the design of the initiative to ensure maximum relevance and hence participation.”

FÁS Training and Employment Centre

Other relevant research

NYCI carried out a separate, but complementary, research project on young people's participation in **Student Councils in Second Level Schooling**. This consisted of three phases, as follows:

- Phase 1: Survey of School Principals.
- Phase 2: Student Survey.
- Phase 3: Student Council Case Studies.

This research is outlined below:

Phase 1: survey of school principals

A pilot survey was carried out to second level school principals in mid-September 2000, followed by an immediate survey of all post-primary schools nationwide. Similarly questionnaires were mailed along with a reply paid envelope and cover letter addressed from the National Youth Council outlining the objectives and purpose of the research.

In order to facilitate Phases Two and Three of the research, principals were asked to state clearly whether they would be willing to participate in further research to be conducted by the National Youth Council, by allowing a survey of its pupils, and in-depth interviews/focus groups with members of its student council in late September/early October. Principals were given the option to respond to the survey anonymously if they wished. Questionnaires contained primarily close-ended questions in order to facilitate ease of completion as well as more efficient coding and analysis.

Phase 2: student survey

Based on the research among principals, a number of schools were identified for student research. Research was limited to schools which had given permission in the principal survey to be contacted for further research. Some ten schools were surveyed, and were chosen to provide an adequate representation of post-primary schools according to: public/private status, geographic location, and co-ed/single-ed status.

Five of these schools had student councils and five did not, four were co-educational and six were single sex schools (three all boys and three all girls), three schools were selected from different areas of Dublin, the remaining schools were drawn from different parts of the country.

It was decided that students from two separate classes would be surveyed in each school, with classes chosen from different years in each case. To get a good mix of opinions and views it was decided that three first year classes, three second year classes, three third year classes, three fourth year classes, four fifth year classes and four sixth year classes would be surveyed. Assuming an average of 30 students per class, a total sample of approximately 600 was expected.

Selected schools that agreed to participate in the research, were contacted prior to commencement of the survey to explain, in more detail, the nature of the research and the means by which it was to be conducted. Although principals were told which years to survey and the numbers of pupils to survey from each class, the researchers had no control over the final classes which the principals chose to survey. As a result, 464 completed questionnaires were returned for analysis instead of 600. Only three sixth year classes were returned for analysis as one principal surveyed a fourth year class by mistake. This also meant that researchers had information regarding four fourth year classes instead of three.

The student research was conducted by means of a self-completion questionnaire, which was distributed to students by teachers who gave a brief overview of student councils, the purpose of the research, and instructions regarding completion of the questionnaire. Questionnaires were collected upon completion and were returned to the principal who returned all completed questionnaires by pre-paid post. Again, the questionnaire contained primarily close-ended questions in order to facilitate ease of completion as well as to facilitate more efficient coding and analysis. Student questionnaires ascertained students' views and experiences of student's councils, their experience in youth organisations and sports clubs, the number of hours students worked a week and their attitudes towards political parties and political participation.

Phase 3: student council case studies

In order to conduct a more detailed examination of student councils currently in existence in Ireland, case studies were carried out involving student councils from three separate post-primary schools. Schools were identified and selected based on information gathered from the surveys among principals and students. Two of the schools selected were based in Dublin, one was co-educational and one was an all girls school. The Dublin schools had already participated in both the principal and student questionnaire surveys. The third school selected was based in Kildare and was an all girls school.

Participants

Focus groups were held with students who were members of the student councils so that a detailed insight could be gained to the councils and their operations to date. One focus group was conducted specific to each of the three student councils. The principals from each of the schools were first approached with a view to establishing contact with the members of the councils. Principals were told the importance of keeping focus groups to a maximum of 10–12 participants. The Kildare focus group involved six participants, and in Dublin, focus groups were carried out with 12 and 14 students respectively.

The main findings of interest from the survey of principals were:

- 66% of schools surveyed have student councils, 34% do not.
- The majority of the student councils were established from 1990 onwards.
- 41% of the student body always attends school board meetings, 16% attend infrequently.
- The majority of the principals surveyed believe that student councils are used to improve communication channels between the school's administration and students and vice versa.
- 77% of principals believe that student councils give students an opportunity to make recommendations in connection with the running of the school.

The main finding of interest from the student's survey was that:

- 93 students surveyed (20%) stated that they participated on a student council.

Other forms of participation were mentioned in the survey, e.g. school sports team, organised groups/societies, staff/student committees, prefects, newspaper/newsletter etc. However, young people's participation on student councils offers the most effective method to influence decision making in formal education.

Chapter Four

THE CASE STUDIES

The case studies described here demonstrate six different models of initiatives involving young people in decision making using a variety of methodologies:

- Portlaw Primary School in County Waterford where all the children in the school are involved in a Green-Schools initiative.
- A Single Parents Initiative in Community and Equality in Tralee, County Kerry, that has responded to the expressed needs of children within the group of 15 young people, and as a result is providing training opportunities to encourage greater participation.
- Parkside Community Development Project in Ballina, Co. Mayo where a Traveller Youth Group of four young men have worked together to produce their own video.
- The South Kerry Youth Education Project in Killarney, Co. Kerry, an initiative responding to the expressed needs of 17 early school leavers in an urban and rural environment.
- St Cuan's Youth Information Point and Library, Co. Galway, a joint partnership between St Cuan's College and County Roscommon Youth Services enabling nine students to run an Information Point and Library for the college.
- The National Youth Parliament, an organisation which allows opportunities for young people to come together to explore youth issues at a Youth Parliament held every 18 months and to pursue recommendations subsequently.

Case Study 1: Portlaw Green-Schools Programme, Co. Waterford

Green-Schools is a European-wide environmental education programme that promotes responsible behaviour amongst school children and the wider community.

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It is an initiative of the Foundation for Environmental Education in Europe. In Ireland the project is coordinated by An Taisce (the National Trust for Ireland) in partnership with Local Authorities.

The programme is designed and implemented by the whole school, involves the wider community and is endorsed by the Department of Education and Science. Schools that successfully implement a Green-Schools programme are awarded a European Environmental Certificate and fly the Green-Schools flag. The first themes that schools tackle are litter and waste and waste minimisation and recovery. Subsequent themes include energy, water, transport, biodiversity and school grounds. So far 45 schools across the country have received the Green-Schools Flag. These schools have reduced their overall waste output by between 50–75%. The programme is run in conjunction with the Local Authorities where the Environmental Officer works hands-on with the schools in their county.

Waterford County Council highlighted **Portlaw National School** as being an example of good practice in respect of the involvement of young people in decision making. Portlaw is a small country school in a beautiful setting with flowerbeds that have been maintained by the children in the school. Initial interest in an environmental project came about as a result of a visit by the local litter officer. A group of students decided on a project to clean up the litter in the school. This was so successful that pupils were encouraged to take part in a Green-Schools initiative.

A Green-Schools committee was put in place in Portlaw National School that included two teachers, two parents and seven pupils (from 3rd to 6th classes). The children were elected as representatives by their respective classes, and in some classes candidates delivered a short speech outlining the reasons why they were seeking election. The committee meets every two weeks during lunch hour and a sixth class pupil takes the minutes.

The school devised a comprehensive action plan where the emphasis was placed on litter and waste management, both short term and long term. The process involved a monitoring and evaluation system together with the implementation of new school policies as a result of learning from the project.

The Green-Schools Committee is responsible for channeling information back to their classes and each class has their own particular responsibilities in relation to the project. Contacts have been made with the wider community; parents have been kept informed by letters and local sponsorship funding has been secured. The Environmental Officer from the local council is a regular visitor to the school.

Portlaw was the first Irish school featured on the European Green-Schools web page and has received a number of emails and contacts as a result. The school has

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devised its own Eco Code that was derived from ideas and suggestions that came from each class.

Waterford County Council has been very impressed by the work the children have accomplished and has awarded them first prize in their Tidy Schools Award in 1999 and first place in the Environmental Project in 2000.

Michael Curran, the School Principal, felt that: ‘significantly most of the targets were achieved but there were some unexpected outcomes from the project that were extremely important and yet hard to quantify, and that was the change in attitude of the students and their willingness to participate’. The project and its results have been visibly displayed in the school and the majority of children have been involved in curriculum work regarding Green-Schools.

The comments of students themselves indicate the success of the initiative in providing a space for students to participate in decision making in a school setting:

“When Laura and I got on the committee we felt that we could make a difference throughout the whole school and especially the appearance of the school by making it a litter free zone and by planting shrubs and digging new flowerbeds.”

Jenny Larkin, 6th Class

“There were various decisions we had to make but one in particular was how we would work hard to get this very important award so what we did was we drew a map of the school and divided it into zones ... This action day was very successful and everybody participated throughout the school.”

Laura Corcoran, 6th Class

“I felt that I didn’t make a difference at first but after a while I knew I made a difference to the school and the committee ... It meant a lot to me knowing that I could help my school and help the pupils in it. First we had to decide who was on the committee then who was doing what and what to do about the bins.”

Julie O’Hara, 5th Class

“I felt that I had an important job to help the environment and show the children in the school how important the environment is to us. The responsibilities we had were to tell all the pupils and their teachers to tell

their families to recycle and not to drop litter and to help the environment ... We had to make decisions like what different classes could do to help the environment and what kind of plants we would plant and how we would recycle things.”

Ruth Kelleher, 4th Class

Case Study 2: “SPICE Junior”

Single Parents Initiative for Community and Equality (SPICE) is a support network of mothers and fathers, both single and separated, that are parenting alone. SPICE has been in existence in Tralee, Co. Kerry since 1996. The group comes together once a week to share experiences and information. The group uses community development principles to work towards empowerment and social change at local level in the interest of one-parent families. The group also organises activities, which are designed to be both social and learning opportunities for its members.

Alongside SPICE a parallel group has been formed for the children of members of the group, **SPICE Junior**. This evolved from what was originally a simple childcare arrangement to enable parents to attend the support group. It soon became evident that children needed more than childcare, they also needed to be encouraged to socialise and to participate in developmental opportunities.

SPICE Junior has become as important to the parents as the SPICE group itself. It is reassuring for parents to know that if a child has a difficulty at school, perhaps because of teasing or bullying or feeling that their family is different, that they now have a group in which to meet children like them, someone their own age who has a family structure like they do. There are 15 young people in the group, 8 of whom are between the ages of 10 and 16 years and the gender balance is roughly equal.

Four of the older members of SPICE Junior participated in the Irish Pre-School Play Group Association training for Assistant Play Group Leaders. This resulted from the fact that in 1999 when the group went away, a number of the older children explained that they did not always want to take part in SPICE because there was a view that it was for young children and certainly not for teenagers. Therefore to encourage their participation older members were asked if they would like to take an active leadership and developmental role in the group. The training programme was designed together with the young people and as a result they felt a sense of ownership over the initiative. The strategy has worked well; the young people love their group

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and have made it their own. The level of commitment and the amount of work they have invested in SPICE has been outstanding.

The young people were delighted with the obvious respect that went with the responsibility they took on. Each of them completed the training and received certificates from the IPPA. The course itself covered all aspects of childcare including child development, safety, problem solving, communication and imaginative play. The experience greatly helped their self-confidence and increased their sense of belonging.

A young leader explained, 'I attended a six week course for playgroup assistants on a Tuesday evening in Tralee Community Development Project. We did stuff like art and crafts, junk art, magic paint, the value of books, music instruments and safety in the playroom and ground rules for the group. I learned how to work with people and to understand young children better and to be a better help around the training room in SPICE Junior.'

The Childcare worker reported that she saw a huge development at an individual level among the children: 'there is a marked improvement in their communication skills, motor skills and most especially in their confidence.' The worker felt that the training gave the young people an understanding of what it takes to run a playgroup and an insight into the pressures involved, and as a result they appreciate their group more. The worker also expressed that it had given her an insight into the young people's strengths and weaknesses and what motivates them. As a result of the training the young people now give the worker more support and have matured. 'The IPPA course simply helped them to build on the skills they already had.'

The young leaders are involved in funding applications made to the Local Area Partnership Company in order to fund new initiatives that they feel are important to the development of SPICE Junior, two examples of ideas that were generated by the group were the funding of a Computer Club and the resourcing of the children's games area. The applications were negotiated with staff who supported the young people in the process of decision making and the implications of their decisions for the group.

Art classes have been held as a result of a request from the older members of SPICE Junior. Prior to the classes commencing, the young people met with the teacher and they discussed what they would like to do on a nine-week course. Taking responsibility for their own needs has been a very positive experience for the young people. They drafted their own ground rules, met a half an hour before the instructor arrived to set up for her and took responsibility for cleaning up afterwards. In this manner they ensured they had maximum time with the teacher for instruction and they enjoyed managing their own affairs.

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How the young people feel:

“It was brilliant.”

“I've discovered the best thing ever – plaster of Paris.”

“SPICE Junior is fun. It's great.”

“I like to learn things.”

“I like making and meeting friends.”

The initiative has presented this model of working with young people at the Annual General Meeting of One Parent Exchange Network, of which there are 70 affiliated groups, as a model of decision making and empowerment for young people.

Case Study 3: Parkside Community Development Project, County Mayo

Parkside Community Project aims to work in the spirit of cooperation with voluntary, statutory and community groups through the principles and methods of community development to combat the issues of poverty, social exclusion and disadvantage in the Parkside area of Ballina, County Mayo.

Throughout 1999 the consolidation and expansion of the Youth Services in Parkside has meant that it is now at the heart of the community. Parkside Community Youth and Traveller Project engages in a wide variety of sports and arts activities with young people. The organisation has found that using arts as a tool for creativity and development has really engaged the young people and given them a real opportunity to make decisions and plan an initiative from start to finish. As an integral part of the work Ballina Traveller Development Group focused on accommodation issues for Travellers.

One of the key areas of work for the youth group was the making of 'Looking Back', a ten-minute film drama created by four members of the Cara Club Youth Initiative.

The initiative was part of the Film Institute of Ireland's Outreach Programme whose aim is to produce films by local people and leave behind filmmaking skills and interest in the community.

Four young Travellers came together to form a group for the film. The Youth Service feels 'that film is an excellent medium for young people who have limited literacy skills, as it provides a different avenue of expression', and this proved to be the case on this project. 'The lads who got involved had limited success at school and two

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had no reading or writing skills at all; but they did have an eye for a good camera shot and excellent ideas which they expressed skilfully and articulately.' This translated into eight months of work; the group met twice a week, every week from April to December.

The group initiated the idea for the film, worked out the script, acted in it, organised extras, filmed it and helped to edit the final version. The worker from the outreach programme provided the patience and technical skill to ensure the project was a wonderful success, and the young people gained more and more confidence as the project progressed. A local Garda was involved in making the film with the group and one of the scenes was actually shot in the Garda Barracks; the young people themselves negotiated these arrangements.

The film was premiered at a local hotel and was viewed by the wider community: parents, friends and politicians. There was a considerable amount of interest in the film; the *Irish Times* reviewed it and the group received a tremendous amount of positive feedback, which was a huge boost to the young people.

The group now has a tangible product in their hands and an interest in filmmaking. It is hoped that the group will produce more films in the future.

Case Study 4: South Kerry Youth Education (SKYE)

The South Kerry Youth Education (SKYE) initiative was a part-time, flexible, needs-based programme for early school leavers in Killarney, County Kerry. The programme was managed by the Kerry Diocesan Youth Service which has worked intensively with excluded and marginalised young people for over a decade. The project was funded by YOUTHSTART, one of the four strands of EMPLOYMENT that was an initiative of the European Union, funded by the European Social Fund. YOUTHSTART projects pilot innovative ways of addressing the issues of early school leaving and youth employment.

The SKYE initiative developed a holistic educational programme to offer a second chance educational opportunity to young people aged between 14 and 18 years. The development of a comprehensive outreach programme facilitated the participation of 17 young people experiencing educational disadvantage from both rural and urban areas.

The young people joined the initiative with no qualifications and little in the way of self-confidence; they had all experienced a sense of failure in the school system and over half of the participants were considered to be at risk by other agencies in the

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county. Staff on the project felt that it was vital for the young people to be involved in planning a curriculum that would meet their individual needs and one that would give them the confidence to make decisions about their lives outside the project.

The overall aim of the project was to meet the developmental needs of the young people, enhance their skills, improve employability, enrich their communities and subsequently inform policy and practice. Following an initial programme of activities designed to win their trust, participants were involved in devising and negotiating their own timetable, based on their interests. Staff provided feedback to the young people about their evaluations and in this way the young people could see the impact of their own decisions and the changes that were made to the initiative as a result.

Each subject was seen as a tool for building the young person's confidence and enabling them to make links with the wider community. Every young person was encouraged to make decisions around work placement; all of them found their placement challenging but the opportunity enabled them to build greater confidence and to become respected in the community. The most successful work experiences were where the young people had identified the area of interest for themselves.

The young people planned a trip away in the summer to Dublin and fundraised by running a disco for a number of local youth clubs and also buying and selling Christmas trees. The group planned the activities, and each member had a responsibility around the running of the events. They planned the activities they would be involved in, shared travel and cooking responsibilities and evaluated their experience. The success of the activities and the fundraising gave the group a new confidence in dealing with the community.

In the second term of the initiative the group were responsible for hosting a group of European visitors and managing a series of youth events for the Kerry Diocesan Youth Services Youth Day, an annual event where up to 2,000 young people converge on Killarney and take part in activities throughout the day. The SKYE participants planned and managed many of the events for the day, including circus skills, technology workshops, graffiti boards, etc.

The young people were supported by staff through team meetings and group discussions and also mentoring young people in contact time each week.

Three of the young people were elected to represent the group at a final conference of YOUTHSTART projects held in Exeter, England. The participants were responsible for planning the event, negotiating arrangements with administrative staff in England and negotiating plans with project staff. Whilst at the conference they had responsibilities for photography, presenting information about their project and participating in a youth event with young people from four other countries.

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By the end of the two-year initiative all of the participants were more confident, had an increased self-esteem and related in a more positive way to their peers and adults. They also received accreditation. Five of the participants progressed to mainstream training courses and all but one of the other young people are currently employed. SKYE was a community-based project and the young people enriched their community by their new sense of wellbeing, their participation in the Christmas Craft Business Scéal, Scéal Eile Arts Conference, the St Patrick's Day Parade, the Kilcummin Disco and their enthusiastic participation on the project.

As a result of the initiative this model of working has been recognised by the Department of Education and Science as being a vital provision in the Killarney area and has been mainstreamed as a Youthreach provision.

Case Study 5: St Cuan's Youth Information Point and Library, Galway

Galway – Elphin Youth Initiative works with and for the young people of the Elphin Diocese area of County Galway and is a division of County Roscommon Youth Service. St Cuan's College is a second level school. St Cuan's Information Point and Library is a joint project of the Youth Service and the college. The facility is unique in that it is run by nine specially trained second level students under the management of the Youth Information Coordinator, a teacher and the director of the County Roscommon Youth Service.

The initiative is a response to the needs of young people in the school and the wider community who are confronted by many choices, challenges and pressures and who have to make decisions that will shape their lives. In order to do this it was felt that young people need reliable information on the options available. Youth Information Services aim to empower young people to make informed and responsible decisions about all aspects of their lives. By providing fast and easy access to a wide range of information in an informal and supportive environment, Youth Information Centres and Points enable young people to avail themselves of opportunities to develop their skills and abilities, to solve problems and to actively participate in society at local, national and international level.

St Cuan's Information Point is part of a network of Youth Information Centres and Facilities run by County Roscommon Youth Service under the auspices of the National Youth Information Monitoring Committee of the Department of Education and Science.

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The Youth Service has worked with St Cuan's College for over 12 years in the delivery of a variety of projects, programmes and services. In 1998 they secured the use of a disused boys' cloakroom from the college to set up the Information Point and Library. The Centre was officially opened in December 1999 and is available to all students. It contains information on areas such as: accommodation, employment and training, education, finance, health, social welfare and travel. In addition to the Information Point the facility also has a library of over 3,000 books that provides a reference and lending service.

Each year all fifth year students in the college learn how they can participate in the service from the director of the local Youth Service. Students have the opportunity to apply for the nine team places to run the Information Point and Library. The successful candidates receive certified training from the Youth Service and the school, both inside and outside the facility.

Marie Madden is 18 years of age, a student at the college and has been involved in the initiative for over a year. 'I had no experience before but I wanted to get involved in management and get a bit of responsibility. We look after everything in the Information Centre and give students the information that they need ... I really enjoy the responsibility.'

Donna Coffey is the Secretary for the team. 'When we were selected we had an induction training and also spent time shadowing the previous group. We give a lot of input into what types of books are bought and what we think people are looking for. We have a lot of responsibility, and get to make decisions, it's good to be involved.'

Over the year the team have learned about research and sourcing new information, they have taken responsibility for the opening and closing of a public service and have developed reliability and team work. The young people's input has made a tremendous difference to the appearance of the building, which is now bright and cheerful and they now have the confidence to provide a service to both students and teachers in the school.

There have been significant outcomes for the school community in the development of this initiative: it has given a greater significance to reading within the school as the library is at least as busy as the Information Point. The young people, who are involved in providing the service, and those who are using it, are empowering each other and are a good example of peer education at work.

In May 1999 the Youth Information Point received a Silver All-Ireland Award from the Gulbenkian Citizenship Foundation. In addition the Student Information Officers received Gaisce Awards from President McAleese for their contribution to the provision of services for their peers.

Taking the initiative

The initiative has been brought to the attention of the National Information Network in order to promote the project as a model of the involvement of young people in decision making. The initiative can also be seen as a model of good practice in the cooperation and involvement of both formal and informal education working together to encourage the participation of young people in making decisions that have a tangible affect on the community in which they live. Work is being initiated on compiling and implementing a training manual and policy document that would inform other organisations of this model.

Case Study 6: National Youth Parliament

The National Youth Parliament was founded by the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) in 1985 to mark International Youth Year. Young people from all over Ireland came together to discuss issues of importance to them over a weekend 'National Youth Parliament'. Since then a further seven parliaments have been held with a total of over 1,000 young people between the ages of 16 and 25 having been involved over the years. The National Youth Parliament is a forum for young people to debate issues that they feel are relevant to them. It encourages young people to participate in decision making structures and to contribute fully to their society. The parliament has one central meeting every 18 months. It also organises regional events around the country in between parliaments to encourage youth participation.

The NYP is managed and maintained by an elected steering committee consisting of 20 members representing nine regions throughout the country. Their duties in the intervening period between parliaments are to promote youth participation, lobby local and national government on recommendations passed at the NYP's central meeting and help to organise the next meeting of the Parliament.

The NYP attracts 200 delegates representing all strands of youth in society at each sitting. Each region, based on Health Board regions, is entitled to elect two members to the National Youth Parliament Steering Committee (NYPSC) to represent them at national level. Dublin, due to its size and population, is currently allowed to submit four members to the NYPSC.

The NYP is an affiliate member of the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI), the umbrella body for youth organisations in the country. Currently, the Vice-Chairperson of the NYP, at 17, is the youngest elected member on the Board of NYCI.

The NYP believes that the process of involving young people in analysis and

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decision making within the National Youth Parliament is infused with a youth work ethos of 'learning by doing'. Through involvement in the Youth Parliament, locally or nationally, the participants acquire and further develop many interpersonal skills which will be invaluable to them in all walks of life, such as the importance of team work, time and people management, communication skills, the ability to devise budgets, organise events and speak confidently on various issues.

The issues of concern to the NYP are wide ranging. For example, the rights of refugees and asylum seekers in Ireland were addressed at the Seventh National Youth Parliament. Among other recommendations it was suggested that: 'there should be inclusion of intercultural education to combat racism at both primary and secondary level, including teacher training.' The views of participants on the world of politics is often critical: according to participants at the same Youth Parliament, young people feel that politicians are motivated by greed rather than a commitment to serve the public who elected them and that politicians are not listening to their needs.

Future development

The current Youth Parliament Steering Committee has drawn up plans for a major development of the NYP. The National Youth Parliament plans to be a fully-fledged independent youth organisation with an active dynamic membership working locally and nationally within the next five years. The NYP will be the first youth organisation of its kind in the Republic of Ireland to be solely managed by young people, for young people. It plans to play an important role in contributing to the development of the Youth Service in Ireland. The NYP's work will be recognised as an important platform for the development of young people in developing a greater understanding of civil participation, whether in school or in a local youth group. The NYP hopes to build an active membership that will work locally, regionally and nationally. It will set up a system of sustainable local youth parliaments based on urban and rural districts.

The main national event, the National Youth Parliament, will continue to be staged at 18-month intervals. Links with the Northern Ireland Youth Forum are being strengthened. In addition, relationships with various European based youth organisations similar to the NYP are being formed.

The National Youth Parliament clearly offers a structured forum where young people can air their views and discuss and pursue issues of economic and social importance that affect their lives. The Youth Parliament's mission must, therefore, be financially supported in order to create a viable and sustainable structure with greater opportunities for more young people from throughout Ireland to become involved.

Observations on the case studies

The six initiatives cited as examples of good practice indicate that where young people are involved in internal decision making, encouraged to participate and take responsibility their self-confidence grows and they wish to be more involved in their community.

The examples given indicate that most participation in decision making is generally limited to decision making concerning the internal work of the group or initiative. It is difficult to find models of public decision making by young people simply because they are not being documented as a matter of course. The reasons for this are usually:

- The lack of adequate funds to do so.
- Too few staff to engage in more formal evaluation practices.
- A lack of commitment from the decision makers in the organisation to prioritise documentation as an essential part of informing their own and other organisations.

The organisations that responded to the survey are those committed to the involvement of young people in decision making. They are striving to increase that involvement, but their priority is often in dealing with the issues that young people are faced with on a day-to-day basis, leaving little time to reflect, evaluate, and document the initiative and its outcomes together with the resultant policy recommendations. Fire fighting can lead to tunnel vision on local initiatives and impedes the development of, and opportunity for, young people's involvement in decision making.

The case studies demonstrate that the involvement of young people in decision making on initiatives is of an internal nature and rarely involves more external or political/public decision making; this may reflect a reticence within organisations to be 'political' themselves.

The pressures on organisations from funders often limits innovation, in particular where funds are dependent on the numbers of young people involved in an initiative. Much of the documentation available on projects is in the form of a report to funders and is often task oriented rather than a full evaluation of the outcomes or a detailed examination of the participation levels of the young people and how this has impacted the initiative.

The case studies demonstrate that the participation and involvement of young people in the decision making process is highly limited in the vital area of public

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decision making. Organisations feel that young people are involved in decision making but perhaps initiatives need to be more critical of the extent to which the process is adult rather than young person-led. Initiatives need to encourage young people to make their views known in the external, political or public arena on a local, regional and national level where they have a significant contribution to make.

Chapter Five

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions from research

Sectoral analysis

Statutory sector

The organisations that showed most interest in the survey were those in the statutory sector. These organisations indicated a clear commitment to devising initiatives that respond to the direct needs of the young people and most often involve young people in decision making at an internal level. The level of decision making for young people on the majority of initiatives seemed limited to group work, and was adult-led rather than young person-driven. This would indicate that the level of participation that is achieved is limited and that there needs to be clear guidelines set out for organisations around what constitutes participation for young people. A commitment to ensure that initiatives strive towards higher levels of participation is required.

Health sector

The responses from the Health Boards were received from several main sections, namely: childcare, community work and health promotion. The quantity and quality of the response from the Health Boards indicated a considerable interest in consulting with young people and a commitment to involving them at every stage of the process. Respondents in this area were working from: regional Health Board mission and policy statements together with best practice requirements of the 1991 Child Care Act, and as a result, initiatives were very clear about the importance of the involvement of young people in decision making. Funding or lack of resources were not cited as critical issues for these initiatives.

While Health Boards and other organisations showed a strong commitment to the involvement of young people in decision making, they often stated that there was a limit to the level of decisions a young person should be involved in, indicating that adults should be the judges on 'maturity' levels. The data showed that young people were not involved to any great extent in management committees, policy making or supported by training to enable them to do so, indicating that

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where young people are involved the involvement may be tokenistic in nature rather than fully participatory.

Voluntary sector

The responses from the Voluntary Youth Sector encompassed a variety of different organisations, all aiming to support young people with developmental initiatives in an out-of-school context and to work with young people to build self-esteem. These organisations indicated that under-funding, the uncertainty this brings to organisations and lack of staff often curtails the most innovative work. Lack of adequate resources, training and support for volunteers means that organisations are often preoccupied with funding applications rather than the creation of policy documents. Where organisations are managing to do both there is tremendous pressure on staff who are often paid on a part-time basis and in actuality work on a full-time basis because of their personal commitment. Therefore in a sector where there is enormous potential for wider participation, a lack of resources has hindered the effectiveness of many initiatives.

Responses from Youth Services, Youth Information Centres and Community Development Projects indicated a commitment to creating models that might be transferred to other areas and other initiatives. They also stated that the involvement of young people in decision making should be part of the ethos underlying the work of an organisation. Though the commitment is stated, the reality is that few of the organisations have documented those models, thus indicating a real need to formalise the methods for creating documentation on models of good practice and resourcing organisations to do so.

Participation and decision making

External decision making

Currently young people have few opportunities to participate in decision making on external issues, and opportunities for doing so are not written into the aims of the initiatives. This indicates that the focus of the organisations from which the initiatives originated, is often inward looking and not 'political' in nature. There are no guidelines to ensure that young people's participation in local initiatives will impact on external policy, or for initiatives to ensure that young people are encouraged and supported in participating in external decision making thus ensuring their participation in the wider community. The lack of any strong direction from other sources to bring about greater participation in external decision making must contribute to this. Other possible reasons include the short-term nature of many

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initiatives and young people's involvement in them and the possibility that many young people may not actually demand such forms of participation.

Limits to decision making

There was a sense from some organisations that they felt there was a limit to the level of decision making that young people should be involved in, and that limit should be set by the adults who work with them. The implication of this is that adults may impede fuller participation by young people by their own lack of trust and confidence, or by the restraints of the organisation or the initiative.

Problems recording levels of decision making

Many of the organisations that have been involved in excellent initiatives have not documented the work they are engaged in for a variety of reasons. Culturally these organisations tend to 'do' rather than record; many of them are under-resourced and priority is given to face-to-face work with young people rather than evaluation and report writing, and quite often there is no funding to complete a piece of work with a final report. None of the case studies quoted had an evaluation report that documented the life of the project and the processes involved. The lack of policy documents and good practice guidelines in the area of the involvement of young people in decision making for new or planned initiatives means that good practice will not be disseminated in the wider community and that decision makers in Government and its agents are neither informed of the needs of young people nor the many examples of good practice that exist.

Evaluation

Evaluating initiatives

Many organisations do not currently evaluate the impact of the involvement of young people in their initiatives; but they see the importance of such evaluation and plan to do so in the future. This would indicate that organisations do not yet see project evaluation as a primary and critical tool in working with and listening to the needs of young people, to further the learning of the organisation and to promote fuller participation and involvement. There is a strong indication from organisations that lack of funding to carry out an evaluation process is limiting their ability to do so.

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Non-response

The limited response to the survey from government departments, the Vocational Educational Committees and Local Area Partnerships was both surprising and disappointing. These departments and statutory bodies have a critical leadership role to play in ensuring the maximum involvement of young people in society; without their commitment young people have limited opportunities to fully participate in society and indeed to have their voices heard. Staff of Local Area Partnerships express their frustration at being inundated with research requests from various sources. From the experience of queries concerning the survey from some government departments, it seems that they may have little or no concept of youth participation in decision making at a department level and were perplexed as to who should complete the questionnaire. The low response from the Vocational Education Committees may indicate that even though they are aware of initiatives in their area they play a more administrative than hands-on role, acting simply as a conduit for finance rather than taking a leadership role in policy making.

Participation in second level schools

The Survey of Principals outlined above ('Other Relevant Research') indicated that 66% of schools now have a school council; it is important that the remaining 34% of schools who do not have a council are encouraged and supported to do so, to ensure that young people in school have the maximum opportunity to participate in decision making. Indications are that these schools would benefit from the support of the Department of Education and Science and other sources in supporting them with guidance and information to set up and run such student councils.

The main findings from the Student Survey indicate that where young people are participating in decision making it is most usually within the school setting, suggesting that young people are currently without the information, training and opportunity to participate in and influence decision making in the wider community.

Key recommendations

The following recommendations arise from the various elements of this research, including the audit of current initiatives, the survey and the case studies of practice. They are addressed to a variety of actors:

- 'Children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.' This

Taking the initiative

commitment made by the **Irish Government** in November 2000 in the National Children's Strategy should be fully implemented to ensure that what young people have to say is listened to and acted upon in all relevant areas of policy and practice. The **National Children's Advisory Council**, in its overseeing role, should work to ensure the implementation of the youth participation strategies set out in the National Children's Strategy.

- A **major drive should be undertaken** by statutory and voluntary bodies to implement the commitment to encourage the input of young people into decision making processes in policy making and within provisions and services, using a variety of approaches. This should be based on the development of 'Youth Participation Statements' within particular organisations or provisions and should include assignment and training of personnel, the development of guidelines, feedback mechanisms, etc.
- The Department of Education and Science and other relevant government departments should adequately **fund and resource initiatives** in the community and voluntary sector which promote youth participation in public decision making.
- **Local and regional structures**, including local area partnerships, local authorities, county/city development boards, local drugs task forces, vocational education committees, regional authorities, health boards, etc., should develop youth participation mechanisms, in partnership with **Local Voluntary Youth Councils** to be established following the Youth Work Act (2001).
- Initiatives to enable youth participation in decision making should be **reviewed regularly** by the relevant government departments, agencies, regional and local authorities, local development agencies and voluntary organisations, so as to better understand the changing needs of young people in society and to produce more effective methodologies on an ongoing basis.
- The National Youth Work Development Plan, being prepared by the National Youth Work Advisory Committee, should include the **production of guidelines and strategies** for relevant agencies, government departments and youth organisations for encouraging youth participation in decision making. Along with strategies for 'internal' decision making, a further emphasis should be on the formulation of guidelines that encourage external, political or public decision making on a national, regional and local level.

Promoting young people's involvement

- Bodies currently involved in the process of building north/south relationships in the youth sector should ensure that any new **north/south initiatives** or entities in the youth sector should include youth participation structures and strategies.
- The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) should further develop its **research into young people and how they participate in society**. NYCI should continue to inform, educate and train personnel in youth organisations and in the formal education sector on the importance of participation and its potential impact on decisions that affect and influence their lives.
- NYCI should take the lead in recognising 'good practice' and **disseminate models of good practice on youth participation** to practitioners and policy makers around the country. A coordinated approach is required at national, regional and local levels to improve linkages with departments, agencies and other bodies and to develop greater channels of communications for both providers and participants.
- The **National Health Strategy** should include strategies to ensure young people's participation in decision making within all relevant sections of the health system.
- **Student participation in decision making** in the formal education sector should be encouraged by policy makers, teachers, school boards and parents. The Minister for Education and Science should ensure that the Education Act 1998, encouraging the establishment of student councils at second level, is backed up with real support to ensure the success of student councils as a vehicle for student participation.
- Support, including funding, should be provided for the development of existing and new **youth-led organisations**, such as the National Youth Parliament and the Union of School Students. The Department of Education and the National Youth Council of Ireland have a particular role to play in creating the conditions for nurturing these and other youth participation structures.
- The **Civic, Social and Political Education** syllabus, taught to students up to the Junior Certificate cycle, should incorporate a programme aimed at enabling young people to influence decision making in wider society and encouraging young people's effective participation.

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APPENDIX A

Questionnaire: The Involvement of Young People in Decision Making

Please return this form by **September 8th** in the SAE provided to: Eileen O'Leary.

Form Number _____

This questionnaire is only for initiatives currently running, or which have taken place during the past 12 months. If your organisation does not currently involve young people in decision making please complete Section I only.

Section One: Background Information

Name of person completing questionnaire

Job title

Name of organisation

Address

Telephone number

Mobile number

Fax number

Email: address

Web site address

Promoting young people's involvement

1. What is the primary purpose of your organisation?

.....
.....

2. Has your organisation directly involved young people in decision making within the past year?

Yes

No

3. Does your organisation intend to involve young people in decision making in the near future?

Yes

No

4. Please indicate the gender of the young people you work with:

Male only

Female only

Mixed sex

5. Please indicate the groups of young people that you work with (please tick all that apply):

All young people in a specific geographical area

Young people from an ethnic minority

With a disability

Who are in care

Who are socially or educationally disadvantaged

Other

If 'Other' please specify

.....

Taking the initiative

Section Two: Describing Your Initiative for Young People

6. What is the name of the existing or planned initiative that will involve young people in the decision making process?

.....
.....

7. What was the reason that the initiative for young people was set up?

- In response to a community need
- As a direct response to the needs of a group of young people
- As a result of research
- As a result of available funding for a youth initiative
- Other (please specify)

.....
.....

8. What is the aim of the initiative?

.....
.....
.....

9. How was/will the initiative be funded?

- State/Government
- Private
- European
- Voluntary contributions
- Local groups
- Other
- If 'Other' please specify

Promoting young people's involvement

.....
.....

10. Are there any other organisations involved in the initiative?

Yes

No

If 'Yes' in what capacity (please tick all that apply)

Advisory

Partnership

Funding

Training

Other

If 'Other' please specify

.....
.....

11. How long did/will the initiative run for?

Up to 6 months

1 year

2 years

3 years

Other (please specify)

.....
.....

12. Did/will you appoint staff specifically for the initiative?

Yes

No

13. Were the positions/will the positions be (please tick all that apply):

Part-time

Full-time

Voluntary

Taking the initiative

14. Describe the job titles of the staff involved in the initiative

.....

.....

.....

.....

15. How did/will young people get to know about the initiative? (please tick all that apply)

- Through school
 - Youth organisation
 - Advertisement in the newspaper
 - Community centre
 - Youth information centre
 - Local library
 - Word of mouth
 - Other
- If 'Other' please specify

.....

.....

16. How many young people were involved/will be involved?

- 0-10
- 11-20
- 21-30
- Other

If 'Other' please specify

.....

.....

Promoting young people's involvement

17. What ages are the young people who have been involved/who will be involved?

- 10–13
- 14–17
- 18–21
- 22–25

18. Which of the following will be involved in the initiative? (please tick all that apply)

- Male only
- Female only
- Mixed sex
- All young people in a specific geographical area
- Young people from an ethnic minority
- With a disability
- Who are in care
- Who are socially or educationally disadvantaged
- Other

If 'Other' please specify

.....

.....

19. Do you provide, or plan to provide, any training to facilitate the involvement of young people in decision making?

- Yes
- No

If 'Yes' please specify

.....

.....

Taking the initiative

Section 3: Youth Involvement in Decision Making

20. How often does your organisation involve young people in decision making in the initiative?

- It is part of our everyday work
- At least every two months
- 2–5 times in the past year
- Once this year
- In the past, but not this year

21. In what areas within your organisation do you involve young people? (please tick all that apply)

- In planning the organisation's activities/policies/services
- Asking for ideas on changing existing activities/policies/services
- Consulting young people on new ideas for the organisation's activities/policies/services
- In the delivery of the organisation's activities/policies/services
- In managing the organisation
- In developing policies or services
- In evaluating the organisation's activities/services
- Other

22. In what sphere(s) would young people's participation in decision making best be characterised? (please tick all that apply)

- Operational: Decision making regarding the day-to-day carrying out of activities and services for young people
- Management: Decision making regarding overall management, including allocation of resources, planning and evaluation
- Political: Informing policies that affect young people

23. How are young people involved in decision making within your initiative?

- As part of the management committee
- Through consultation on issues affecting them
- As part of a representative group
- As part of an advisory group
- Volunteer basis

Promoting young people's involvement

24. What methods do you use to involve young people in decision making?

(Please tick all that apply)

- Questionnaires
- Focus groups
- Individual interviews
- Activity-based sessions
- Use of the Arts
- Use of email/internet
- Other

If 'Other' please specify

.....

25. Approximately how many young people have been involved in decision making in the initiative?

- None
- 1-10
- 11-20
- 21-30

Other (please specify)

.....

26. Did the young people receive feedback on their input into the decision making process?

- Yes
- No

If 'Yes' please describe how

.....

27. Do the young people receive any payment for being involved in the decision making process?

- Yes
- No

If 'Yes' please specify

.....

Taking the initiative

Section Four: Impact of the Involvement of Young People

28. Has your organisation evaluated the involvement of young people in decision making?

Yes

No

29. If 'Yes' to question 28, were the young people involved in the evaluation?

Yes

No

If 'Yes' describe how

.....
.....

30. Have the views of young people made an impact on decision makers within your organisation or resulted in changes to the initiative/policies?

Yes

No

If 'Yes' please describe results

.....
.....

31. Are young people involved in decision making outside of your initiative?

Yes

No

If 'Yes' please describe

.....
.....

Promoting young people's involvement

32. Does the initiative link with:

- Information service
- County council – please specify department

.....

- Local/regional voluntary youth organisation
- Youth council
- Health board
- Local area partnership company
- V.E.C.
- Youthreach provision
- Community training centre
- Traveller training centre
- FÁS
- Trade union
- Community development project
- Media
- Third level college
- State body
- Voluntary organisation
- Department of Education & Science
- Other government department
- National youth organisation
- If 'Other' please specify

.....

33. As a result of the youth participation in your initiative have there been any changes to the way in which new initiatives are planned, delivered or evaluated?

- Yes
- No

If 'Yes' please explain

.....

.....

Taking the initiative

34. Has the initiative resulted in any key learning experiences for the people involved?

Yes

No

If 'Yes', what are they?

.....

35. What have been the main outcomes of the initiative? Please list.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

36. What are the most important lessons you would like to pass on to anyone who would like to create an initiative with the maximum participation of young people in decision making?

.....

.....

.....

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. We would be grateful if you could enclose background information on your organisation as well as copies of any reports, evaluations or guidelines that you have produced in relation to the involvement of young people in decision making.