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Dept. of Applied Social Studies,
University College Cork,
Ireland

The movement to a child-centred perspective within social policy and practice: a critique of Comhlaire na nÓg as a forum for young people's participation in Ireland.

Aoife Gavin, BSocSc¹

Abstract

The paper aims to investigate if the initiatives organised for children's participation in Ireland really attempt to seek the opinions of children on policies and practices for the future, which affect their lives. Research conducted on a session of Comhlaire na nÓg is outlined and examined. Literature in relation to children's participation in the formation of policy is discussed along with different levels of children's participation. The critical evaluation illustrates that Comhlaire na nÓg did not meet the full criteria for giving children a voice as outlined by the National Children's Strategy 2000 and that the degree of participation witnessed at the event can be identified as being at the level of 'Consulted and Informed'. The event was found not to be tokenistic; however it should involve a higher degree of participation.

Keywords: Children's participation; child-centred; children's rights; Comhlaire na nÓg; Dáil na nÓg

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Introduction

The notion that children and young people should have a voice in matters which affect them is a concept which has emerged since the ratification of the *United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child* in Ireland in the early nineties. Children's participation in policy making in Ireland is instigated through the National Children's Strategy 2000. My discussion will firstly outline literature relating to children's participation and the levels it can attain. I will proceed from here to give a brief description on the background of Dáil na nÓg and Comhlaire na nÓg to highlight why it exists in Ireland. This will be followed by an outline of my research on a session of Comhlaire na nÓg. A critical discussion of the research findings will follow in order to investigate if the initiatives organised for children's participation in Ireland really attempt to seek the opinions of children on policies and practices for the future, which effect children lives.

Children's Participation in Policymaking

Tisdall and Bell (2006) highlight that as children's participation is taking hold in practice and policy; the impact that this participation is having on decision-making is being given increased attention. Both children and adults alike have expressed concerns that children's participation in decision-making can be a tokenistic exercise that fails to bring about any change. The existence of arguments promoting children's participation has begun to stretch from mere recognition that children should participate, to demanding that this participation results in political change.

Hart (1992) uses 'The Ladder of Participation' diagram to highlight different levels of children's participation. The diagram is designed to serve as a beginning typology for assessing children's participation in projects. The National Children's Strategy uses Hart's 'Ladder of Participation' to indicate the levels of children's participation for initiatives that give children a voice. The ladder contains eight levels that are arranged consecutively ranging from the lowest level of participation (at the bottom) to the highest



level of participation (at the top). The bottom three levels of the ladder signify non-participation, and they are Manipulation, Decoration and Tokenism. The next five levels of the ladder relate to increasing degrees of participation and they are; Assigned but informed, Consulted and informed, Adult-initiated shared decisions with children, Child-initiated and directed; and finally the highest degree of Child-Initiated shared decisions with Adults.

Background on Dáil na nÓg

The first goal of the National Children's Strategy 2000 states that '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' (Ireland; 2000; 30). This goal towards children's participation is influenced by Article 12 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* which states that 'State parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child' (Ireland; 2000; 30). One of the measures for the implementation of this goal is the establishment of Dáil na nÓg.

The Office of the Minister for Children is responsible for the implementation of Article 12 of the convention and the initiatives to improve the structures for children and young people to participate in, and to make sure that they are being implemented. The initiatives include; Comhlaire na nÓg, Dáil na nÓg, the Student Council Working Group, Guidelines on Participation by Children and Young People and the establishment of an Office of the Minister for Children Child and Youth Forum (Office of the Minister for Children; 2006).

Dáil na nÓg is an annual event where children and young people in Ireland meet at a national level to discuss issues which are important to them. The term Dáil na nÓg means 'youth parliament'. It gives young people in Ireland an opportunity to be heard by



members of the government. The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) is presently organising Dáil na nÓg on behalf of the Office of the Minister for Children in partnership with Foróige and Youth Work Ireland. The NYCI is the representative body for voluntary youth organisations in Ireland (*What is Dáil Na Nóg, 2007*).

Dáil na nÓg meets with the attendance of the Minister for Children. From this session, a report is published and submitted to the cabinet committee on children. The objectives of Dáil nÓg are: to provide children and young people with a place where they can raise issues and debates which concern them; to act as a mechanism for children's concerns to be fed into the development of public policy making; to provide a model for children's participation, which can be developed at a local level; to support the personal, social and civic development of children; and finally, to provide a way for children to hear and learn about other young peoples experiences (*Objectives of Dáil na nÓg, 2007*)

Each delegate of Dáil na nÓg represents their local authority area and are elected to attend the Dáil at their local Comhlaire na nÓg meeting. The Comhlairí, or Youth Councils are organised by the City or County Development Boards in each local area. The objective of Comhlaire na nÓg is to give children a voice at a community level as well as electing candidates to attend Dáil na nÓg. Each City/County Development Board runs their local Comhlaire na nÓg. In 2007, 200 delegates elected through Comhlaire na nÓg attended Dáil na nÓg. (*What is Comhlaire na nÓg?, 2007*)

Methodology

When undertaking my research I felt that the most appropriate way to gather the relevant information in relation to young people's participation in Ireland was by attending a session of Comhlaire na nÓg and engaging in active fieldwork through participant observation and conducting interviews with the young people and the organisers on their experience of the event. I attended a session of Comhlaire na nÓg, which was specifically for the participants from the Waterford County area. It was a full day event



and was held on Friday 30 November 2007 in the Park Hotel, Dungarvan, Co. Waterford. From the nine secondary schools in the county approximately 36 young people attended the event. The age profile was around 14 to 16 years old. The gender of the young people appeared to be represented equally. Each of the nine schools in the area was invited to send four students to attend the event.

The event comprised of two break-out sessions where the young people were separated into three groups to discuss different issues. During the break-out sessions, as there were three different groups in discussion, I could only sit in on one group during each session. During the break for lunch, I conducted two separate group interviews with a group of four students and a group of two. After the event, I conducted two interviews with the organisers and a single interview with one of the students. I conducted five interviews containing an overall number of nine interviewees. When I gathered my findings after the event, I realised that I had some gaps in my information so I conducted a follow up interview the main organisers of the event.

Comhlaire na nÓg Session: November 2007

The session began with a welcome speech from the Mayor of Waterford County and a description of the agenda for the day. This was followed with a presentation on 'teenspace' the National Recreational Policy for Young People (2007) which was conducted by a representative for the Office of the Minister for Children. The first 'break-out' session involved an open discussion between the students on the policy. The students were separated into three different groups for this activity with two facilitators working with each group. The facilitators who ran the event were drawn from the Community & Enterprise section of Waterford County Council. These groups also nominated three students for the Dáil na nÓg election, which took place later that day. Following this all the students congregated to give feedback on their discussion and to announce the candidates for the Dáil election.



On returning from lunch, they conducted the second 'break-out' session, which involved an open discussion on road safety, with the students again forming three separate groups. Again, the groups gave feedback on their discussion to the larger group. The candidates nominated for the election of Dáil na nÓg were briefly introduced and the election took place. The session ended with closing remarks and photographs.

Findings

As mentioned previously, a representative from the Office of the Minister for Children gave a presentation on the National Recreational Policy for Young People. This presentation appeared to be quite adult-orientated and I felt that it was intended for the organisers rather than the students. For example, the representative spoke about the costs associated with certain projects. I felt that this would be of little relevance to the students. During the interviews, the students commented on the presentation. *"The start of it was really hard to follow"* and another student said, *"I thought it was a bit long it dragged on for a while"*.

I found that the open discussions or the 'break-out' sessions were very good for allowing the students to voice their opinions. The atmosphere in the groups appeared to be very relaxed and all the young people had a chance to speak. During the interviews, comments from the students highlighted this aspect. *"The people who were helping listened to us and were very interested in what we had to say"* and *"All our views were written down"*. However, I did find from my observations that this open discussion worked better in one group than it did in the other. This may have been related to the way in which the facilitators managed the discussion and their ability to listen to, and interpret what the children were saying. One particular group appeared to involve more participation and I feel that the facilitators in this group spoke to the participants in a more child-centred way. The second group also involved open discussion, however I felt that it was conducted in a pattern of the facilitators asking the students questions rather than guiding a natural open discussion.



As I mentioned previously the subjects that were outlined for discussion were the National Recreational Policy for Young People and road safety. The first break-out session discussed the recreational policy and was mainly centred on things for young people to do and places to hang out. The second break-out session discussed the issues of road safety. In relation to the subjects that were chosen for the break-out session one student commented that:

“The subjects covered were kind of stupid and pointless. Like drink driving, I don't see what relevance drink driving is to teenagers of our age.”

“We talked about law and the voting age and things like that and that was good. That was really relevant.”

“We could of talked about things like subjects in school and the quality of teaching. Things like that. More things that are relevant to how we grow up and how we can have a more successful life.”

The subjects that were chosen for discussion were pre-selected. This meant that the students did not get to choose what they would like to discuss. However, in some cases the students did talk about things that they appeared to be more interested in such as the voting age.

When asked what the students thought of the session so far, or overall, most of them expressed positive opinions of the session. Many of them referred to the ability it gave them to express their opinions and to have their views heard. Some of the comments from the students included the following;

“very interesting, I got to express my opinion”

“I liked it”

“a great way to express our opinions”.

The second question that I asked the students during the interview was what they hoped to achieve by coming to the session. Most of them outlined their wish to be elected for



Dáil na nÓg. One of the purposes of the event itself was to elect five members to attend Dáil na nÓg 2008. After the second break-out session, the nine nominated candidates were voted down to five candidates. These young people would go on to represent Waterford County at Dáil na nÓg in February 2008. Some of the other young people who were interviewed simply wanted to have their voices heard. The following comments reflected the majority of responses given by the young people in relation to what they hoped to achieve by coming to the session:

*“I hoped to achieve to get into the Dáil” and
“to have my say in things”.*

When asked what they would like to see happen with the development of Comhlaire na nÓg in the future the students highlighted the lack of knowledge of Comhlaire in their communities and the lack of recognition of Comhlaire na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg at a national level.

“I’d like to see it advertised more because people don’t know much about. Anyone who I go back to tonight, will be like, ‘what were you at?’ and ‘what was it about?’. They won’t know anything about it. They don’t know it’s on, they don’t know its there.”

“I’d like to see that it would be more recognised by the government and that more people and adults would know about it.”

“Id like to see the members of Dáil na nÓg having more of an influence in how the country is run, to have a bit more of an influence and make more of a change”

One student highlighted that *“it should be more open to people if they want it”*. There is no criterion in relation to how the students are picked by the schools to attend Comhlaire na nÓg. However, in one particular school the responsibility to find people to attend the event was given to one particular student. This may not be the case in all of the schools.



However, it may indicate the presence of inequalities in relation to who gets a chance to attend the event.

One of the most prominent findings of the interviews was the views of the young people in relation to having their voices heard. The students themselves appeared to feel confident that they were being listened to at a local level but they seemed to be unsure and doubtful as to whether anything would be done about what they had said. Some of the responses of the students when asked, 'Did you feel like you were really listened to?' highlighted this point.

“Yes and no. we were listened to by the people who were there and they were great, they really did take in our opinions but whether any of the things which we talked about would be followed up is really doubtful. I doubt anything which we said at it will even go near the [government] departments or anything like that.”

“I feel that we were listened to but I don't know if they'll take it up”

“I think that they will listen to us but I don't know if they will actually. I hope that they would bring it forward but I don't know”

“The people who were helping listened to us and were very interested in what we had to say.”

“All our views were written down”

However, I found that the majority of the students were doubtful and not sure if any change would come about from the opinions and views that they expressed. One of the students stated that,

“On the bus on the way up we were joking about how it's just ticking the box for them and how it's nearly pointless, us going to it. We were not putting it down,



we enjoyed the opportunity of having our say but we were really doubtful as to if anything would be done about it”

It is clear that one way in which the opinions of young people can move forward is through the participation of the five nominated candidates for Waterford County in Dáil na nÓg 2008. After conducting a follow up interview, it was revealed that the opinions of the young people, which were expressed at the session of Comhlair na nÓg, were recorded at each of the discussion groups. These notes are used as part of a bigger report that is prepared for forwarding to the National Youth Council of Ireland. It is also requested by the County Development Board that the information provided in the report be forwarded to the relevant organisations at national level. This year the information recorded in relation to the National Recreation Policy for Young People and road safety, contained in the report, would be requested by the County Development Board to be passed on the Office for the Minister for Children, the National Road Safety Authority and the Minister for Transport. From the comments of the students and the observations of the day it appears that, the students were not aware that their opinions were being used in this way.

The interviews with the organisers highlighted their opinions in relation to the purpose of the event. They stated that the key objectives of the event were

“to get young people more knowledgeable and more informed of the political system and to get them more interested in going forward for office, maybe sometime in the future” and

“to participate with young people in an effort to try and get them to voice their opinions in issues that will effect their day-to-day lives”.

Both of the organisers interviewed stated that they felt that the participation of the students was meaningful. One of them stated, *“the feedback that we’re getting back is*



that it was [meaningful]". The second organiser, who was interviewed felt that the participation for the students was *"very meaningful, and I think that it was more so than other years"*. As the students were not asked about what they thought about participating in the event, it appeared that these opinions were formed from the student's reactions to the event.

When asked how they would like to see Comhlaire na nÓg develop in the future one of the organisers highlighted that *"we can only really advance the Comhlaire at a local level"*, but continued to highlight that *"our main aim with the Comhlaire is to have participation not just from the nine secondary schools in the county, but hard to reach young people"*. It was not mentioned how they aimed to achieve this inclusive participation. However, I feel that the way in which the students are chosen to attend Comhlaire na nÓg would need to be considered in order to achieve a more inclusive level of participation. Another organiser outlined that an objective would be to have *"more regular meetings"* and this was something that was also highlighted by the students during the interviews.

The overall findings of these interviews indicate that the students felt that there was a lack of knowledge of Dáil na nÓg in their communities and that there was a lack of recognition of Dáil na nÓg by the government. Overall, they felt that they were listened to at a local level but they felt doubtful that their views would be taken into account at a higher level and they may have felt that the event was tokenistic. The organisers both agreed that the participation from the students was meaningful and appeared to be actively thinking about how Comhlaire na nÓg could develop in the future, however they could only develop the initiative at a local level.

Critical evaluation

From my observations, the event appeared to be a very positive experience for the students. However, there are some aspects of the event that can be criticised as they do



not meet the criteria of what giving children a voice means in The National Children's Strategy 2000. The policy outlines that giving children a voice means “encouraging children to express their views and demonstrating a willingness to take those views seriously” (Ireland 2000; 30). From these findings, the way in which the young people were encouraged to give their opinions was limited to specific topics, which were not chosen by the young people, and some discussions appeared to encourage children to speak more openly than others. The subjects discussed in the break-out session may have been more beneficial to them if the perspective of the young people and the relevance of these aspects to their daily lives were considered to a greater extent.

The second aspect for giving children a voice is “setting out clearly for the child the scope of such participation by them to avoid misunderstanding” (Ireland; 2000; 30). How the young people would participate in the event itself and what they would be doing on the day was explained quite clearly. Each young person who attended was given a copy of the agenda and how the election for Dáil na nÓg would take place was set out clearly.

The third aspect of what it means to give children a voice is “providing children with sufficient information and support to enable them to express informed views” (ibid.). It can be argued that some aspects appeared to lack child-centred approaches in specific areas such as the presentation on the National Recreational Policy for Young People. The information provided during this presentation was important for the first break-out session. Some students commented about the presentation being hard to follow and uninteresting. If the strategy was explained to them in a way which would be more relevant to their lives, or in more ‘child-centred’ way they may have a better understanding of how the strategy involved them and why it might interest them.

“Explaining the decisions taken, especially when the views of children cannot be fully taken into account”, is the final point set out by The National Children's Strategy in



relation to what it means to give children a voice (Ireland; 2000; 30). The way in which the views of the young people were used at local and national level needed to be explained to them to a greater extent. Most of the students interviewed were unsure if their opinions would be taken seriously. This was reflected in their comments in relation to the event being a 'tick-box' event for the government. There appeared to be a lack of communication to the students as to how, or if their opinions would be used at a higher level.

As mentioned previously Hart (1992) uses the Ladder of Participation to highlight different levels of children's participation in projects. From the findings of this research it can be argued that the degree of participation witnessed at the event of Comhlaire na nÓg can be identified as being on the fifth rung of the ladder at the degree of 'Consulted and Informed'. At this level, Young people work as consultants for adults in a manner, which has great integrity. At this level of participation, the project is designed by adults, but children understand the process and their opinions are treated seriously.

In conclusion, it is clear from the research that has been illustrated that Comhlaire na nÓg did not meet the full criteria for giving children a voice as outlined by The National Children's Strategy. By using Hart's evaluation, we can observe that the event of Comhlaire na nÓg is not tokenistic however; a higher degree of participation would be necessary to ensure that children are being giving a voice as outlined in goal one of the strategy.



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