"I have loads of cool ideas…"

A study of the nature of young children's autonomous participation in a strategic policy development process.

A thesis submitted for the Degree of Ph.D. to National University of Ireland, Galway.

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Abstract

Children's participation is increasingly recognised as informing the development of policies and strategies that are concerned with service provision for children and families. Creating space for children to express their views is a fundamental responsibility of adults seeking to uphold Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). That young children may not express their views verbally is the subsequent conclusion of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 2005. This thesis focuses on the participation of young children in a strategic policy development process undertaken by Roscommon Children and Young People's Services Committee (CYPSC). Underpinned by a social constructionist epistemology, the study was influenced by the Lundy Model of Participation (2007) and theories of autonomy. The study examines how adults can support young children's autonomous engagement in participatory processes in a meaningful way. Participatory methodologies guided data collection, and children and Early Years Practitioners (EYPs) were involved in shaping and facilitating the consultations at the heart of the study. Key research findings of this study show that young children can participate in policy development when processes are organised to buttress and support their emerging autonomy, and that a vision of autonomy as a relational concept is applicable in these participatory processes. Further, the study highlights the ethical dimensions of facilitating young children's participation and calls for attention to be paid to this by policymakers and practitioners.

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'It always seems impossible until it's done'

Nelson Mandela

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List of Abbreviations

Co: County
CCC: Child Care Committee
CRC: Committee on the Rights of the Child
CYPP: Children and Young People's Plan
CYPSC: Children and Young People's Services Committee
DAP: Developmentally Appropriate Practice
DCYA: Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DoE: Department of Education
DCEDIY: Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
ECCE: Early Childhood Care and Education
EYHWS: Early Years' Health and Well-being Strategy
EYP: Early Years' Practitioners
EYS: Early Years' Service
GP: General Practitioner
HSE: Health Services Executive
REC: Research Ethics Committee
NCS: National Children's Strategy
NRO: National Research Office
NUIG: National University of Ireland, Galway
PAR: Participatory Action Research
PPFS: Prevention, Partnership and Family Support
UNCRC: United National Convention on the Rights of the Child
ZPD: Zone of Proximal Development

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Chapter One. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

In the last three decades, children's participatory rights have been widely acknowledged in policy and practice in Ireland and internationally. While there are multiple conceptualisations of participation in the literature, generally it is understood as the act of taking part in or contributing to a process, an event or a decision. In relation to children, participatory approaches usually seek to empower and enable children to have active involvement in various processes so that they can contribute to society as active citizens, and have real influence on matters that affect them (McEvoy 2015).

Children's rights are enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 12:1 of the UNCRC states that all children have rights to express a view on any matter affecting their lives, and no limitations related to age or capacity are imposed by the UNCRC on these rights. Children can choose to express their views in varied ways, including verbally or other methods, as articulated in Article 13 of the UNCRC (UN, 1989). The children's rights discourse, which has been more prominent in the decades since UNCRC ratification, has influenced policy development regarding children's participation in decision-making processes (Theobald et al., 2011). Children are increasingly recognised by policymakers and commentators as social actors with autonomy, and agency[1], and as active in the construction of their own lives, and in the families, communities, and societies in which they live (James & Prout, 1990). This is also true of the world of research, where participatory approaches have resulted in collaborative, transformative, rights-based, and reflexive ideas about conducting research with, and for, children (Balen et al., 2006).

However, while there is this international movement towards facilitating children's participation at various levels of society (Lansdown, 2020; Larkins and Crowley, 2018), there are diverse perceptions of the nature of young children's capacity for participation and the extent to which their participation should be facilitated (Bae, 2009). Young children are increasingly recognised as 'seldom heard' in decision-making processes, and their views are rarely sought or heard in matters of policy at local, organisational or strategic levels (Kelleher, 2014; Horgan, 2017). This is the context for my research study, which was centred on the participation of young children in a strategic policy development process.

[1] These concepts are often used interchangeably; however, they are different, and I come to their delineation and explanation later in this dissertation.

As will be explained further in this chapter and elaborated on throughout this thesis, this study was aligned to a participatory process that informed the development of an Early Years' Health and Well-being Strategy (EYHWS) for Roscommon CYPSC.

In this chapter, I will introduce the subject of my study and set out the rationale for the research and introduce its professional and practice background. Further, the scope of the research project will be outlined; I will clarify the research process that I undertook and highlight the contribution that my study seeks to make to the body of knowledge on young children's participation. Finally, I give an overview of the structure of the thesis, including a summary of each chapter. I start by introducing the background to this study.

1.2 Background to study

This study is set within the context of collaborative planning and provision of children and family services supported by Roscommon CYPSC, and the particular focus of my study is the participation of young children in a policy development process. CYPSCs are county-level structures across Ireland that are tasked with improving outcomes for children and young people through integrated planning, working and service delivery. CYPSCs operate through an established infrastructure that brings together professionals and agencies in a collaborative effort to ensure that the five national outcomes for children in Ireland are met at local level (DCYA, 2014). These five national outcomes are that children will be:

1. Active and healthy, with physical and mental well-being
2. Achieving full potential in all areas of learning and development
3. Safe and protected from harm
4. Have economic security with opportunity
5. Connected, respected, and contributing to their world.

In 2017, Roscommon CYPSC consulted with stakeholders on priority areas related to young children's health and well-being that should be addressed by an EYHWS for Roscommon, to be overseen by a strategic interagency committee operating under the CYPSC banner. I am employed by Tusla as a research and information officer supporting the work of Roscommon and Galway CYPSCs and I was tasked with coordinating these stakeholder consultations. In discussions with the CYPSC Co-ordinator, given our motivation to uphold Article 12 of the UNCRC (UN, 1989) and the participatory orientation of CYPSC, we agreed that young children were a key constituency in the consultation programme. Looking to the literature for

inspiration, it became clear that there were few examples either in Ireland or internationally of the participation of young children in policy-development processes and at other levels of decision-making.

1.3 Motivations for studying this topic

I approached this topic both as part of my professional practice, and as an academic enquiry. My professional role requires engaging with stakeholders to inform CYPSC planning and decision-making processes, and as an academic I have a keen interest in children's rights to participate in these activities. As such, undertaking a consultation with children in relation to a policy matter is within my professional brief, and my field of interest and expertise as an academic. Being tasked with engaging with stakeholders for the development of the Roscommon EYHWS opened the potential for me to not only engage with the perspectives of our youngest stakeholders, but to also research the process. Thus, I had an opportunity to add to the limited body of knowledge on this aspect of the broader child participation discourse.

In addition to my current role, my previous professional experiences include over 20 years as a Social Care practitioner and as an Early Years Inspector with Tusla. As a result, I was comfortable working in a research environment that included young children, EYPs, and decision-makers from a range of agencies and services operating in Roscommon. I have an academic interest in ECCE practice and policy that has developed from my MA study on the potential for early years' services to provide family support (Gibbons, 2009).

Not only did I approach the study as a professional with extensive experience working in this area, I designed the study around my dual roles as academic and professional. In planning for this study, I was aware that I was undertaking research where academic enquiry and practice processes would overlap and interact. Therefore, in consultation with my academic supervisors, I embedded a process of reflection into the study so I could account for the interactions between these dual roles. My ambition was to be aware of the various demands and expectations arising both from my academic work and my professional responsibilities, to reflect on the possible conflicts that might arise between them, and to find ways to ensure they could each be resolved. This resulted in a multi-method, sequential, qualitative methodological approach that was informed by Participatory Action Research (PAR) for the study, with an emphasis on reconciling my dual role as researcher and practitioner.

1.4 Gap in the knowledge that this study expects to address

There is limited evidence generally on the impact of children's involvement in policy-making processes across the age range (Shier et al., 2014; Byrne and Lundy, 2015, Forde et al., 2017). Additionally, few studies explore children's experiences of participation in the public policy arena (Perry-Hazan, 2016). This study aims to add to our understanding of young children's autonomous participation in a policy-development process, the responses and reactions of adults who are involved in the process, and the impact of young children's participation on strategic policy-developments. As a result of a hybrid data analysis process, I arrived at three overarching themes that show how young children's participation in policy development processes is experienced, understood, and responded to. Findings from this study should be of interest within a broad interdisciplinary arena, as young children's participation is relevant to early years, the sociology of childhood, political science, education, developmental psychology, and research on interagency and integrated work processes.

While this study is an academic enquiry, it has a practice intent reflected in the study objective to develop a model of consultation and participation that can be employed by decision-makers when seeking the views of young children. This model should make a valuable contribution to the participatory agenda of CYPSCs across Ireland in particular, but it can be applied in many other contexts where children participate in decision-making.

1.5 Research question and research objectives

The aim of this thesis was to study the participation of young children during a policy-development process and was influenced by theories of autonomy and participation. Participation theories broadly recognise that meaningful participatory activities involve listening, supporting children to express their views, and involving children in decision-making processes (Lundy, 2007). The ethical principle of autonomy is valued in decision-making processes as it relates to the capacity of those involved to hold views, make choices and to act with self-determination and in a principled way when making decisions (Motloba, 2018). This research study was concerned with the nature of young children's autonomous participation in a policy-development process, and it drew participants from three populations: young children who participated in a consultation process, EYPs who supported their participation in this process, and CYPSC members who engaged with young children's perspectives when developing the EYHWS for Roscommon.

This study aimed to answer the following research question:

Is it possible for young children to participate autonomously in strategic policy development?

The study objectives were as follows:

1. To study the participation of young children in a policy development process, examining how young children autonomously construct and express their views when involved in such a process.

2. To research the experiences and understandings of EYPs who facilitated a consultation process with young children, and to explore how this experience affected their understandings, values, and practices towards participation.

3. To understand the perspectives of local policymakers on the participation of young children in policy development processes and to examine the impact of the views of young children on their decisions.

4. To develop a model of consultation and participation that can be employed by practitioners and policymakers when seeking the views of young children.

1.6 Scope of the project

The aim of this research project was to study young children's participation within a policy development process, and to understand more about the nature and extent of their autonomous participation. The study was conducted within Co. Roscommon, in the West of Ireland. The project engaged with six ECCE services that became research sites hosting child consultation sessions. Research sites were in rural and suburban locations and included a mix of private and community-based services. Within each site, the study engaged with young children aged four and under, in a series of consultation sessions, and with EYPs who co-facilitated these sessions.

The study engaged with members of the Early Years' Health and Wellbeing working group of Roscommon CYPSC. This committee is comprised of senior managers and decision-makers from a range of statutory, community and voluntary agencies and organisations providing services to young children and their families in Roscommon.

For this study, I developed a qualitative, participatory, and sequential research design, employing multiple methods to fully respond to the research question, and to reflect the professional context in which the study was located. In participatory research, the researcher and participants are collaborators across some or all stages of the study. This approach to research provides opportunities for participants to be listened to, and for their views to be acted

on. There are many examples from research that show that the *'inclusion of young children… is central to understanding their life worlds'* (Harcourt and Einarsdottir, 2011:301). However, this orientation towards child participation brings questions for researchers regarding the meaning of participation, the interpretation of the child's position within research processes, and ethical and theoretical concerns about autonomy, representation, validation, consent and assent. The challenges raised by these issues are arguably more demanding for researchers who are seeking to include younger child participants, as is the case in this study. At various points in the thesis, I set out in more detail how I responded to these issues but in summary my overall approach was participatory and inclusive of young children's capacities for collaboration. The data collection for this study tracked the planning and facilitation of a series of 'real world' child consultation sessions in each of the research sites. I used observational and reflective tools during the field-work process. Additionally, I conducted qualitative interviews with participants at various points before and after the consultation sessions, and I conducted documentary analyses of CYPSC meetings to gather data about their decision-making processes.

1.7 Thesis structure

This thesis is made up of nine chapters, as follows:

1. Introduction
2. Context
3. Literature Review
4. Methodology
5. Research Findings (1)
6. Research Findings (2)
7. Research Findings (3)
8. Discussion
9. Conclusion.

The thesis includes several appendices which are presented at the end of the thesis. A summary of each of these chapters is presented next, so that the overall structure of the thesis is clear.

Chapter Two sets out the context for the study and deals with the policy, professional and practice contexts within which the study was located. The policy section includes national and international policy material, including policy on ECCE provision, participation, and service delivery. The chapter also provides geographic and demographic data on Co. Roscommon.

Chapter Three, the Literature Review offers an evaluation of the literature on children's participation. The chapter is set out in four sections as follows: Children's Rights Discourse; Development, Agency, and Autonomy in Early Childhood; Young Children and Participation; and Democracy, Citizenship and Child-centredness in Early Childhood Theory and Practice. Each of these areas related directly to the overarching topic of child participation. In the summary of each section, conclusions are reached on the body of literature that relates to the topic area.

Chapter Four sets out the methodological approach that guided the research process. The influence of the research context on methodological decisions are presented in the chapter. Theoretical underpinnings that informed the research design and methods selected for the study are outlined, and further elaborated on. Sampling and recruitment processes, an outline of the identified ethical concerns and an overview of data analysis processes are presented.

Chapter Five outlines the findings of the data collection phases of this study in relation to the theme of relational autonomy and relational participatory processes involving young children. The findings reflect on the emergent and relational aspects of the concept of autonomy, and the conceptualisation of emergent child participation within a relational frame is highlighted in the findings.

Chapter Six sets out findings in relation to the thematic area of the voice of the young child in child-centred and rights-based participatory processes. Findings highlight how child-centred and rights-based participatory processes are concerned with promoting agency and autonomy. The findings suggest responsive processes are required where young children are participants in the process, to fully reflect the provisions of Article 12 of the UNCRC.

In Chapter Seven, I continue with a presentation of findings under the thematic area of moral, ethical, and personal perspectives on participatory processes involving young children. The findings point to the extent to which adults' beliefs, values, experiences, and perspectives impact on the extent of the participatory experiences afforded to young children. Several tensions identified in the findings are set out in this chapter. Further, findings related to adults' emotional and evocative engagement to children's participation are presented.

Chapter Eight presents a discussion of the findings, in conjunction with a reflection on the literature on various dimensions of young children's participation. This chapter draws on the findings to present a proposed model to support the participation of young children in policy development, which is one of this study's objectives.

Chapter Nine sets out the conclusion to the research report and presents a summary of each of the preceding eight chapters. The concluding chapter reflects on the methodological approach employed for this study, summarising the methods, and aligning the substantive findings to the research objectives. I reflect on my own methodological orientation and approach to research and discuss how the study's situation within my professional practice context has impacted on methodological considerations. The chapter also presents study limitations. The research findings are further drawn on to present future potential research topics that have been identified and which could complement and build on findings.

Chapter Two. Context Chapter

2.1 Introduction

Children's participation has become a priority area for policymakers and practitioners in Ireland and internationally in recent decades. This is reflected in the facilitation of children's participation, agency, and autonomy in decision-making processes at various levels of society. In recent years prominent young activists including Malala Yousafzai, Greta Thunberg and the Parkland School shooting survivors David Hogg and Emma Gonzalez amongst others, have inspired signficiant developments across a range of social, environmental, and political issues. These young people have inspired and mobilised adults and children alike and shone a light on the impacts and possibilities of facilitating the voices of children and young people at local, national and international levels of decision-making, debate and policy development in strategic and political spheres.

Children's participation is usually associated with Article 12 of the UNCRC. The principle of participation has been defined by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) as:

> '*The ongoing processes which include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults, based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcomes of such processes* (CRC, 2009).

The CRC is clear that it does not impose a lower age limit on children's participation and encourages respect for non-verbal and diverse forms of communication for young children and for children with disabilities (Bouma et al., 2018). However, young children in Ireland and internationally remain a 'seldom heard' population (Kelleher et al., 2014) when it comes to their participation in decision-making processes, particularly at the level of strategic policy development.

I conducted this study, which included young children as participants, in a series of real-world consultations on a strategic policy formation process in Roscommon. This chapter outlines the broad situational, policy and professional contexts in which this study was undertaken. The chapter considers my own professional circumstances, and I explain the role and remit of my employer Tusla regarding both children's participation practice, and interagency and partnership working towards children's outcomes. Additionally, I outline the professional circumstances of EYP and CYPSC participants in the study. I provide a profile of Roscommon, including demographic statistics, and an overview of the county as a geographic entity and an

administrative area. I then set out service provision in Roscommon, before moving to describe the collaborative approaches to the provision of children's services in the county. Finally, I bring together the various factors to highlight the overall context in which the study was undertaken.

2.2 Policy and practice landscape informing children's participation in Ireland

2.2.1 Introduction

This section focuses on policy developments related to children's participation both domestic and international and considers implications of the participation agenda for agencies and organisations providing services to children. Beginning with an overview of service provision by the state, this section considers how participation is reflected in policy pertaining to the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector, and to integrated and collaborative service provision for children and young people in Ireland.

2.2.2 Service provision for children in Ireland

In Ireland, three governmental departments share responsibility for children's health, well-being, education, and welfare. These are the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY/formerly DCYA), the Department of Health (DoH), and the Department of Education (DoE). The DoH is responsible for health-related legislation and policy and oversees the delivery of healthcare services for adults and children through the Health Service Executive (HSE). The DCEDIY has responsibility for children's policy development in addition to services directed at child welfare, child protection and wellbeing, and services in these areas are delivered through Tusla.

The HSE was established under the Health Act (Ireland, 2005) and has statutory responsibility to deliver Ireland's publicly funded health and social services. The HSE funds and contracts a range of providers to support its functions, including universal and targeted community-based services such as General Practitioners (GPs), pharmacies, and providers of social services in local areas. Health and social services are provided at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Primary health care in the community is delivered through a network of GP surgeries, public health nursing services, and allied health services in local communities. Therapy services are offered in primary care services, while children with complex physical health, physiological, and emotional needs are responded to by specialised teams.

The DoE has responsibility for the provision of education and training. Education is compulsory for children in Ireland from the ages of six to sixteen or until students have completed three years of second-level education. The Irish education system comprises of early childhood, primary and post primary education, further education and training, higher education, and special educational provision.

Tula was established following the enactment of the Child and Family Agency Act (Ireland, 2013), and has a statutory obligation as set out in the Child Care Act (Ireland, 1991) to identify and support children who need protection and to investigate allegations of abuse and neglect. Tusla has the statutory responsibility to promote the welfare of children, and to support the safe and effective functioning of parents and families. Tusla provides a range of services including child protection and welfare, family support, early intervention, education support, domestic, sexual and gender-based violence services, foster care, residential care, and aftercare services. Tusla has responsibility for the registration and inspection of ECCE services and is the agency that has been tasked with the administration of the CYPSC initiative.

2.2.3 Charting developments in the child participation policy landscape

The attention paid to children's participation in Ireland in 2021 stands in marked contrast to the relative invisibility of children in the broader social policy landscape in the 1980's and 90's. Ireland ratified the UNCRC in 1992 without any reservations (Hayes, 2002). However, ratification required an extensive overhaul of policy and legislation, beginning with the gradual implementation of the Child Care Act (Ireland, 1991). The Kilkenny Incest Report (McGuinness, 1993) highlighted poorly resourced child welfare systems, leading to an increase in funding to allow for the full implementation of the Child Care Act in 1996. The 1991 Child Care Act (Section 2) clarified the state's responsibility to promote the welfare of all children from birth to eighteen years of age, as well as children considered at risk of harm or abuse.

In the early 1990's, there was an uncoordinated approach to policy development, with responsibility for policy related to children spread across several government departments such as health, education, and justice (Hayes, 2002). The need for a more co-ordinated children's policy approach was recognised by the state, and in 1994 a Minister of State with special responsibility for policy affecting children was appointed to the Departments of Health, Education and Justice. This minister assumed responsibility for child protection, youth homelessness, school absenteeism and children in trouble with the law (Ruxton, 1998 in Hayes, 2002). The focus of policy development at that stage was on addressing the perceived needs of

disadvantaged children, with little consideration in policy of the state's obligations to all the nation's children or to upholding their rights. Hayes (2002:6) sums up the dominant policy agenda of the time as a *'protectionist welfare approach'*, which she says, '*characterises children as dependents in need of protection and/or problems in need of solutions'*. Hayes goes on to summarise the policy agenda related to children as showing '*limited recognition of children as a group with rights of equal value to those of adults. Children are an invisible entity in much policymaking* (Hayes, 2002:6).

However, Ireland was required to comply with their commitments as a signatory to the UNCRC. A series of consultations with children were conducted in 1999 and these were influential in the development of 'The National Children's Strategy: Our Children, Their Lives' (NCS) (DoHC, 2000) which set out to translate many of the articles in the UNCRC into policy and practice. The NCS was the first policy document to set out children's rights in an Irish context, and to indicate the state's commitment to support children's participation in decision-making on matters that affect their lives. Since the publication of the NCS, there has been significant public policy developments concerning children, which I present in the next section.

2.2.4 Child participation policy developments in Ireland since 2000

By prioritising child participation as a policy area since 2000, the Government of Ireland has committed to respecting the provisions set out in Article 12 of the UNCRC. This included a policy goal of ensuring that children and young people's voices are heard and responded to, and that their opinions are given due weight in matters that affect them (DCYA, 2015).

Since 2000, there has been an impetus towards providing the infrastructure in organisations and in civic society to increasing the ways in which children's participation can be facilitated in public decision-making processes. Several policy developments and initiatives have been undertaken by the Irish State to support children's participation, including the establishment of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in 2011 (now DCEDIY), the creation of the Office of the Ombudsman for Children in 2003, alongside the appointment of a Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. Several child and youth participatory structures were established, including a national council, a national parliament and thirty-four local councils across the state. Following a constitutional referendum in 2012, two of the UNCRC's principles (the principle of participation and the best interests of the child principle) were written into amendments to the Irish Constitution, Bunreacht na hÉireann (Ireland, 1937). Article 42 of the Constitution now states '*The State recognises and affirms the natural and imprescriptible*

rights of all children and shall, as far as practicable, by its laws protect and vindicate those rights'.

'Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, 2014-2020' (BOBF) (DCYA, 2014) replaced the NCS as the national policy framework for children and young people in Ireland. A national consultation with children and young people in 2012 informed its development. This strategic framework sets out five national outcomes for children, and commits that children in Ireland will be:

1. Active and healthy with physical and mental wellbeing,
2. Achieving full potential in all areas of learning and development,
3. Safe and protected from harm,
4. Economically secure and having opportunities,
5. Connected, respected, and contributing to their world (DCYA, 2014: xiv).

'BOBF' has six transformational goals which are identified in the document as the enablers to achieve the five national outcomes for children. The transformational goals are:

1. Support for parents,
2. Earlier intervention and prevention,
3. Listen to and involve children and young people,
4. Ensure quality services,
5. Strengthen transitions,
6. Cross government and interagency collaboration and coordination (DCYA, 2014: xv).

Under the 'BOBF' framework, and the 'Working Together for Children Initiative' (DCYA, 2012) Children and Young Peoples Services Committees (CYPSCs) were established in every county in Ireland. CYPSCs are tasked with the co-ordination of the work of agencies and services that have as their remit children and young people aged between 0-24 years, and to improve outcomes for children and young people through local and national interagency efforts (DCYA, 2017).

In 2015, the 'National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making' (DCYA, 2015) was published, with yearly reporting on progress and a revision of the strategy published in 2019. The Lundy model of child participation (2007) underpins this strategy. The goal of the national participation strategy is to ensure that children and young people have a voice in decisions about their individual and collective lives in their

communities, their education, their health and wellbeing and in legal contexts such as family law cases (DCYA, 2015). The stated objectives of the strategy are as follows:

1. Children and young people will have a voice in decisions made in their local communities,

2. Children and young people will have a voice in decision-making in early education, schools, and the wider formal and non-formal education systems,

3. Children and young people will have a voice in decisions that affect their health and well-being, including on the health and social services delivered to them.

The strategy includes actions to facilitate and support children's participation in decision-making processes, and states that government departments and state agencies will consult with children when decisions are being made that may affect their lives. This strategy presented the following definition of children's participation, as accepted by the Irish Government:

> *'The process by which children and young people have active involvement and real influence in decision-making on matters affecting their lives, both directly and indirectly'* (DCYA, 2015:20).

The Irish state has provided infrastructure at national and local level to facilitate children's participation. Within the DCEDIY, the Citizen Participation Unit and the Children and Young Person's Participation Support Team aim to support participation initiatives and existing participation structures (DCYA, 2015). The state established the Children and Young People's Participation Research Advisory Group in 2013 and regional Participation Officers in the DCEDIY support the work of local youth councils 'Comhairle na nÓg', and the youth parliament 'Dáil na nÓg'. Further to this, the Children First Act (Ireland, 2015) placed elements of 'Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children' (DCYA, 2011) on a statutory footing. The Children First guidelines are intended to support the reporting of child abuse and neglect, and one of the principles underpinning the guidance is the child's right to be heard at every stage of the process (Keenaghan and Redmond, 2016).

2.2.5 CYPSC and children's participation

CYPSCs (originally known as Children's Services Committees) were first piloted in four areas in 2007, to explore the potential for such a structure to improve outcomes for children by coordinating and integrating the planning and delivery of services and interventions for children. Since 2007, the CYPSC initiative has developed to provide CYPSC coverage for each county in Ireland. In 2014, the age remit of CYPSCs was widened from birth to eighteen years

of age to birth to twenty-four years of age, to align with 'BOBF' and to ensure a more co-ordinated response by services to meeting the needs of young people over the age of eighteen years. The DCEDIY provides strategic and policy direction for the CYPSC initiative nationally, originally through the 'Blueprint for Children and Young Peoples Services Committees' (DCYA, 2015b) and subsequently 'Shared Vision Next Steps' (DCYA, 2019). A national CYPSC Steering Group supports the effective operation and implementation of CYPSCs at local level. A National CYPSC Co-ordinator provides leadership at national level, while each CYPSC has its own local coordinator, all of whom are employed by Tusla. The local co-ordinator is tasked with promoting interagency and collaborative practices in their county and supporting the local operationalising of the strategic and policy direction of the national CYPSC programme.

Each CYPSC is required to develop a three-year Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP), which aims to improve outcomes for children and young people in the county and which is informed by consultations with children and young people as stakeholders. CYPSCs respond to the five national outcomes for children through thematic working groups. These working groups develop collaborative action plans to ensure that the CYPSC is meeting its obligations to improve outcomes for children in their local areas.

CYPSCs aim to promote child and youth participation practice across all its activities and programmes of work at national and local level (DCYA, 2019). To meet this objective, CYPSCs are tasked with initiating and supporting national and local initiatives that promote the participation of children and young people in decision-making, co-ordinating interagency training in participation practice locally and supporting the participation of children and young people from diverse backgrounds including children and young people with disabilities. CYPSCs have a stated aim to:

> '*… increase the involvement of children and young people… with their local CYPSC. This will ensure that the voices of children and young people are embedded into the planning and delivery of local services'* (DCYA, 2019:37).

2.2.6 Tusla and children's participation

The Child and Family Agency Act (Ireland, 2013) which established Tusla as the statutory agency for child protection and welfare in Ireland, placed a legal obligation on the agency to involve children in decision-making. The Act requires the agency to ensure that the views of children are ascertained and given due weight with regards to the age and maturity of the child

(Kennan et al., 2017). To fulfil its obligations in respect of children's participation, Tusla published a guidance document 'Toward the Development of a Participation Strategy for Children and Young People' (Kennan et al., 2015) in which it commits to the participation of children and young people in decision-making. Further, the 'Child and Youth Participation Strategy' (Tusla, 2019) sets out how the agency plans to support and facilitate participatory practices over the period 2019 to 2023. By adopting the Signs of Safety model of practice which is based on a participatory assessment framework, Tusla has committed to facilitate children and young people's participation in its legal and policy obligations (Quinlan, 2017).

Further initiatives by Tusla to embed participatory practice in the agency and funded services included a Child and Youth Participation Toolkit (Keeneghan and Redmond, 2016) and the development of a website created by children which provides child friendly information on services provided by the agency. Tusla employs participation officers who are tasked with ensuring that children and young people who engage with the agency have their participatory rights upheld.

The Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS) programme is a national Tusla initiative that seeks to improve outcomes for children and families through early intervention and preventative work in local areas. The PPFS programme has three priority areas of work:

1. Implementing an area-based approach to identifying and addressing needs in a coordinated and timely manner through Child and Family Support Networks and the Meitheal model,

2. Supporting parents in developing their parenting skills,

3. Supporting the participation of children and young people in decisions that affect them.

Seed funding of projects that support participation is administered by the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme. A review of this programme (Tierney et al., 2018) found it has been a significant driver in embedding children's participation across Tusla, but there were still obstacles to be addressed at the time, such as limited time available to staff to engage with participatory activities. Additionally, the report found that collective participation was less embedded than individual participation, but this was improving because of the work of the programme.

2.2.7 Participation policy in ECCE

The ECCE sector in Ireland is broadly spread across two categories of service provision (Early Childhood Ireland n/d). These are:

1. **Community services:** Offering community childcare (not-for-profit), these services are managed by voluntary management committees and give preference to children from families on lower incomes, and to supporting parents who are returning to work or education.

2. **Private services:** Usually operated by an individual, a partnership or a limited company, where fees are charged to parents and paid directly to the ECCE provider.

Both community and private ECCE services operate the government funded free preschool year (known as the ECCE Scheme) for children of pre-school age. This scheme is offered in early years' settings for three hours a day, five days a week, over 38 weeks of the year. All children are entitled to two years on the ECCE scheme.

The ECCE sector is comprised of several service types in both the private and community sectors. The three main types are described by Tusla's Early Years' Inspectorate as follows:

-Childminding service: This is a service offered by a person who single-handedly takes care of children in the childminder's home for a total of more than two hours per day. Childminders must register with TULSA if they care for more than five children under the age of five years, including their own children.

-Sessional pre-school service: This is a service offering a planned programme of early learning to pre-school children for a total of not more than 3.5 hours per session. Services covered by the above definition may include pre-schools, playgroups, crèches, Montessori pre-schools, naíonraí[2] childminders or similar services which generally cater for pre-school children.

-Full day-care service: A structured day-care service for pre-school children for more than five hours per day and which may include a sessional service for children not attending the full day-care service. Services described as nurseries and crèches are included in this definition (Tusla, n/d).

A policy document specifically related to the early years was published in 2018. 'First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028' (DCYA, 2018) states that professionals who have a remit to provide early care and education

[2] Naíonraí are preschools which deliver their programme through the medium of the Irish language.

services to children aged five and under should be knowledgeable about children's rights and cognisant that the principle of participation underpins their work (Long 2019). In line with the Irish state's commitment to children's participation, the development of 'First 5' included a consultation with young children involving children across twelve ECCE services and primary school settings. Children were consulted on what they liked and disliked about where they lived, and what they wished for (DCYA, 2018). The 'First 5' strategy reports its starting point is the recognition that:

> *'... from birth, young children are active, competent, and creative individuals and members of society, with their own distinctive interests, experiences, challenges, and points of view'* (DCYA, 2018: 24).

The strategy sets out the state's role in upholding children's rights through a combination of legislation, policies and services that recognise and promote rights, and further emphasises that young children are entitled to express their views in line with Article 12 of the UNCRC. These advances in policy require EYPs to understand and integrate children's rights and the principle of participation into their practices (Long, 2019). Commitments to training on children's rights for EYPs have been made in the Early Years Strategy (DCYA, 2018) following a recommendation that this be facilitated by the Ombudsman for Children's Office in 2015. However, this action does not appear to have been implemented at the time of writing this thesis. This may be attributable in part to the COVID restrictions that resulted in the closure of many early years' services in 2020 and 2021.

Two quality and curricula frameworks inform ECCE practice in Ireland: Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Síolta, (CECDE, 2006). Long (2019) reports that both frameworks are underpinned by the UNCRC, and both embody a conceptualisation of the child as a rights-holder. Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education was designed to support the provision of high-quality early childhood care and education for children from birth to six years. Síolta is set out in twelve principles and sixteen standards, the first of which relates to the rights of the child. While reaffirming children's rights, Siolta reports that children's participatory rights:

> *'... where the child is seen to have agency and power within her/his own life – are more controversial. This is due, primarily, to the different constructions and understandings of childhood'* (CECDE, 2006:2).

In relation to participatory rights, EYPs are encouraged to ensure:

> *'... that each child has opportunities to make choices, is enabled to make choices, and has her/his choices and decisions respected. They need to ensure that each child has opportunities to take the lead, to initiate activity, to be appropriately independent, and to be supported in problem solving'* (CECDE, 2006:8).

The UNCRC is affirmed as the basis for children's rights through Aistear, which is the early learning curriculum framework for children from birth to six years in Ireland. The framework uses interconnected themes and principles to describe and support children's learning and development (NCCA, 2009). The theme of participation is articulated under the principle of 'Children as Citizens' in the following way:

> '*Children are citizens with rights and responsibilities. They have opinions that are worth listening to and have the right to be involved in making decisions about matters which affect them. In this way, they have a right to experience democracy'* (NCCA, 2009:8).

EYPs are advised to consider their practice from the perspective of the child:

> *'Involve me in making decisions and in planning activities and doing and reflecting on them with others. Let me share my views and opinions with you about things that matter to me... As I communicate in different ways, this might mean you need to observe and interpret my facial expressions, body movements, gurgles, cries, moods, and my language(s)'* (ibid).

Long (2019) finds that Aistear reflects the principle of participation by enhancing young children's visibility as stakeholders and as rights-holders in their own learning and development. The Aistear-Síolta Practice Guide (NCCA, 2013) brings the principles and standards of Siolta, and the themes of Aistear together to support EYPs to enhance the quality of their curriculum. Thus, the practice guide creates a new standard for EYPs that is based on children's rights principles and themes in both documents. This newly developed standard called 'Children's Rights' states that:

> '*…every child should be given choices and have choices respected, and every child should be enabled to initiate activity, be appropriately independent and through their active participation and consultation, be considered a partner by the adult'* (NCCA, 2013: 7).

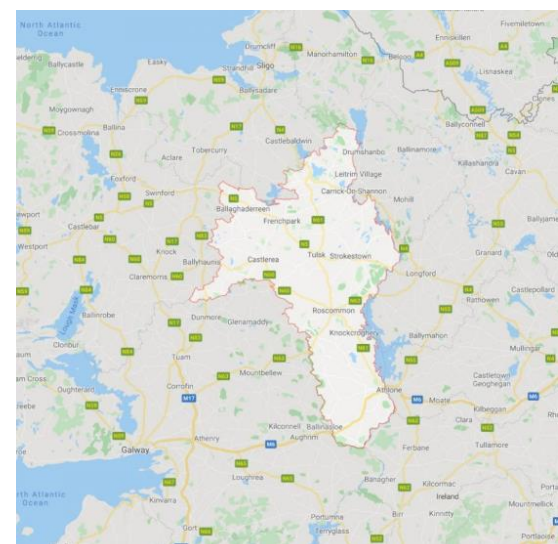
2.3 Geographic, demographic, and social dimensions of Roscommon

2.3.1 Introduction

My study was undertaken in Roscommon, which is a landlocked county in the province of Connaught in the western region of Ireland. The six research sites that participated in the study were spread throughout the county. In this next section, a profile of Roscommon is presented, outlining geographic, demographic, health, and social aspects of the county.

2.3.2 Geography of Roscommon

Roscommon is the ninth largest county by area but is ranked twenty-seventh of Ireland's thirty-two administrative areas for population size (CSO, 2016). Roscommon is predominantly rural in character, with only 26.8% of the population living in towns (CSO, 2017). The county town (also named Roscommon) is the administrative and services centre and most populous town with a population of 5,876 (CSO, 2016). Athlone, which is partly located within Co. Westmeath, acts as a centre for service provision in the south of the county. The county borders every other Connacht county: Galway, Mayo, Sligo, and Leitrim, as well as three Leinster counties: Longford, Westmeath, and Offaly. Proximity to these other counties influences service provision within the county. For example, there is no maternity hospital in Roscommon and expectant parents must leave the county to avail of many services in Galway, Mayo, or Sligo.



(Source: Google Maps)

Figure 1: Geography of Roscommon

2.3.3 Population of Roscommon

The population of Roscommon is 64,554 as of the last census (CSO, 2016), representing 1.35% of the Irish state's population. The population comprises 32,377 males and 32,167 females. The birth rate in Roscommon is 11.8 per 1,000 population, lower than the national average of 13.7 (CSO, 2016). Roscommon's population is predominantly rural with the main centres of population being small rural towns and villages.

There were 24,013 households in Roscommon in 2016 of which 6,420 were single person households. This equates to 26.7% of households, above the state average of 23.5%. There were 9,313 persons with a disability in Roscommon, representing 14.4% of the population, which is 1% higher than the national average. The 2016 Census identified that 10% of households did not have access to a car, which is significant in a rural county with dispersed services.

The population density for Roscommon is 25.33 persons per square kilometre, making Roscommon the third most sparsely populated county in Ireland. During the period 2011 to 2016, the population growth of Roscommon was 0.7%, which is significantly lower than the national figure for population growth this period of 3.8%. These demographic statistics paint a picture of a county that has suffered from rural decline and low population growth. The total child population at the last census was 16,306, with 4,642 in the age category 0 to 4 years as set out in Figure 2.

Total Population	**64,554**
Total Child Population (0-18)	**16,306**
Children aged 0-4 years	**4,642**
Children aged 5- 12	**7,222**
Children aged 13-18	**4,901**
Adults aged 18 and over	**47,989**

Figure 2: Child population in Roscommon

There were 514 members of the Traveller Community living in Roscommon according to the 2016 Census, which is a significant increase of 30.3% from the 2011 figures of 381. In 2016, 6,596 of Roscommon's population were enumerated as having a nationality other than Irish,

representing 10.3% of the of the 'Usually Resident' population. This is slightly lower than the national figure, which is 11.4% (CSO, 2016). The nationalities other than Irish who are resident in Roscommon are: UK (2,590), Polish (1364), Lithuanian (377), other EU countries (1,141) and rest of world (1,124).

The number of people in Roscommon who speak a language other than English or Irish at home was 6,132 (CSO, 2016). Additionally, there are 186 individuals that do not speak any English at all, while another 899 indicated that they did not speak it well, which indicates that 1.7% of the total population of Roscommon have a limited ability if any to speak English (CSO, 2016; RPL, 2017).

There are several centres of population for new and migrant communities in Roscommon. There is a sizeable Pakistani community and a Slovakian Roma community in Ballaghaderreen (population 1804). There are Slovakian Roma communities in Roscommon town and Frenchpark (Roscommon CYPSC, 2020). Ballaghaderreen hosts a direct provision centre for almost two hundred Syrian refugees coming from humanitarian refugee camps in Lebanon and Greece under United Nations Resettlement and Relocation programmes.

2.3.4 Socio-economic profile of Roscommon

There is some variance between the socio-economic profiles of the southern and northern areas of Roscommon. The proportion of professional workers in the south of the county, around Athlone is 38.2%, which is higher than the national average of 36.2% (CS0, 2017), and is notably higher than the proportion in northern areas, which averages at 31.5%. The proportion of semi/unskilled workers in the south of the county is 16.2%, lower than the national average of 17.9%, and is notably lower than the corresponding proportion in the northern area of the county at 18.6% (CSO, 2016; 2017). Roscommon experienced a drop in its relative deprivation score from -2.1 in 2011 to -2.4 in 2016 (CSO, 2016). Of the 108 Electoral Divisions in Roscommon 71 are inclined towards deprivation, 63 are marginally below average and eight are disadvantaged. The most affluent areas are the wider environs of Boyle and Athlone (excluding the towns themselves). Overall, north parts of Roscommon are slightly more disadvantaged than the south or east of the county. At a local level, the most disadvantaged Electoral District is Boyle Urban (-13.3), while the most affluent is Oakport (8.3). Figure 3 sourced from the HSE (2015), illustrates the levels of deprivation in Co. Roscommon.

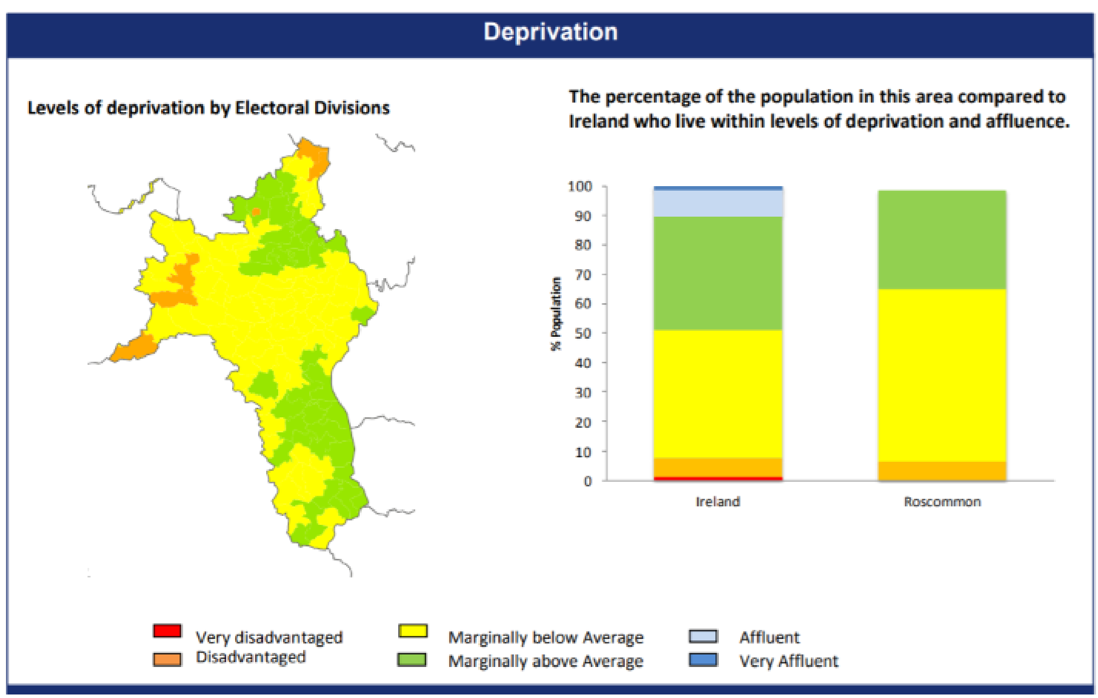


Figure 3: Deprivation Levels in Roscommon

2.3.5 Health profile of Roscommon

In the 2016 census, 86% of the population of Roscommon reported that their health was 'good' or 'very good'. This is similar to the national average of 87%. The latest figures for breastfeeding rates show that 52.5% of infants in County Roscommon were breastfed, compared to the national average of 58% (HSE, 2016). Roscommon has a below average or average mortality rate for all deaths and major causes of deaths, except for heart disease and stroke in those less than 75 years of age. According to the National Suicide Research Foundation, Roscommon has the second highest rate of suicide in Ireland, at 17.3 per 100,000 population (RCC, 2020).

2.4 Collaboration and interagency working in Roscommon

2.4.1 Introduction

Recent developments in the child and family policy landscape have drawn increased attention to interagency approaches in service provision. Integrated and collaborative working is seen by the Irish state as central to achieving the policy goals set out for children and families in Ireland (Canavan et al., 2009; 2014). This section considers how interagency and collaborative partnerships and approaches to practice are supported in Roscommon.

2.4.2 Defining integrated working practices

Even with the increased focus on interagency working in policy and practice, a commonly accepted definition for this approach to practice and service delivery remains elusive. It is generally agreed (Statham, 2011; Duggan and Corrigan, 2009; Boydell, 2015), that there is no one common or shared definition of interagency collaboration. Terms such as partnership working, collaboration, and integration, joint planning, joined up thinking, multi-sectoral or multi-agency working are used interchangeably in literature and policy material to describe collaborative working relationships between agencies and organisations.

More recent literature emphasises that the discourse on these approaches should align with the changing needs of children and families, and the societies in which they live, as well as the characteristics and the level at which the interagency activity operates. Statham's literature review in 2011 which informed the roll-out of the CYPSC initiative in Ireland, suggested that a shared characteristic of interagency working is where more than one agency or organisation work together collaboratively, in a formal and planned way. Frost (2005) identified a hierarchical model that shows different levels of interconnectedness and partnership in interagency working. Similarly, Duggan and Corrigan's (2009) review of the literature indicated that collaborative working relationships between services run along a continuum of connectivity and collaboration, depending on the nature of the partnership and level of connectedness between agencies. There are several other models of collaborative working that feature in the literature (Bruner, 1991; Howarth and Morrison, 2007; Townsley et al., 2004), which are set out in more detail in Canavan et al., (2014).

2.4.3 Local government and the provision of services in Roscommon

There are several statutory bodies who are tasked with local governance, policing and the administration of health and social services in the county. The Local Authority is Roscommon County Council, and is responsible for statutory functions including planning, housing, recreation and amenities, and environmental matters. The HSE provides health services in the county. Tusla is responsible for the protection and welfare of children, while An Garda Síochána has responsibility for policing and law enforcement. In addition, there are several other statutory, voluntary, community and privately run services, agencies and organisations providing services to children and families in areas including education, community-based supports, childcare, and disability. Figure 4 on the next page is an illustration of many of the

key agencies and organisations operating within Roscommon. It is not intended to be an exhaustive list, rather to highlight the network of administrative and service provision that exists in the county, and which is part of the professional backdrop to this study.

Sector	Agency	Overall Responsibility
Statutory	Gardai	Law enforcement and policing.
Statutory	Tusla	Child protection and welfare. Family Supports, Local Area Networks/ CYPSC, ECCE inspection and registration.
Statutory	Roscommon County Council	Local Authority responsible for a range of local services in Roscommon including playgrounds, arts programmes, and libraries.
Statutory	Health Services Executive	Physical and mental health and personal social services
Statutory	Department of Education/ Schools/ Galway Roscommon Education and Training Board	Education and training
Community / Voluntary/ Private	Early Childhood Services and School Age Programmes	ECCE, afterschool or school age services
Community/ Voluntary	Roscommon County Childcare Committee	Coordinates and supports EECE services, school age programmes and parent and toddler programmes.
Community/ Voluntary	Roscommon Leader Partnership (RLP)	Local and Community Development
Community/ Voluntary	Foroige	Youth Services
Statutory/ Voluntary Partnership	Roscommon Sports Partnership	Supports for sports and physical activity
Statutory/ Voluntary Partnership	Roscommon Early Intervention Service	Provides services for children with complex needs

Figure 4: Agencies and services operating in Roscommon

2.4.4 ECCE provision in Roscommon

There are 65[3] ECCE services and 6 afterschool or school age services operating in Roscommon according to the services directory maintained by Roscommon County Child Care Committee (RCCC)[4]. The early years' services are a mix of private and community full-day care, sessional and childminding services. Inclusive of RCCC, there are 31 City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) in Ireland (DCYA n/d). CCCs offer services locally including advice on setting up an ECCE business, information sessions and training courses, and advice and support on applying for government funding for ECCE provision. CCCs also provide information on ECCE provision to parents and families.

2.4.5 Interagency collaborations supported by Roscommon CYPSC

Roscommon CYPSC was established as part of the third phase of the roll out of the CYPSC initiative nationally, with the first meeting of the Committee taking place in May 2014. Membership is drawn from nominated or invited senior managers, budget-holders and decision-makers working across the statutory, voluntary and community sectors who have a role and a remit to provide services to children and families. The Committee is chaired by the Tusla Area Manager, and the Vice- Chair is from Roscommon County Council.

4.6 Roscommon Children and Young Peoples' Plan

The first Roscommon Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) developed in 2016 covered the period 2017- 2019[5]. To develop the plan, the CYPSC coordinator undertook a mapping exercise to identify and locate service provision for children and young people in the county. This was followed by a consultation process with children and young people throughout the county, their parents and families and staff from community, voluntary and statutory service providers. Other consultation opportunities with children and young people's fora and councils were availed of, such as the CYPSC coordinator's attendance at Roscommon Comhairle na nÓg's Annual General Meeting.

The socio-demographic profile, mapping of service provision and findings from consultations informed an analysis process undertaken by the CYPSC with the support of an external

[3] Correct on 6/7/21

[4] The service directory is available on http://www.roscommonchildcare.ie/service-providers/

[5] A new plan scheduled to be developed in 2020, was postponed to 2021 due to the COVID emergency health restrictions.

consultant, which identified and prioritised areas of work. Objectives and priorities were agreed, and once the plan was developed and signed off by CYPSC, it was submitted by the coordinator to the DCYA for review. The CYPP was formally accepted by the DCYA in early 2017.

To progress the implementation of the plan, Roscommon CYPSC established seven thematic working groups, chaired by CYPSC members. Membership of these working groups is drawn from professionals from agencies and organisations working with children, children and young people themselves, and other expert contributors nominated or invited to the working group as appropriate for the theme. The working groups, and their links to the five national outcomes for children as set out in 'BOBF' are as follows:

1. Healthy and active in the early years

National Outcome: Active and healthy, physical, and mental wellbeing

This working group has been set up to address issues in relation to the health and well-being of young children and their families. The working group oversees funding streams and grants for health and well-being initiatives and interventions. The working group is convened by a HSE professional and members[6] represent a range of disciplines and professions and come from agencies providing primary health care, public health, social services, health promotion, ECCE, community development, family support and early intervention services to children and families in Roscommon.

2. Parental mental health

National Outcome: Active and Healthy, physical, and mental wellbeing

This working group, convened by the HSE, aims to ensure that appropriate services and supports are available in Roscommon for children who are affected by issues related to their parents' mental health. A particular focus is on strengthening the links between services for children and adults.

3. Supporting transitions

National Outcome: Achieving full potential in learning and development

The aim of this working group is to support the transition from Pre-school to Primary School of all children starting Junior Infants. The group covers Roscommon and Galway and is chaired by CCC representatives.

[6] Membership in 2021 differs to membership at the time that this study was conducted.

4. Internet safety

National Outcome: *Safe and Protected from Harm*

The aim of this working group is to develop and implement actions and interventions which will achieve better outcomes for children and young people in relation to the issue of internet safety. The working group is chaired by Tusla.

5. Prevention Partnership and Family Support

National Outcomes: *Safe and Protected from harm/Connected, Respected and Contributing to their World.*

This working group is responsible for overseeing the implementation of parenting support and participation strategies. The chair of this working group is from Tusla.

6. Services for LGBTQ+ community

National Outcome: *Connected, respected, and contributing to their world*

Set up to address the gap in services for young LGBT people in Roscommon, this subgroup has the ambition of introducing accessible local services for young people and their parents. Young people are members of this group, and it is chaired by a representative from education.

7. Social inclusion Measures

National Outcomes: *Have economic security and opportunity/Connected, respected and contributing to their world / achieving full potential in learning and development*

This working group aims to address local issues for children, young people and their families related to equality, social inclusion, and social mobility. The group is co-chaired by Tusla and Roscommon Leader Partnership.

2.4.7 The CYPSC team

Roscommon CYPSC shares a Tusla service area with Galway, and the two CYPSC coordinators have formed an alliance and work closely together. Both CYPSCs have a separate identity, profile, and membership apart from sharing a chairperson, but by working as an alliance, they pool their resources and support each other's work where possible. There is an occasional overlap in working relationships between subgroups, for example, the Transitions working group was co-chaired by a Galway and a Roscommon CYPSC member, and the programme of work ran across both counties. I am employed by Tusla to support the work of both committees by ensuring they have access to research, information, and resources to

discharge their duties effectively. This involves facilitating consultations with children and young people on a range of thematic areas to support the implementation of the CYPP, and other ongoing work programmes that CYPSC support. I am a regular attendee at CYPSC meetings, but I am not considered a member of CYPSC. It is in this role that I was tasked with conducting a series of consultations with young children to inform the development of the Roscommon Early Years' Health and Wellbeing strategy on behalf of the Healthy and Active in the Early Years working group. This opportunity led to the development of this study and was the context within which data was collected.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter set out to clarify the context for this research study. To set the scene, the chapter outlined the service provision for children and families, including a summary of the governmental departments and state agencies responsible for key aspects of service delivery across several domains. The Child Care Act for the first time clarified the state's responsibility to promote the welfare of all children from birth to 18 years of age, and its enactment allowed the state to become a signatory of the UNCRC in 1992. Flowing from these two landmark developments are significant developments in how services for children in Ireland are planned and operationalised. From 2000, all policy initiatives included a focus on child participation to support the state's obligations as set out in Article 12 of the UNCRC. The changing children's policy landscape increased the visibility of children in policy and illuminated the participation agenda, which aimed to enhance participatory practice in agencies and organisations that provide services to children, young people, and their families. Within the broader children's policy landscape, participation is reflected in policy pertaining to the early years' sector, within Tusla and in relation to interagency and collaborative service provision for children and young people in Ireland through the mechanism of CYPSC.

As the study was conducted in the geographic area of Roscommon, a profile of the county to include demographic social and health information was included. Overall, a picture emerged of a rural county with low population growth, but with sizable new communities including minority and vulnerable populations spread across the county.

To bring together the many elements already presented in the chapter, the concept of interagency and collaborative working practices was set out, including definitions and reference to models that constitute this approach to the delivery of services to children. The various agencies, organisations and statutory bodies who are tasked with providing services to

children and families in Roscommon were outlined. Service provision in Roscommon was characterised as sometimes more accessible out of county, however I have outlined the situation with service provision across a range of areas related to the lives of children and families in Roscommon and shown the breadth of coverage within the county.

The development of Roscommon CYPSC, from inception to its first CYPP plan and the establishment of thematic working groups on a range of areas identified as priorities in the CYPP was described. One of these working groups is the Early Years Healthy and Active group, which in 2017 set out to complete the first Roscommon Early Years' Health and Well strategy. Working alongside this group led to an opportunity to consult with young children as part of a consultation process that included parents and service providers. The data collection for my research project was set centrally within this context.

Chapter Three. Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

To support the development of the methodology for this study and to inform and illuminate the discussion on the findings, I undertook a review of literature that is pertinent to the research question. The opening section to this chapter sets out the purpose of a literature review, describes the search strategy that I employed, and summarises the areas of literature outlined in the chapter. This section sets out the structure of the chapter, which is presented in four sections related to the topic being studied as follows:

1. Children's Rights Discourse
2. Development, Agency, and Autonomy in Early Childhood
3. Young Children and Participation
4. Democracy, Citizenship and Child-centredness in Early Childhood Theory and Practice

The chapter moves on to discuss the literature in each of these sections, before summarising the main conclusions arising from this review of the literature.

3.1.1 My rationale for conducting this literature review

I engaged in a thorough review of the relevant literature for several reasons. As a literature review summarises and synthesises the existing body of knowledge, conducting a substantive literature review is a precondition for a thorough and sophisticated research project (Boote and Beile, 2005). As the participation of young children in policy development processes is under-researched, I anticipated that a review of the literature would provide me with a conceptual and theoretical background to my study and support me to locate my study within current debates on children's participation. I expected that presenting relevant commentary, debates, theories, and controversies would illuminate the topic, and identify gaps in the knowledge (Randolph, 2009).

3.1.2 Search strategy

Thematic, conceptual, and subject areas that are relevant to the overarching topic were first identified and then used to guide the search. I developed a list of search terms, Boolean phrases, and key words to guide the search as set out in Figure 5 on the next page.

Young children (or)	Early childhood (and)	Participation	
Young children (or)	Early childhood (and)	Decision-making	
Young children (and)	Decision-making (and)	Participation	
Young children (and)	Consultation		
Young children (or)	Early childhood (and/or)	Participation (and/or)	Learning and Development
Early years' practice (and)	Participation		
Policymaking (and)	Young children (and/or)	Participation	
Democracy (and)	Early years practice (or)	Early childhood	
Listening (and)	Early childhood		

Figure 5: Boolean phrases to guide literature search

I accessed databases using the N.U.I. Galway library and the Tusla Research Centre's e-resources (Psychology and Behavioural Sciences Collection, SocINDEX with Full Text, Academic Search Complete, and Social Work Reference Centre). Books were reviewed using the NUI Galway's Hardiman Library and the Barnardo's library (of which Tusla is a member). Hub na nÓg library which has a comprehensive collection of literature on children and young people's participation was accessed. Policy and practice material were sourced from a variety of online and offline sources.

After the initial broad search process, I refined the search parameters to include more conceptual and theoretical material including children's rights and the new sociology of childhood. At a later stage, the concepts of autonomy and relational autonomy became significant because of the study's focus on decision-making, and the search strategy incorporated this new focus. Other theoretical concepts including the Ethic of Care (Tronto, 1998; Bath, 2013) were engaged with during this phase of the literature search. While this concept is concerned with relational processes, listening and interactions in the context of care, it was ultimately not specifically included in the review as other concepts such as autonomy were thought to be more relevant when moving from conceptualisation of the theme of young children's participation in decision-making, through to methodological considerations for the

study. Overall, the search strategy supported the development of the literature review and enhanced my understanding of the literature on the topic being studied. In the next four sections of this chapter, I set out a summary and analysis of the literature that was reviewed during the development of this review.

3.2 Section One. Children’s Rights discourse

3.2.1 Introduction

In this first section of the literature review, I consider understandings, interpretations, and commentary on children’s rights, focussing specifically on the participation rights of young children. Children's rights relate to human rights specifically afforded to children including entitlements to education, care and standards of living and protection from abuse and exploitation, and rights of participation in decision-making affecting their lives.

3.2.2 Theorising children’s rights

Freeman (1995:70) defines rights as *‘entitlements, valuable commodities which we do not grovel or beg to get’*. When applied to children, there are competing theoretical positions regarding the precise functions of rights. These debates consider whether children should have specific rights afforded to them as a citizen group, or indeed whether children should be viewed as rights bearers at all unless (or until) they can demonstrate to adults they have the competencies to exercise these rights. At the same time, there has been philosophical consideration on the nature of the rights children have, if it is conceded that they do indeed have rights. On one side of the debate is the ‘will or choice’ theory (Hart, 1973; Steiner, 1994) which sees having a right as requiring the capacity to either claim or enforce that right, or to waive it. Hart (1982:185) suggests *‘it is hard to think of rights except as capable of exercise’*. ‘Will’ theorists, according to Archard (2015), deny that children (in particular young children) are qualified rights holders in the same way that adults are, but they concede that children, as human beings, have a moral status as rights-bearers that ought to be protected.

On the other side of the debate is the ‘welfare or interest’ theory (MacCormick, 1977; Kramer et al., 1998), which views rights as the protection of an interest that imposes certain duties on others. Wenar (2015:5) argues that the function of a right is to further the right-holder's interests and *‘impose on others certain duties whose discharge allows the rights holder to enjoy the interest in question’*. However, Archard (2003) points out that these positions do not consider

the arbitrariness of childhood and invariably do not capture the truth about children's lives. Cowden (2012) agrees that the diverse nature of childhood presents challenges in any rigorous analysis about children's rights. Wenar (2015) finds that the resulting deadlock in the debate has led to alternative theoretical positions on the function of rights. Archard (2015) proposes that these various debates highlight both the nature and value of rights and the moral status of children, which leads into further debates as to the nature of childhood itself. These debates are well reflected in recent literature which poses questions about the nature of rights that children can claim and when parents can legitimately exercise power and control over their child (Fives, 2017; 2018; Tannebaum and Jaworska, 2018).

These competing theories have generated controversy, tensions, and debates in the children's rights literature over decades. Aspects of these debates are reflected in positions that consider children (particularly young children) as lacking the autonomy or the competencies needed to claim or enforce their rights, and that it is justifiable for the state, society and parents to act paternalistically in restricting or interfering with children's freedoms (Purdy, 1992). Paternalism is broadly defined in the literature as the exercise of power over others without their consent, and where the interference is benevolent (Archard, 1990; Grill, 2011). On the other side of this debate, it is argued children are fully autonomous human beings who should enjoy all the same rights of an adult without question, paternalistic interference, or limitation. This latter position is taken by the so-called 'liberationists' including Farson (1974); Holt (1975); Cohen (1980); and Harris (1996).

A further issue is whether adults and children are to enjoy the same rights. Feinberg (1980) sets out rights that only belong to adults (what he calls "A rights"), rights that are common to adults and children ("A-C rights") and rights that only apply to children ("C rights"). "A rights" include liberties or privileges (e.g. voting or driving a car), whereas "A-C rights" are focussed more on welfare (e.g. health, privacy). "C rights" are firstly welfare rights, which children possess but are incapable of acquiring for themselves because of their dependence on adults (such as the right to food and shelter), and secondly, rights to be protected against harms which may affect children as a direct consequence of their childhood (e.g. child abuse). Welfare and protection rights have been described as paternalistic in nature, attributing a tutelage status to children (Reynaert et al., 2009). When applied to policy, the conceptualisation of children's rights in the literature reflected in these positions is broadly focused on either the justification of rights as enablers for children's participation in decision-making, or on the enforcement of legislation that affords children protection from abuse or exploitation.

According to Hayes and Bradley (2009), the most controversial issues in the children's rights debates concern the relations between claims, duties, and rights, the roles of the state and parents. Reynaert et al.'s (2009) review of the literature picks up on this when it maps out the academic discourse on children's rights since the adoption of the UNCRC. Three themes are identified as predominating the academic work. These are *'autonomy and participation rights as the new norm in policy and practice; children's rights vs parental rights; and the global children's rights industry'* (Reynaert et al., 2009:518). This review is mostly concerned with the first of these themes, as it is pertinent to the topic being studied, although there are references to the exercise of parental rights in the chapter.

Whether someone can have a right without someone else having a corresponding duty has been the subject of debate (Archard, 2015). However, the legal-status view is clear in holding parents as primarily responsible for safeguarding children's rights (Hayes and Bradley, 2009). There are other preoccupations reflected in the work of Reynaert et al., (2009) particularly related to the concept of the autonomous child. They suggest that there is an increasing trend towards individualisation and autonomy emerging from the rights discourse, while these ideas may not be fully compatible with the Western social construction of childhood. This conceptualisation of childhood is described as imposing an *'unchildlike sense of autonomy'* (Diduck, 1999:129), whereby the child is expected to know her or his own life, needs and interests and how to deal with them adequately in much the same way as adults are expected to do (Benporath, 2003). The image of a competent and autonomous child is prevalent in much of the literature on children's rights, particularly related to the right to participation, and is considered in more depth further in this review.

Woodhouse (2008) is critical of those that view children's rights from a welfare or needs perspective and suggests that this promotes a construction of children as the passive recipients of adults' actions, rather than as active agents. Stainton Rodgers (2004) and Woodhead (1997) both suggest that the traditional conceptualisation of children with *'needs'* imposes a particular set of values on them. Objections to the notion of children as right-holders usually focuses on traditional characterisations of childhood as a period of dependency and undeveloped capacity for autonomy or rationality and, as a result, diminished ability to claim or exercise rights, according to Nolan (2007). However, Woodhouse (2002:3) suggests that this position '*exposes the inadequacy of framing 'rights talk' primarily in terms of the individual's freedom to exercise her powers when dealing with a category of persons who begin in a state of almost complete powerlessness'*.

The literature differs on the purpose of children's rights, and whether they relate to the present child or to the adult they will become. Feinberg (1980: 126) proposes that some "C rights" are '*anticipatory autonomy rights'* or "*A rights" in trust'*. Archard (2015) refers to Eekelaar (1986) who views rights as *'developmental'* so that the child can enter adulthood without disadvantage. The positioning of the child as a future adult in terms of their rights is a prominent theme in the literature, as will be discussed further in this chapter.

3.2.3 The UNCRC

The UNCRC is an internationally binding agreement that is applied to human rights specifically affecting children. The convention sets out formally agreed standards that cover provision rights (to necessary goods, services, and resources); protection rights (from neglect, abuse, exploitation and discrimination) and participation rights (so that children are treated as active citizens and can contribute to society from their earliest years) (Alderson, 2008). Freeman (1995) argues that although the UNCRC cannot be viewed as the final word on children's rights (because it is a result of international compromise), it goes well beyond any previous international documents and reflects a global consensus on the status of children. Melton (2005: 648) believes that the UNCRC is unique and unusual in its scope as a '*nearly universally adopted expression of respect for children as persons ... no other human-rights treaty directly touches on so many domains of life'*.

However, there are echoes of the previously outlined controversies and contested perspectives in the debates on the UNCRC itself. Couzens (2017) argues that the UNCRC has not made child participation any easier to understand, in fact she suggests it may have made it more complex to understand and to practice. Burman (1996) suggests that there is a risk that globalising childhood can result in generalised statements about children's lives. She argues that children's rights are local rather than global, and that there is a covertly western interpretation and agenda in much of the discourse resulting from the UNCRC. Nonetheless, she supports a legal rights framework and suggests that it is necessary in the broader struggle against inequality and injustice faced by children globally. Woodhouse (2000:3) takes up this point about generalising and globalising the rights discourse which, she suggests, *'ignores the interdependency of individuals, families and communities'*.

The convention has been found wanting, as it excluded children in its deliberations (Freeman, 1998) and instead relied on adult observers to identify children's interests. Nonetheless, these deliberations did consolidate the argument that children are entitled to specific rights (Tobin,

2014). However, as Fives (2017) points out, children's rights can be limited when parental power is exercised, as parents are assumed to be in control of the ways in which their children can enjoy these rights.

Several writers identify that the UNCRC underpins the children's rights discourse by challenging normative perceptions of children as lacking in capacity (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010; Brummelaar et al., 2018). Smith (2002) described how the UNCRC operates through moral pressure, dialogue, and cooperation with individual states, rather than enforcement mechanisms. She suggests that, despite its shortcomings, the UNCRC makes children more visible in policy and it challenges governments and others to value children today, rather than simply the adults they will become. It provides useful independent feedback to countries on their policies and practices for children (Hayes 2002), while Smith (2002) finds that, overall, the UNCRC is generally compatible with the rethinking about childhood as reflected in the new sociology of childhood (see 3.3.5). It appears therefore that critically accepting the UNCRC while being mindful of its shortcomings when considering the development of policy for children is essential to support children's participation. There is merit in Hayes' (2002:5) argument for considering the UNCRC as an appropriate framework to foreground the uniqueness of children's issues and as *'a mirror against which the duties and obligations of adults and of the State – and their response to these obligations – can be reflected'*.

3.2.4 Children's rights in early childhood

Archard (2015) discusses whether young children are qualified to be rights-holders and finds that children in general lack certain cognitive and volitional abilities to make fully independent choices. Children are not unique amongst humans in this respect, he suggests, but children are unique in the sense that every one of us was, during our early years, not qualified to be a rights-holder, even if now we are so qualified. He proposes that young children's incapacities seem to disqualify them from having liberty rights. Archard outlines several positions on the moral status of children as rights-bearers. He cites Griffin (2002) who suggests that rights are best reserved for human beings capable of agency and that the absence of rights does not signal that young children have diminished moral importance. On the other hand, Archard refers to the work of Brighouse (2002) who proposes that whilst infants and young children may lack agency, they certainly have fundamental interests meriting protection and at least, they have welfare rights. He also points to the work of Brennan (2002) who proposes that a gradualist

model of rights will protect young children's interests and lead into autonomous rights as children grow and develop.

The discussion on young children's qualification as rights-holders adds another layer of complexity to the broader children's rights debate, and again appears to be unresolved. A general perception of children as being needy and vulnerable and requiring the support and protection of adults is notable in the literature, according to Stainton-Rogers (2004). This assessment is shared by other commentators (Woodhead, 2005; Dahlberg et al., 2007) who suggest that this perception is sometimes articulated as a reason for not consulting with young children. There is a tension between this enduring perception and the rights discourse which views all children (including young children) as agentic, capable, and competent in expressing an opinion (Alderson, 2008; Alderson & Montgomery, 1996; Lansdown, 2005). Woodhouse (2004) highlights this tension and attempts to resolve it by interpreting children's rights as being either needs-based or dignity-based. Woodhouse's resolution considers dignity-based rights as recognising children's emerging capabilities by acknowledging their competencies, while recognising that children are entitled to adult support and protection, which includes affordance of their needs-based rights.

Related to this debate, there are differing conceptualisations in the literature on children's agency, including ethical, legal, developmental, evolutionary, socio-cultural, and philosophical perspectives. These debates are introduced here as they pertain to rights but feature in other sections of this chapter where appropriate. Montreuil and Carnevale (2016:503) traced the development of the concept of agency from the 1970's field of childhood studies and reflected on the wider debates on children's best interests and the need for protective measures, through to a recognition that children's agency and best interests can coexist. These authors propose that children's agency could be defined as the capacity of the child to act deliberately, to speak for oneself, and to actively reflect on, and influence, their social worlds. They further clarify that multiple forms of expression are indicative of children's agency including verbal and non-verbal expression and argue that the capacity of children to enact agency is not solely dependent on adults to act as facilitators of agency.

Implementing young children's rights as a specific issue has emerged because reports from individual countries to the UN were noted to devote so little attention to implications of the UNCRC for young children (Woodhead, 2006). In response, the UN (2005) clarified that it regards young children as active meaning-makers with evolving capacities, requiring age-appropriate guidance and support, both as individuals and as a constituency who have a voice.

‘Meaning-making’ in this context is represented in the literature as the expressions of meaning and understandings that represent children’s lived experiences, knowledge and perspectives which come from children themselves (Christensen and James, 2000). Dunphy (2012) includes adults as part of a meaning-making collaboration and argues for the use of guided participation so that together adults and children can create meanings and generate knowledge. Parents/ caregivers and States are reminded that there is an obligation to facilitate the genuine participation of young children and that a balance is needed between control and guidance, and respect for the developing capacities of young children (UN, 2005). However, as Fives (2017; 2018) argues, parents have rights to interfere in their children’s lives that normally (i.e. amongst adults) are not granted.

While it appears that much of the literature on young children’s rights is concerned with the implementation of the UNCRC, it can be argued that the theoretical debates on rights for children generally do not deal explicitly with rights for young children or infants, except in passing. For example, within the *‘Will and Interest’* debate, young children are referred to as *‘incompetent’* (Cowden, 2012:362) in much the same way as people with dementia are. Therefore, while many of the controversies detailed earlier in this chapter should be considered especially in relation to young children’s competencies and abilities to exercise their rights, there is a dearth of literature that explores the value and nature of children’s rights in early childhood, except for their implementation. If the controversies as discussed earlier in relation to the broader theoretical debate on rights for children remain unresolved, this would also appear to be true in the case of rights for young children.

3.2.5 Participation rights in early childhood

Participation is an underpinning concept in this study as it helps us understand the extent to which children’s rights are upheld when young children are invited by adult decision-makers to share their views and opinions. The UNCRC’s Article 12 specifies that children's participation rights encompass the right to involvement in decision-making processes. However, the practical application of this article is seen by some commentators as problematic when applied to young children (Woodhead and Brooker, 2008). This may be because the wording of Article 12 appears to be ambiguous on the question of when and if a child is *'capable of forming his or her own views',* and if the *'age and maturity of the child'* requires adults to then listen to those views. Milne (2008) finds that the concepts of age and maturity

can lead to a justification for the subjective exclusion of young children from participatory processes.

In turn, the ambiguous language of Article 12 was clarified by General Comment 7 (UN, 2005:7), which asserted that '*As holders of rights, even the youngest children are entitled to express their views… they make choices and communicate their feelings, ideas and wishes in numerous ways, long before they are able to communicate through the conventions of spoken or written language'*. According to this clarification, participatory rights apply equally in the early life context. General Comment 12 (UN, 2009: 9) added additional clarity to the point that children's views should be sought regardless of age and notions of maturity or capacity:

> *'State parties cannot begin with the assumption that a child is incapable of expressing her or his own views. On the contrary, states parties should presume that a child has the capacity to form her or his own views and recognize that she or he has the right to express them; it is not up to the child to first prove her or his capacity'.*

The central implication of Article 12, according to Lansdown (2001: 2), is that participation is a substantive right. However, Lansdown cautions that, as with adults, democratic participation should not just be considered as an end in itself, but that it is the means through which to *'achieve justice, influence outcomes and expose abuses of power'*. In other words, participation is a procedural right in addition to being a substantive right as it enables children to promote and to protect this, and other, rights.

However, even with these clarifications on participation rights for young children, there is limited literature that specifically considers participation of children aged under five years. A review of the literature by Macanochie in 2013 found that conceptualisations of participation for young children are problematic, both in practice and in theory. Drawing from Lansdown (2005) and MacNaughton et al., (2008) she concludes that most of the child participatory literature focuses on children over eight years of age, with younger children regarded as lacking the capacity or maturity to participate meaningfully in decisions about themselves or to contribute to our knowledge of the world.

In other commentary, Lundy (2007) is clear that children's participation rights are not dependent upon their capacity to express a mature view but are dependent only on their ability to form and express a view in whatever way they choose. However, the age of a child is broadly recognised as affecting the range and the nature of the participatory opportunities available to them in practice (Leinonena & Venninena, 2012: 472). For these writers, the key challenge to the participation of young children in ECCE is that it is not always considered an *'important*

issue in early childhood education, and educators are accustomed to viewing smaller children as helpless and incompetent'. They suggest that young children's abilities to participate and become active members of a group are skills that require practice and refinement.

As was demonstrated in this section, one of the preoccupations in the literature is the extent to which the child has the agency and capacity to enact their participatory rights. To further interrogate some underlying assumptions on the nature of children's capacities, I will set out and discuss the literature as it pertains to young children's development, agency, and autonomy in the next section of this review.

3.3. Section Two. Development, Agency, and Autonomy in Early Childhood

3.3.1 Introduction

This section of the literature review considers research and commentary on children's agency, autonomy, and competencies, and how these apply within early years' learning and developmental contexts. It begins by summarising the key theorists on children's learning and development and considers the debates that exist within the various perspectives. The section moves on to consider the literature on children's agency and autonomy and proposes that there is evidence in the literature that a relational model of autonomy may support participatory practices in ECCE. Finally, the section considers literature on young children's participation in decision-making and their competencies for meaningful participation and involvement in such processes.

3.3.2 Theories of child development

Child Development is defined in the literature as a field of study that *'seeks to account for the gradual evolution of a child's cognitive, social, and other capacities'* (Hetherington and Parke, 1999: 4). It does so by observing, describing, and uncovering developmental processes and by seeking evidence that can explain and predict the behaviours and development of young children (Black at al., 1992). There are several theoretical debates emerging from the child development literature, much of which is historical with roots in the early theorists from the disciplines of philosophy, anthropology, and psychology, such as Rousseau, Locke, Darwin and Hall. These themes, which underpin much of the historic and contemporary literature according to Shaffer and Kipp (2007) are: nature versus nurture, the active or passive child,

socio-cultural influences, continuous or discontinuous development, and the interactions between developmental areas.

In summary, the 'nature v nurture' debate is characterised by differing positions on the extent to which development and behaviour are products of either inherited (Freud, Bowlby, Chomsky) or acquired (Bandura, Skinner) factors, as set out in Keating (2010). The *'active/passive'* child debate centres on whether (or not) children should be viewed as active participants in their own development (Chess & Thomas, 1986), or as in the Freudian perspective, passive recipients influenced only by other people and the environment. The socio-cultural approach finds that the child is born with innate abilities that supports cognitive development, but socio-cultural factors have major impacts on how and what a child learns (Vygotsky, 1978a). The 'continuous/discontinuous' debate among theorists is well covered in Berk (2011). This debate is concerned with whether (or not) developmental changes occur over time, and in a gradual, steady manner (Vygotsky) or more suddenly and in stages (Piaget, Kohlberg, Erickson, Freud). This debate occurs across several disciplines and is highly contested and generally unresolved. In the next subsection, the literature on Learning, Cognitive and Sociocultural approaches will be set out and reviewed.

3.3.3 Developmental perspectives on children's learning

Woodhead (2006: 4) suggests that a developmental perspective on learning emphasises *'regularities in young children's physical and psychosocial growth during early childhood, as well as their dependencies and vulnerabilities during this formative phase of their lives'*. Key developmental theorists include Piaget, Bruner, and Vygotsky. According to MacNaughton (2003), the developmental approach links development to nature and genetic characteristics rather than environmental influences. Other key thinkers in this field include Gessell (1880-1961), whose work identified developmental milestones that can be used to track normative development (Oliviera, 2018).

Learning theorists or Behaviourists, have had a major influence on early years' practice (Waller, 2009). Behaviourist theories emphasise the influence of the environment in shaping development. Development in this paradigm is framed in terms of observable behaviours. Behaviourists propose that children are more likely to repeat a behaviour if it is reinforced by the adult or the environment. This approach is usually discussed within two distinct areas of 'conditioning': classic or operant. Classical conditioning is a response by the child to certain stimuli or events occurring in the environment, as shown in experiments conducted by Pavlov

(1849-1936) and Watson (1878-1958). Operant conditioning emphasises development occurring as children learn behaviours from rewards and punishments, and thus the behaviour becomes modified and more desirable for the child (Skinner 1904-1990).

Both developmental and learning theories have influenced ECCE practice. However, both have been criticised by commentators as conceptualising the child as passive and lacking in the capacity to influence their own learning and development (Greenberg, 1987). Social learning theory proposes a model of development that views children as having some influence and agency on the behaviours they adopt. Bandura (1976) highlights that children learn from observing and modelling the behaviour of others. However, since the 1980's this theory has taken on a more holistic approach and is mindful of the context in which the social learning occurs, developing into Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura). MacLeod (2016) argues that this newer theory conceptualises children as self-organising, active, self-reflecting, and self-regulating, rather than as controlled by external forces.

Cognitive theorists such as Piaget (1896-1980) drew attention to the stages of development and to children's capacities associated with each stage. Piaget identified stages in children's development culminating in the autonomous logical thinking of the formal operational stage suggested by Piaget to occur from ages twelve to nineteen years (Hill and Tisdall 1997). Piaget's theory has been widely adopted in ECCE (Woodhead, 1999). Piaget believed that children must pass through these developmental stages before they possess the capacity for rationality and reason. However, this theory appears to be in conflict with other theories that underpin children's participation (Mayall, 2002), where an understanding of child development requires an acknowledgement that the evolving capacities of children are influenced by children's experiences, culture, interactions and relationships (Lansdown, 2004).

Later, Piaget and Inhelder (1969) proposed that adaptation to the environment was needed for learning to occur. Thus, through assimilation and accommodation to the environment, the child engages in a process of cognitive development and self-correction. Piaget's view of learning is that it is a continual and incremental process and not universal, linear, and staged processes with a clear start and end point, as favoured by the behavioural theorists. While the sequence of Piaget's stages has been influential in ECCE, other theorists suggest that he underestimated children's abilities to perform tasks which are more relevant to them, and where guidance is provided. Short (1991) in Hill and Tisdall (1997) concludes that young children have more ability to discuss abstract issues than Piaget and many educators thought possible, provided the context and the language used to explore these issues makes sense to children.

3.3.4 Sociocultural perspectives on children's development

Sociocultural theory is underpinned by the seminal work of psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who believed that relationships with parents/caregivers and the wider community were the origins of and the key influences in, the development of the individual's cognitive functions. Vygotsky considered that '*all the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals'* (1978b: 57). Vygotsky proposed that the learning of language and development of thinking were the two most significant processes in the child's development. Social interactions between the child and parent/caregiver are critical in these processes, according to Vygotsky. Stages of development are not fixed according to age; rather they reflect typical development during certain periods around which intellectual development is organised (Butterworth and Harris, 2002).Both Vygotsky and Piaget emphasised the influence of social factors on children's development, however Vygotsky (1978a) finds that social interactions play a significant role in cognitive development. The nature of these interactions informs Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which he describes as the distance between the *'actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers'* (1978b: 86). Essentially, Vygotsky considers that this zone contains all the knowledge, skills, and abilities that the child cannot yet understand achieve or perform independently, but which they have the capacity to learn under the guidance of an adult. 'Scaffolding' (Wood et al., 1976) is a related concept that highlights the importance of the role of the adult (or capable peer) within the ZPD. Wood et al., (1976: 90) define scaffolding as a process *'that enables a child or novice to solve a task or achieve a goal that would be beyond his unassisted efforts'.*

Shaffer (2009) highlights another point of divergence between Piaget and Vygotsky's theories: Piaget believed that cognitive development is universal in its nature, whereas Vygotsky believed that cultural differences significantly affect the process of cognitive development, and therefore it cannot be universal. This divergence is reflected by contemporary writers who question the applicability of Minority World conceptualisations of childhood to the Majority World (Tisdall and Punch (2012); Freeman (1998)).

Contemporary theorists such as Bronfenbrenner (1979: 60) further developed Vygotsky's views. Bronfenbrenner thus notes that *'…learning and development are facilitated by the participation of the developing person in progressively more complex patterns of reciprocal*

activity with someone with whom that person has developed a strong and enduring emotional attachment…'

3.3.5 The New Sociology of Childhood

The sociology of childhood emerged in the 1970's and 1980's and has since developed into a field of study, with associated debates and controversies. Its roots are found in the early work of sociologists such as Dreitzel (1973) and Jenks (1982) who rejected the portrayal of children as passive recipients of socialisation, where children were thought to '*learn and internalise unquestioningly expectations and practices of adult society'* (Hill and Tisdall, 1997: 12). James and Prout (1990) put forward a new paradigm for conceptualising childhood as socially constructed. They argued that childhood is shaped and influenced by the cultural and social context in which children live and participate. Children in this new paradigm are active within their own social worlds, rather than passive subjects of social structures (Corsaro, 1997). Gender, ethnicity, and social status are recognised as impacting on the experience of childhood. Children are considered as having agency and power, rather than it being afforded to them by adults (Prout & James, 1997).

A key edited collection on childhood is that of Qvortrup et al., (1994). Whereas Prout and James emphasised a social construction of childhood, Qvortrup et al., focused more on macro-structural approaches to understanding childhood. This work proposes that the low status of children in society generally reflects the low status of children within the field of sociology up to that point. Children, they suggest, had been portrayed prior to this new paradigm as a minority group subordinate to adults, which effectively resulted in their marginalisation. These authors argued that this marginalisation is often justified as protective but can be viewed as paternalistic (Hill and Tisdall, 1997). Qvortrup et al., (1994) emphasised that children are active agents in society, rather than simply representing a preparatory stage on the journey to adulthood. Dahlberg et al., (1999: 46) expanded on this view of the child as a co-constructor of knowledge and as a researcher, actively seeking to make meaning of their world. Their view of the child challenges the notion that the child '*is an essential being of universal properties and inherent capabilities whose development is innate, biologically determined and follows general laws'*.

ECCE as a discipline has been challenged by these debates. According to Anning et al., (2004) and Alderson (2012), the field has seen traditional developmental and biological theories of learning and development replaced by theories that highlight the socially constructed nature of

learning. The sociology of childhood rejected many of the traditional perspectives of childhood found in the developmental framework. Rather than viewing childhood as divided into universal stages, the sociological critique proposed that childhood evolves in diverse ways. For many sociologists in the new paradigm, Piaget was considered a *'bête noire'* (Hill and Tisdall, 1997: 11). A critique of the Piagetian paradigm by Jenks (1996:25) found that the presentation of learning in terms of developmental stages typified how *'the fact of normal processes overcomes the "value" of real social worlds'*. In contrast, Woodhead (2009) cautioned against discarding the entirety of the field of developmentalism and suggests that Piagetian constructivist theories took for granted that children were actively engaged with their environments and were gradually acquiring an increasing sophistication in their learning.

Smith (2007: 1) argued that a rights perspective is a good fit with the new sociology, which she stated is *'critical of developmental psychology and recognises multiple childhoods, children's agency and competency, and the primacy of children's lived experience'*. However, it is not yet clear to what extent practice in the area reflects the changing nature of the discourse. Indeed, Mayall (2006) found that most professionals working with children were largely influenced by more traditional conceptions of childhood that viewed childhood as a stage on the preparation for adulthood. The varying conceptualisations of childhood resulted in overlapping and sometimes contradictory representations of children, with the child seen as the 'other' and contrasted to 'adults' (Jenks, 1996).

3.3.6 Young children and agency

Children's agency is reflected in the principles enshrined in Article 12 of the UNCRC, even if the term itself is not mentioned in the convention (Harcourt and Hägglund, 2013; Sirko et al., 2019). The concept of agency is closely related to participation, citizenship, and autonomy (Mentha et al., 2015) and is understood generally as the capacity of the child to make choices and decisions, and to have influence over their daily lives and in matters that affect them (James and James, 2012). However there remains a diversity in how agency is conceptualised, from critical realist positions (Archer, 2000; 2003) to more relational and social understandings (Morrow, 2003). However, Larkins (2019) finds that while recent theorising of children's agency is grounded in relational understandings, critical realist approaches can provide additional theoretical reinforcement to the concept. Alderson and Yoshida (2016: 86) highlight the multiplicity of positions in the theoretical debates by proposing that children's agency is represented as *'ambivalent, intended or inadvertent, rational or foolish, cautious or risky,*

compliant or resistant, individual or collective, partly autonomous and partly heteronomous, chosen yet constrained, effective and ineffective, creative and destructive, competent and incompetent'. Prout (2005) concludes that children's agency is often taken as an essential and unmediated human characteristic, and its meaning is often glossed over. Larkins (2019) further argues that there is a tendency in the academic debates for agency to be ascribed to children and as a result, a demand for children's influence on decisions can be made without adequate consideration of the meaning of agency or how it operates.

From a Foucauldian perspective, which is concerned with subjectivity produced through power relations (Foucault, 1984; 1988), even when adults aim to promote the well-being of children, they are merely imposing discipline and placing limits on children's agency and autonomy. Devine (2002: 37) cites Giddens (1984) and Foucault (1984) in her discussion on educator discourse on the power and control which is exercised over children's time and space, interactions, and their life chances within the education system. She argues that it would be a mistake to perceive children as docile because of their subordinate status to adults in education.

Sutterlüty and Tisdall (2019: 183) propose that some aspects of the debate on children's agency from the field of childhood studies have assumed that agency is '*innately and inevitably positive, thus making it problematic if in the particular circumstances children's agency seemed questionable'.* They give an example of the ambiguous nature of children's agency when it goes against the social norms, such as child soldiers. Other examples of children who run small businesses further challenge Western assumptions about children's helplessness and dependence (Alderson, 2012). These contributions to the debate on agency suggest that it needs to be considered more as a relational concept. This is summed up by Wyness (2015: 13) cited in Sutterlüty and Tisdall (2019), who argues that '*children as agents are immersed within the social world and thus embedded in relations within which they have a formative influence'.* Wyness (2015) proposes that agency and autonomy are intertwined but distinguishable concepts, and the literature on young children's autonomy is set out in the next section.

3.3.7 Young children and autonomy

Autonomy can be broadly understood as the ability of the person to take an action freely and independently, make a decision or choice, in order to achieve a goal (Mashford-Scott and Church, 2011). Stoljar (2018) suggested that autonomy is generally understood as the freedom to function independently and to act on decisions that are one's own. According to Sutterlüty and Tisdall (2019) while 'agency' is the capacity for self-determination, 'autonomy' means

self-rule. They further argue that autonomy rather than agency should be the core concept in childhood studies.

The concept of autonomy guides ethical practice when decisions are being made, most notably in the context of child, disability, end-of-life, medical and health care provision. However, such a broad understanding may not fully consider what Twomey (2015: 255) called the *'the richness and complexity of the concept… about what it means to be autonomous, or to exercise autonomy'*. Twomey argued that the concept is bound up with issues of competence and capacity, with an emphasis on risk and harm, consent, and reason. A feature of the focus on consent and reason, according to Twomey, is that it raises questions about a person's capacity to exercise reason in making autonomous decisions. If autonomy requires the exercise of reason, to be autonomous one must first be capable of reasoning, she argued *(ibid).* While the roots of the concept of autonomy lie with the ancient Greek philosophers, the Kantian idea of autonomy emphasises free-will and self-legislation. As Campbell (2017: 381) states, in the Kantian formulation of autonomy '*a human will be driven to action, not by appetite or desire, but by identification with a "higher" or rational self*'.

There are more than one conceptualisation of autonomy found in the literature, as can be seen in medical ethics research and commentary. The most frequently presented conceptualisation relates to the idea that the patient (as per the medical literature) possesses both the right and the capacity for self-sufficiency and has control over decision-making about their health or well-being. The prominence of this conceptualisation in recent decades is part of a reaction against medical paternalism in the patient-doctor relationship, according to Walter and Friedman-Ross (2013). This conceptualisation of autonomy has been described in the medical ethics literature as an 'In Control Agent' model, whereby the doctor provides information to an educated consumer/patient, who then controls decisions about their own health care *(ibid).* This account of autonomy assumes a capacity for '*deliberation and rational transcendence of emotion, prioritising the rational over the emotional'* (Walter and Friedman-Ross, 2014: 17). Similarly, Code (1991:77-78) had earlier described an autonomous person as *'self-sufficient, independent, and self-reliant, a self-realizing individual who directs his efforts toward maximizing his personal gains…'*

In their systematic literature review, Gómez-Vírseda et al., (2019) found that individualistic conceptualisations of autonomy have philosophical origins in the writings of Descartes, Locke, John Stuart Mill and Kant. This line of thought, they propose, is articulated in the biomedical ethics literature as *'respect for autonomy'* which is one of the four basic principles of

biomedical ethics as presented by Beauchamp and Childress in their significant 1979 text. Autonomy is considered by some to be an 'end-state' or an 'achievement' of a self-determined and open future (Feinberg, 1994). Other positions hold that for children, autonomy can be violated even when the child does not exhibit the capacity for autonomy, because (for example) the child may currently lack the cognitive capacities that are necessary for setting goals (Clayton, 2006). The capacity of the young children for autonomous self-regulation is treated by some commentators with scepticism (Mullin, 2007). This discourse draws on traditional perspectives of children as lacking competencies and maturity, as described by Woodhead (2006); or as *'human becomings, not human beings' (*Coady, 2008: 4).

The concept of autonomy as being concerned with independence appears in historical as well as contemporary literature on children's learning and development. According to Manning (2005), Froebel's educational philosophy sees young children as individuals and his teaching methods enhance children's autonomy. The idea that children prefer to freely choose what they want to do, or the '*freedom to self-construction'* (Weinberg, 2009: 34), is essential to the Montessori pedagogy. However, Frierson (2015) considers that Montessori's work on children's capacities for autonomy highlights the critical link between the fostering of children's autonomy with the environment. Frierson thus proposes that children's incapacities for autonomous behaviours are the consequences of a failing in the external conditions, rather than any intrinsic limitation linked to the child's age or capacity. Erikson (1950, 1963) finds that the young child passes through a period characterised as 'autonomy versus shame and doubt'. He suggested that children who do not develop autonomy during the toddler years from ages one to three are more likely to remain dependent on adults, or to be overly influenced by peers later in life. To this point, Cannella (1997) finds that a key purpose of early childhood education is to guide the young child toward independence by facilitating their emerging autonomy.

Yet, in the same way that 'agency' is a contested concept, there remains a disparity in perceptions of children's autonomy (James and James, 2012). There is no broad and widespread consensus that young children are even entitled to autonomy or to the freedom to act independently of adult influences, yet autonomy and independence are still thought to be essential for early learning (Woodhead, 2006). In recent decades, the individualistic conception of autonomy has increasingly been challenged in the literature (Dworkin, 1988, Fineman, 2004). Ho (2008) notes that the individualised concept of autonomy does not consider the relational and the social contexts within which decisions are often made.

An alternative model of autonomy set out in the literature is *relational autonomy*. In this understanding of autonomy, human interests, connections, relationships, interdependence, and agency are emphasised, and independence is considered as a relational concept (Dove et al., 2017). Proponents of relational autonomy are often feminist theorists who are concerned with the social structures and relations that make autonomy possible (Westlund, 2009). These writers argue that a person's identity, needs, interests and autonomy are shaped by their relationships with other people. A relational conceptualisation of autonomy sees the person as embedded into a social network of other people, within which they develop their capacities and sense of self-determination (MacKenzie and Stoljar, 2000). Children's autonomy is developed '*through the relationships they forge on a daily and long-term basis'* (Dove et al., 2017: 152). McKenzie (2008) argues that autonomous persons are assumed to have capacities for decision-making, even if they do not always exercise it wisely, whereas relational autonomy is more concerned with the relational aspects of decision-making even when decisions are made by some-one other than the person whose interests are central to the decision. This conceptualisation of autonomy emphasises the social context within which the autonomous individual exists, acknowledges the central role of other people in decision making and highlights the *'emotional and embodied aspects of decision-makers'* (Walter and Friedman-Ross, 2014: 516).

For many early childhood commentators there is an acknowledgement supported by the rights discourse and enshrined in the UNCRC, that children are experts in their own lives (Thomas and O'Kane, 1998; Balen et al., 2006). While not based on an individualistic conception of autonomy, the new sociology of childhood proposes a construction of the child as a competent and agentic co-constructor of their own learning and development (Woodhead, 2006). There is an increasing focus in the literature on how the child's lived experiences and their present understandings of their own realities justifies their inclusion as active and agentic participants (Powell and Smith, 2009). Research has shown that when children are supported to exhibit agency and autonomy, they learn about negotiation, compromise, success and failure, and resilience (MacFarlane & Cartmel, 2008). This, in turn, is thought to support their sense of self-worth, citizenship, and wellbeing (Berthelsen & Brownlee, 2005). Yet in practice, there are difficulties in balancing individualism and the child's right to autonomy within groups of children and families while at the same time maintaining group/family cohesion and cooperation (Paris & Lung, 2008).

In the context of children's participation in research, McLaughlin (2020: 205) concludes that ensuring children can enact their participatory rights within research contexts *'requires a switch away from an individual autonomy model of agency and capacity'*. The notion of relational autonomy or an '*associational presence',* McLaughlin argues, requires '*the creation of spaces within which relational agency can be nurtured and sustained'* (2020: 204). Carnevale (2012) suggests that the individualised conception of autonomy fails to consider the nature of joint decision-making processes which have been validated in feminist and relational ethics. Skyrme (2016) proposes that for disabled children and young people, joint decision-making that recognises a form of supported or shared autonomy offers a viable alternative process through which children can make decisions with adult/parental support. This approach, she proposes, can be conceptualised as relational autonomy wherein the child and those they are in close relationships with (such as parents) work together to make a decision. In the context of disability (specifically Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy) Skymre's research finds that the autonomy that disabled children exercise '*emerges from a supportive network of relational autonomy'*. These life-enhancing qualities, she argues, '*can be achieved through expressing individual choice, making decisions and doing so with the trusted support of parents'* (2016: 227).

Gómez-Vírseda et al., (2019: 2) concluded that much of the literature on relational autonomy is a *'reaction against'* the individualistic interpretations of autonomy whereas relational autonomy itself is *'a rich and complex concept'*. Thus, she calls for a practical translation of the concept of relational autonomy into decision-making approaches so that it is developed further as a normative concept, rather than a reactionary development against traditional conceptualisations of autonomy.

Autonomy is widely considered to be a prerequisite for child participation. However, tensions exist around the extent to which young children can be truly autonomous. While literature on the potential for relational autonomy to support young children's participation is limited, the relational nature of early years' pedagogy reflects the nature of the role of parents in decision-making within the medical literature. This conceptualisation lends itself to the possibility of a more nuanced understanding of autonomy as a shared enterprise when applied to ECCE practice. How these ideas are reflected in the reality of young children's participation is considered in the next section of this review.

3.4 Section Three. Young Children and Participation

3.4.1 Introduction

Participation is a central concept in this study and helps us understand the processes that are at play when young children are invited by adults to share their views and opinions in decision-making processes. In this section, I consider the different conceptions of young children's participation in decision-making processes in the literature. Beginning with a broad overview of how child participation is conceptualised and theorised, the section moves on to outline and discuss literature on the concept of participation as it pertains to early childhood.

3.4.2 Conceptualising child participation

Participation theory broadly recognises that child participation involves listening, supporting children to express their views, and taking their views into account in decision-making (Lundy 2007, 2018). Many writers draw attention to the varying constructions of child participation such as Thomas (2007), and it is represented in the literature variously as a social, political or a relational construct. Hart's definition (1992: 5) *'the process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives'* is inclusive of the individual and collective contexts in which children participate. In the context of early childhood, Theobald et al., (2011) define participation as the way young children take part in the varied contexts of their lives. Alderson (2008) suggests it is a broad concept related to 'taking part', but with two distinct elements: being consulted and making decisions. For political theorists such as Young (2000) cited in Thomas (2007), participation is about inclusion, democratic representation, and justice, as well as the active involvement in decision-making processes. She proposes that to enable all social groups to have access to democratic processes, these processes need to adapt to meet the needs of all social groups. While Young does not specify children as a social group, writers such as Thomas (2007: 201) propose that *'the relevance of her arguments to children and young people is readily apparent'*.

There is some disagreement as to what constitutes 'participation' (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010). There are two broad interpretations of the nature of children's participation, ranging from 'passive' to 'active'. Passive participation, as identified by Boyden and Ennew (1997), happens when children take part or engage in an activity, while active participation occurs when children are empowered to voice their views and opinions, influence decision-making, and affect change. Thomas (2007) warns that 'passive' participation can be misunderstood and

misidentified as 'active'. Kellet (2009:50) suggests that in relation to children, the term 'participation' is often used in practice to describe their active involvement in a process or event (or *'something'*), yet she finds this too simplistic and suggests that *'confusion still abounds as to what children's participation really means'*. Kellet (2009: 43) further states that child participation is complex and multifaceted in nature and is *'a contested concept in contemporary political and social dialogues'*.

Participation is usually conceptualised within the literature as an important aspect of decision-making. Hill et al., (2004:83) define child participation as *'the direct involvement of children in decision-making'*. Davies et al., (2006:11) conceptualise participation more purposefully as the '*involvement in a collective decision-making process with a recognisable social and/or educational outcome'*. Another distinction is noted between *'consultation'* or listening to children's viewpoints but not necessarily acting on them, and *'participation'*, in the sense that children's views have direct influence on decision making processes and on change. Clark et al., (2003:12) propose that '*participation implies some ownership of the decision-making process whereas consultation may stop with seeking advice'*.

Lansdown (2001:16) offers a three-fold categorisation of participation practices, which she cautions are not mutually exclusive or clearly bounded. These are:

Consultative processes which are usually adult initiated processes to obtain information from children through which they can improve legislation, policies or services.

Participative initiatives where the aim is to strengthen processes of democracy, create opportunities for children to understand and apply democratic principles or involve children in the development of services and policies that impact on them.

Promoting self-advocacy where the aim is to empower children to identify and fulfil their own goals and initiatives.

There are risks with how participation is interpreted and applied, as the nature of the participation can become tokenistic or manipulative rather than meaningful (Arnstein, 1969). However, Lundy, (2018) queries whether it is accurate to describe tokenism as 'non-participation' and proposes that tokenism is a necessary step on the journey towards meaningful participation. Lundy's model of participation (2007), and Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation are both discussed in more detail in the next section of this review.

3.4.3 Models of child participation

Arguably, the most relevant participation model for this study is that of Laura Lundy (2007). The eponymous Lundy Model underpins recent policy direction on children's participation in Ireland (DCYA, 2015a). The model is represented by four interconnecting and sequential domains: Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence, which are in turn a conceptualisation of children's rights to participate in decisions that affect their lives as set out in Article 12 of the UNCRC.

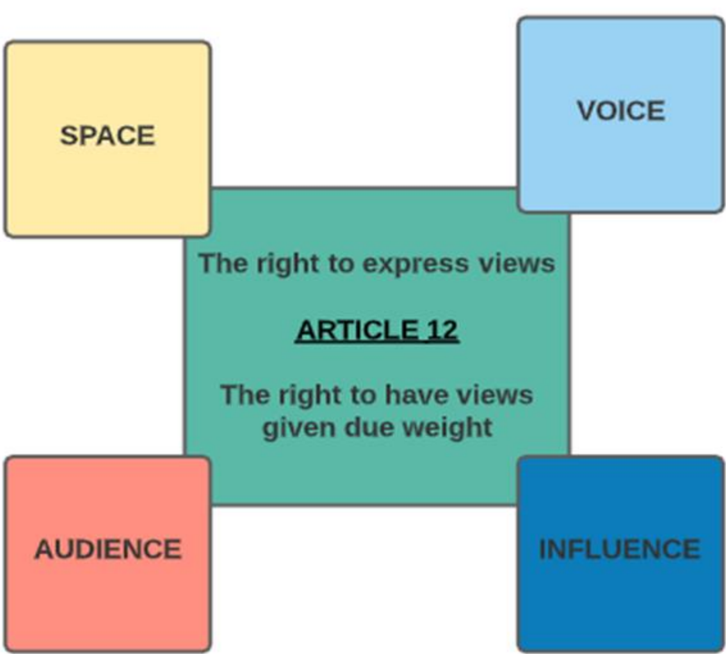


Figure 6: Lundy's model of participation

In Lundy's model, 'Space' is considered as an essential prerequisite for the meaningful participation of children in decision-making and is the structure within which children are encouraged to express their views or left free to choose not to. Lundy (2007) emphasises the importance of an inclusive space so that all children can feel safe to express their views without fear of being rebuked or dismissed. Lundy's use of space is like Barbers' (2007) concept of the 'engagement zone' where adults engage with children to find new ways of creatively utilising space to support participation. The concept of 'space' is linked to the idea of 'Allyship' in the youth participation literature (Maynard et al., 2020). Allyship in this context is seen as the opening up of collaborative and equitable space for young people's participation (Checkoway,

1996) in which adults and young people share both power and responsibility for the partnership (Khanna & McCart, 2007).

Other writers consider participation as a spatial practice. Kudva and Driscoll (2009:378) argue that the creation of these spaces is not straightforward, noting that *'spaces of participation are created (and often constrained) by organisational practices'*. Lansdown (2005: 2) argues that respecting child participatory rights '*necessitates a preparedness to create the space to listen to their views in ways appropriate to them…'* and one that, she acknowledges, requires the provision of time, and of adults who are willing to listen. Marshall et al., (2015) and Tisdall et al., (2006) argue that a participatory space in public decision-making processes should ideally provide opportunities for face-to-face dialogue between the child and policymaker or facilitator, rather than other forms of engagement (such as surveys). Cornwall (2008) discusses the nature of both invited spaces and popular spaces for child participation, while Shier (2010) proposes that participatory decision-making spaces exist along a continuum, from those organised autonomously by children to those that exclude children.

However, other writers consider the ambiguousness of 'space' as problematic. Percy-Smith and Thomas (2010) suggest that for many children, spaces for formal participation opportunities are abstracted from their everyday lives and concerns. Children may not feel empowered to participate, despite the existence of structures or spaces for participation. Instead, these authors argue for the need to rethink children's participation as a diverse set of social processes rooted in everyday environments and interactions, rather than as a 'space' or a 'structure'.

Having created the space or social process for children's participation, the next step in the Lundy model is to facilitate children to express their view. 'Voice' in the Lundy model is the expression and articulation of the child's opinion, whether spoken or expressed non-verbally. Johnson (2017) argues that the creation and strengthening of participatory processes facilitates children to express their views in a dialogue with other children, adults, and decision-makers. However, there is an ambiguity in some of the literature on what 'voice' means in the context of young children's participation. Terms such as' listening' and 'hearing' and 'responding to' the 'voice of the child' are used interchangeably to expand on the discussion of voice in early years' literature. Participation, according to Lancaster (2010), is interchangeable with listening. However, Clark et al., (2005) find that listening is a necessary stage in participation. Rinaldi (2001: 4) speaks of *'a pedagogy of listening'* and suggests that '*listening is an active verb, which involves giving an interpretation, giving meaning to the message and value to those who*

are being listened to'. This perspective suggests that listening involves more than hearing and requires interpretation and validation.

Children's 'voice' is a concept that is part of a wider approach including both listening and participation (Tisdall, 2012; Baker, 1999; l'Anson, 2013). Hadfield and Haw's (2001:488) concept of 'voice' is one that can range from a straightforward acceptance of the child's choice, to a *'much more involved act of participation'* which sees children involved in planning, shaping, and receiving feedback on decisions which affect them. Lansdown (2011) proposes that children's rights to express their views in whichever way they chose can be hindered if children are regarded by adults as lacking in the competencies to contribute verbally to decision-making processes. Earlier, she argued that as young children express themselves differently from adults, this can result in a dismissive response from adults. Too often, she argues, '*token efforts are made to listen to children, but little effort is subsequently made to take on board the views they express'* (Lansdown, 2005: 2). Yet this is not true of every adult in every participatory space, as Roberts (2000:238) suggests: *'there have always been people who have listened, sometimes there have been people who have heard, and perhaps less often, those who have acted wisely in what children have had to say*'.

One of the primary reasons for the development of the Lundy model was to emphasise that *'voice is not enough'* and that children must be guaranteed the opportunity to communicate their views to a receptive audience (Lundy, 2007). 'Audience' is described by Lundy (2007: 937) as '*a guaranteed opportunity to communicate views to an identifiable individual or body with the responsibility to listen'*. It is notable that the 'audience' domain of the Lundy model is probably the least discussed in the literature. This may be because of an assumption that it is directly linked with the provisions of Article 12 of the UNCRC. Welty and Lundy (2013) have added to the debate on the role of audience by arguing that there is a need to ensure that children have the right to an audience. It may be that in the minds of commentators, the domains of audience and influence are intertwined more closely than the other domains, and this is perhaps worthy of further scrutiny.

'Influence' in the Lundy model refers to the impact of children's participation on the decision-making processes and by extension on their everyday lives. Stephenson et al., (2004: 4) make the connection with influence in their definition of participation as '*children influencing issues affecting their lives, by speaking out or taking action in partnership with adults'*. The extent to which children's participation influences decision-making processes at several levels is not clear, and this is discussed further in this review. However, one aspect of 'influence' that Lundy

promotes is the importance of giving feedback to children. This is supported by MacNaughton and Smith (2009), while Kelley (2006) finds that many participation processes often fail to respond to children's views by providing feedback. Hill et al., (2004) suggest that participation may be meaningful but argue that if children's views are heard but no action is taken, then consultation is seen mostly as a stand-in for participation.

Another participation model often referred to, while not exclusively related to child participation, is that of Sherry Arnstein (1969).

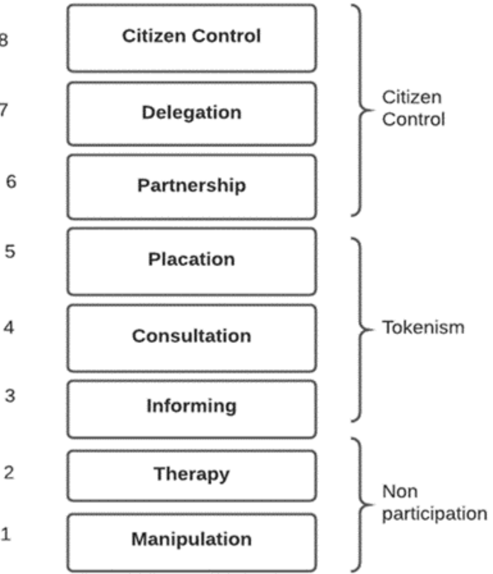


Figure 7: Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation

This model, or ladder, of citizen participation reflects various stages of citizens' participation in planning and decision-making, ranking from low (manipulation) to high (citizen-control) (see Figure 7). First published in 1969, the participation of citizens in planning and decision-making is still ranked using this model. In Arnstein's model, 'Manipulation' and 'Therapy' are categorised as 'Non-Participation'. Tokenistic participation has three levels: 'Informing', 'Consulting' and 'Placating'. 'Informing' is seen as a one-way flow of information, with no opportunities for feedback. 'Consulting' includes an invitation for citizens to share their opinions, but Arnstein argues that this is '*still a sham since it offers no assurance that citizen concerns and ideas will be taken into account'* (1969: 219). 'Placating' ranks higher as a tokenistic form of participation as Arnstein describes how those considered worthy are entitled to participate, but the decision-makers retain the power. The last and optimum section of the ladder is Citizen Power, which has three levels: 'Partnership', 'Delegated Power' and 'Citizen

Control'. These forms of participation are thought to increase the power and control of citizens in decision-making processes.

Another linear model is Hart's ladder of children's participation (1992). This model identifies eight levels of participation, ranging from low (manipulation) to high (child initiated, shared decisions with adults). Hart's ladder has been critiqued for suggesting that all meaningful participation activities should be at the top rungs of the ladder, and that progress is linear moving from one rung to the next (Tisdall & Liebel, 2008). Since 1992, Hart has pulled back from his linear model, and has suggested that this was originally intended to facilitate debate and become a jumping-off point for reflection, rather than a model of participation (Hart, 2008). He now agrees that different forms of participation may be appropriate in different contexts. Hultgren and Johansson (2019:377) argue that models which build on hierarchical ladders of children's participation *'become problematic when designing or evaluating participative activities for young children'*. Other writers have moved away from the symbolism of a ladder and towards a less hierarchical typology. Lansdown's (2001) model aims to enable children to identify their own goals and initiatives. Tisdall (2015:8) finds that participation models are becoming more complex, with *'wider recognition of institutional, social, political, cultural and economic influences, and the mechanisms to increase children and young people's involvement'* and argues that they do not fully address or interrogate the meaning of participation. Generally, these models or typologies all see participation as a process, occurring within and between various domains or levels. The difference for the reader is the extent to which the focus is on these processes as means to facilitating meaningful participation, or to achieving an optimum form of participation.

3.4.4 Consulting with children

For some commentators, consultation is a sub-category of participation (Thomas, 2007), while for others it is a separate concept entirely (Shier, 2001). The terms 'child consultation', 'participation', 'children's voice' and 'listening to children' are often used interchangeably, and according to Coleyshaw et al., (2010) each of these terms resists clear definition. Hayes (2004) points out that the term 'consultation' has a multiplicity of meanings, which she suggests may be partly because of the prevailing conceptions of early childhood, and what young children can be expected or able to contribute. For some, consultation means including children at a 'vox pop' level on issues that are easily and automatically associated with childhood, such as toys or playgrounds. The term 'consultation' is suggestive of a power

imbalance since it is usually the adult that determines the topic of the consultation, according to Davies and Artaraz (2009), particularly where young children are concerned. However, Borland's definition of consultation involves seeking the views of children as a guide to action (2001), which suggests consultation can and should impact on decision-making processes. Clark et al., (2003) found two different and nuanced purposes for listening to young children in ECCE settings: everyday listening by practitioners that gives young children opportunities for decision-making in everyday routines and activities; and one-off consultation with young children about a particular issue.

There are several studies highlighting that different approaches may be needed in ECCE to develop genuine opportunities to consult with children. In their seminal work, 'Listening to Young Children: The Mosaic approach', Clark and Moss (2011) argue that adults (educators and researchers) should access young children's voices by working as co-investigators alongside children, using largely task-based methods and tools such as child-led photography, tours, mapping, art, and child-conferencing. The Mosaic approach was influenced by the principles of PAR (Clark and Moss, 2001) which came to prominence in the field of childhood studies (James et al., 2002). However, there are tensions evident in this approach. Clark (2010) argues that the participatory underpinning of the Mosaic approach derives mainly from children's participation in research tasks, and therefore, during the observation period of the Mosaic approach, the researcher is advised to remain detached from interactions with children. While a detached, objective, and scientific approach is more in keeping with a positivist paradigm (Dahlberg et al., 2007; Blaisdell, 2012), the impact of the adult stepping back from the process may result in increased levels of child participation.

Lewis (2010) finds that the nuances of participation are often neglected in Mosaic studies. Meanwhile, the expectation that children will participate appropriately following the process of selection, with guidelines on how to participate provided by adults and an adult-led interpretation of the data, means that for some commentators there is a risk is that the 'voice of the child' may be falsely represented (Komulainen, 2007). This representation can generate an uncritical image of young children as coherent, autonomous and agentic (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008:511), whereas in reality, adults and children alike '*are all fallible: imperfect and naive, learning and changing; "immature" rather than fully formed, rational, competent and autonomous agents'*. It is suggested in critiques of this method that despite the clear intention to design an inclusive methodology (Blaisdell, 2012), the Mosaic approach has yet to

address the inclusion of children who do not display *'adult-centric autonomous behaviour'* (Cocks, 2006:257).

The potential benefits of conducting consultations with children are frequently discussed in the participation literature. Hudson (2012) states these include: the development of better policy and practice that more clearly reflects children's views and understandings; the development of skills, knowledge and understanding of civic rights and responsibilities amongst participants; and increased levels of confidence and self-esteem for child participants. Clark et al.'s (2003) audit of the evidence of impact for listening to young children across three levels, individual, institutional, and strategic, revealed that young children experienced increased self-esteem, increased social competencies and clearer insight into decision-making processes. Theobald et al., (2011) summarise the benefits and impacts of participatory initiatives as giving children control over their decisions and building democratic processes. Lansdown (2001) sets out the benefits of participation in terms of its benefits to children, adults, and agencies. In summary, these benefits include better decisions; a strengthened commitment to, and understanding of, democracy; children being better protected, and respect for a fundamental human right. She finds that children become self-advocates as they work towards meeting their own interests.

3.4.5 The nature of young children's participation

Article 12 of the UNCRC gives children the right to influence matters that concern them. However, Lancaster (2010) suggests that there is an expectation arising from the wording of the article that adults will take responsibility for decision-making, while giving due weight to the child's perspective. This expectation sees the adult called on to consider the child's age, maturity, and competence, which means that children's entitlements are bounded and dependent on the interpretation of the adult (Coleyshaw et al., 2010).

Much of the literature on children's participation in decision-making relates to health-care provision. Moore and Kirk's 2010 study found that health professionals are concerned with ensuring children are protected while not preventing children's rights to participate from being enacted. In Sweden, the participation of children in health-care decisions was observed, and parents and healthcare professionals were noted to influence children's active participation. In this study, the younger the child the less optimal the participation (Quayne et al., 2019). In child protection and welfare contexts, Kennan et al., (2017) found limited evidence of children and young people's views resulting in tangible changes in planning and decision-making

processes. In relation to community participation, Forde et al., (2017) found that while children participate in a wide range of activities in their communities, they have limited opportunities for participation in decisions affecting them.

Coyne (2008) found that children (of all ages) are not always actively involved in consultations or decision-making about their health. She concluded that children appear to occupy a marginalised role in both health-care encounters and decision-making processes and their participation is heavily influenced by parents and health professionals. In contrast, Sheridan and Samuelsson (2001) concluded that young children can exert their influence, and through participation they learn that their views and opinions are respected and valued. Emilson (2007) examined young children's participation during 'circle time' in ECCE settings and found that the extent of the influence of children's participation was largely dependent on practitioner attitudes.

There is a recognition of a lack of research on the impacts or influence of decision-making processes on improvements in service delivery. Kellet (2009) suggests that while it is possible to find some pockets of evidence of service improvement directly attributed to children's participation, overall, she agrees with Sinclair (2004) that there is limited evidence of any significant impact of their participation in relation to improvements or change in service delivery. Clark et al., (2003) in their review of the evidence, found few examples of the impact of young children's views on change at a strategic level.

However, there have been some examples of this emerging in the literature. Larkins and Crowley (2018) and Larkins et al., (2014) provide examples and case studies of children's participation in national and international public decision-making processes. In relation to the participation of young children, Dockett et al., (2011:33) facilitated a consultation process involving young children in the redesign of a space for children at the Australian Museum. Harris and Manatakis (2013) reported on a project that consulted with young children on the development of a strategic Plan for Children of the Australian Capital Territory. Garrick et al., (2010) explored young children's experiences of the English early years' curriculum in a project commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families. Bath (2013) found that Garrick's study highlighted the potential for involving children in planning, decision-making processes, and assessment opportunities in their settings. Freeman et al., (2017) conducted a study with pre-schoolers that supported city planning in New Zealand, while a study by Ergler et al., (2020) looked at the potential for young children to shape decisions on urban environments

Almqvist & Almqvist's study in 2015 explored young children's experiences of empowerment in their preschools, while Winter (2012) studied the perspectives of young children in Northern Ireland who are in state care by employing reality boxes as a way of eliciting their views. This study offered implications for social work practice in Northern Ireland as a result of young children's participation.

In Ireland, there are some recent examples of including young children in policy development processes. Horgan (2017) reported on a consultation process with children aged five to eight years on their perspectives on afterschool provision for the DCYA (2017). Coyne et al., (2018) conducted a consultation with young children (aged three to five years) on their likes, dislikes and wishes as part of the development of the First 5 Strategy (DCYA, 2019). Another Irish example is the Start Strong (2011) child consultations that fed into the development of the Start Strong Children 2020 project. Young children (aged from nine months to five years) were involved in the development of Aistear in 2007 through a research study called Listening for Children's voices: Children as partners in the Framework for Early Learning (Daly et al., 2007).

These Irish and international studies all employed creative and participatory tools and techniques that facilitated and maximised young children's competencies, agency and preferences (Coyne et al., 2021). The findings from these studies illustrate the potential for young children to be research participants, and as having the capacity to share their views and opinions on a theme or topic. The findings also highlight young children's competencies and capacities for participation and point to the importance of starting from the premise that young children can participate and share their views and perspectives, rather than assuming they cannot (Winter 2012). The findings of these studies all support the contention of the DCYA (2018) that young children are active and creative individuals and members of society, with their own distinctive perspectives, preferences, life experiences and challenges.

3.4.6 Policymakers' responses to young children's participation

There is a stated commitment by decision-makers to foster children's participation and provide opportunities for children to express their views (Bessell, 2009). Indeed, decision-makers are referred to in much of the literature as *'duty-holders'* and children as *'rights-bearers'* (Tisdall, 2015; Hayes and Bradley, 2009) and this is a recognition of the rights underpinning participatory practices across all levels of decision-making. Yet the extent to which child participation influences decision-making processes is still up for debate

Writers such as Hill et al., (2004) argue that children's participation is *'now valued as a normative principle by policy-makers'*. Badham's (2004:153) concern is that there remains a *'gap between the high tide of rhetoric of participation and the low tide on effective delivery of improved services for those most socially excluded'*. Horgan (2017:105) neatly sums up the evidence base on the extent to which children's participation influences policy decision makers as follows: *'despite the flurry of participatory activity in recent years … there is less evidence that children and young people's actions are having real influence on the policy-makers whose decisions affect their life-chances and well-being'*.

The literature concerned with decision-makers' attitudes towards child participation, and by extension on childhood itself, is generally limited. Broadly, the existing literature suggests that the views of many decision-makers appear to be based on an idealised view of children and childhood and how child welfare needs are identified (Duggan and Corrigan, 2009). There is a persistent view that children, particularly young children, are excluded from decision-making processes because of concerns regarding their capacity to participate meaningfully. Matthews et al., (1999: 137) noted that an argument made against young children's participation is *'the conviction that children are incapable of reasonable and rational decision-making'*. There is a sense in some commentary that while the principle of child participation itself is taken seriously by policymakers, children's contributions and inputs resulting from their participation are not treated seriously. Perry-Hazan (2016) demonstrates that children's contributions in policy decision-making processes can invoke extreme reactions and responses in adults, expressed as either fawning or dismissing, which she suggests are manifestations of adultism. Byrne and Lundy (2015) found little evidence of children's views directly informing policy-making processes, and Horgan et al., (2015) point to a lack of evidence of both the involvement and impact of children's participation in policy processes. Kilkelly (2007) finds that the voices of certain groups of children and young people are excluded in policy development even when relevant to their own circumstances. Kelleher et al., (2014:1) suggest that many children do not have access to participation structures, and services that '*target their needs are not adequately enabling the voice of these young people to be heard. Seldom-heard young people are thus young people whose voices are not heard in decisions that affect them'*.

The term 'seldom-heard' is widely used in the literature to refer to groups of children who are under-represented or not represented at all in consultation or participation processes. Identifying which groups of children are 'seldom-heard' is described as a complex issue and one that must be considered sensitively (Williamson et al., 2009). It is suggested that it may

best be described as an *'umbrella term which encompasses groups of great diversity and complexity that have in common their isolation from both mainstream and targeted participatory activities'* (Kelleher et al., 2014:24).

Kelleher et al., (2014) further outline certain characteristics of seldom heard children including specific demographic, cultural, behavioural, attitudinal, and structural factors. However, they cite McAuley & Brattman (2002) who argue that it is preferable to consider seldom-heard children as having additional and unmet support needs, rather than labelling them. Smail (2007) attempts to identify a number of child and young person groupings as being generally under-represented and seldom heard in policy processes including: children and young people from travelling communities, children and young people in care, and those not in education. Arising from their review of the literature, Kelleher et al., (2014:24) contend that being seldom-heard should not be taken to mean an inherent competency issue precluding child participation, but rather should be seen as a deficit in the enabling participatory structures organisation and services. They summarise by suggesting that '*ultimately it is the case that organisations and service providers are not looking hard enough, or in the right places, and are not providing the appropriate opportunities for participation for some young people'*.

It is notable, that despite so few examples of being heard in policy development processes, young children are not often identified in the literature as a seldom-heard grouping. As they seem to share the characteristics and to lack the enabling structures to support their participation of other grouping, this is problematic. Indeed, the vast majority the literature on seldom-heard children is concerned with the lack of opportunities to be heard of older children and young people. Kelleher (2014) does point to the exclusion of young children, and Roe and McEvoy (2011) identify young children as a group that is seldom-heard and thus, less engaged in participatory structures and processes, but the absence of this population of children in literature concerned with this issue is notable.

A central theme in the child participation debate relates to whose perspective is heard, which children get to speak and for whom (Cobb et al., 2005). The literature points to broad groupings of children who are more likely than others to be consulted with by policymakers. Frazer and Devlin (2011) describe how participatory structures tend to be more inclusive of articulate children who are thought to have greater capacities for participation. There is a tendency evident in the discourse for policymakers to rely on the participation of children and young people from youth parliaments, student councils, youth forums and other semi-formal elite structures, or from the self-nomination of children and young people. Tisdall and Davis (2004)

suggest that these structured spaces and channels of consultation and participation can create a filtering effect that decreases children's representations and reduces the chances of reaching diverse child voices. Matthews and Limb, (2003) caution that limiting children's voices to such elite fora can result in a culture of passivity or even of cynicism for other children about their non-participation and non-representation.

So, it appears from the literature that while policy nationally and internationally acknowledges that children's views should be sought out and represented across the spectrum of decision-making processes, certain groups of children including young children are not at all influential on decision-making processes at strategic level. This could be for several reasons, including ideas about younger children's capacity to participate and express a valid opinion and concerns about suitable methodologies, but there is a growing consensus that without an enabling and supportive structure in place, the voices of certain groups of children, including young children will continue to be marginalised.

3.4.7 Impacts of child participation on decision-making processes

While youth forums have been widely acknowledged as the preferential child participatory space for decision-makers, there is limited international research to date that has focused on the experiences of children and young people in, or on the opportunities offered by, formal participatory structures and channels. Tisdall and Davis (2006) propose that the child participation literature has been largely self-referential in its consideration of the impact of participation on policy development. Perry-Hazan (2019) goes further in judging the child participation literature to be largely uncritical and suggesting that the reasons for this are socio-historical, and rooted in the need to raise the profile of children in research, which may explain the lack of critical reflection on how children's voices are used in participatory processes.

In terms of the influence of children's participation on the outcomes of policy decision-making processes, the evidence is scant. Neary and A'Drake (2006) cited in Tisdall et al., (2008), found that while children described the experience of participating in a board advising the Ministry of Education as beneficial, there was no evidence of any impact on decision-making by the board. Tisdall (2007) conducted a study on the impact of a student council and found that 40% of children in the school did not think their participation in the council meant that they had a say in how the school was run. Two studies by Matthews (2001) and Collins et al., (2016) found that decision-makers and young people broadly contend that there are positive outcomes of consulting with a youth forum, such as opportunities to influence policy, the ability to make

a difference as well as personal development. However, Matthews (2001) found that these processes could be tokenistic and not fully representative of young people's views. Whiting et al., (2018) analysed the extent to which youth councils interact with formal participation structures, however, their study does not measure the impact of the forum on decision-making processes. Adshead (2019) finds that formal structures support citizen engagement and the integration of children's voices into the broader governance agenda at local level.

Patrikios and Shephard's (2014) study on the Scottish Youth Parliament concluded that its membership is broadly representative of the youth population and that members perceive positive impacts from their experiences but offers no substantive evidence of its influence on strategic and policy development processes. Notably, there is little known either on the participation of young children in this respect, or on how these structures strengthen the potential for children's views to influence decision-making processes at strategic level. This is likely to be because of the almost complete absence of young children's opportunities to participate in these structures. Therefore, the appropriateness of these structures as channels for young children's participation is not articulated in the literature, or suggestions on more appropriate channels or processes are not put forward.

3.4.8 Impacts of participation on policy development

Policymaking is one of the most challenging areas for the implementation of children's participation rights, according to Horgan (2017). Yet there are few studies that examine the interaction between policy development processes and the views and attitudes of policymakers towards children's participation. Marshall et al., (2015:18) discuss how decision-makers, facilitators, and children experience participation in public decision-making, and propose that face-to-face dialogue between policymakers and children is more likely to result in more meaningful responses from policy makers. However, they conclude that it is '*not appropriate for children and young people to be asked to participate directly when decision-makers are not in a position to ensure that their engagement will be transparent, respectful, relevant and accountable'*. This suggests that participatory processes could benefit from policymakers' engagement in reflection on their own values and attitudes prior to a participatory process, yet there is little evidence in any of the literature that this is occurring.

Kennan et al., (2016) summarise the themes emerging from the literature on outcomes of participatory practices on decision-making processes and point out that there is little evidence as to the effectiveness of structures set up to enable children's participation at the governance

level. However, there is evidence that these structures have a positive influence on children and young people's personal development, they argue. Overall, the limited research available indicates that children and young people have had little direct influence on decisions taken pertaining to the governance of an organisation or at the policy level.

Perry-Hazan's (2016) important study sought to address this gap in knowledge. The study found that a there is potential from children's participation to influence national policy decision-making processes and to contextualise policy decisions. However, the study uncovered extreme reactions by policy makers in Israel to children's comments (described as either fawning or dismissive) and suggested that both participating children and decision-makers need support so that child participation can be effective and engaging of diverse voices. As a result of evidence of decision-makers not necessarily taking children's perspectives seriously, there has been some discussion in the literature in relation to the validation of consultation practices that involve children. For example, there have been calls for strengthening the skill sets of adults in decision-making roles. Other writers have urged a different approach, such as Hill et al., (2004), who propose that an approach based on participative as well as democratic principles may create opportunities for children and young people to determine how they wish to participate. Tisdall et al., (2014) call for a refined approach, and suggest that rather than being consulted about specific policy areas, children should have the opportunity to identify the issues that are important to them and these areas should be adopted by policy makers as part of policy development. Co-production, she contends, has the most potential for participation that is meaningful, effective, and sustainable

3.4.9 Conclusion

The body of work that looks at children's participation in decision-making processes in organisational, social, and legal contexts, local democracy, and strategic policy decision-making is mostly related to older children and young people. Much of the literature focusses on procedures, models, and methods to understand, enhance, and support participation, and there is a noticeable lack of detail on the influence or impact of young children's participation outside of these organisational or specific local contexts.

3.5 Section Four. Democracy, Citizenship, Ethics and Child-centredness in ECCE

3.5.1 Introduction

This section will review literature on the classical theorists and introduce more modern commentary on the concepts of democracy, citizenship and child-centredness as they pertain to young children's learning environments. The section looks at these concepts separately and then introduces literature on early years' approaches and curricula that integrate these concepts into their approaches. This aspect of the review draws on literature that highlights where democratic practices are more likely to take root and contrasts these approaches with more market-driven positions on the provision of care and education of young children, which start from a different value position. It moves on to consider literature on ethical practice in the ECCE, as this is considered by commentators to be an essential aspect of democratic and inclusive practice. Clarifying the literature on reflective practice in ECCE is important for this study as reflective practitioners are more likely to be critical thinkers with the capacity to unpack many of the key concepts or 'big ideas' referred to in the literature on these themes.

3.5.2 Theorising Democracy

Participation is a key concept in theories of democracy, both as a political, legal, and administrative status, and as normative concept or theory, according to Kymlicka and Norman (1994). While there is no broad consensus in the literature on how to define democracy, it is generally agreed that it is a form of rule by the people rather than a single individual or minority group, where the subjects of power (citizens) decide how power is to be exercised. Democracy is usually characterised by freedoms (e.g. free speech, freedom to vote and freedoms of the press and individual freedoms and choices), equality, and the representative participation of citizens in political decision-making. However, democracy is hugely varied in its recognised forms globally, and is context dependent (White and Openshaw, 2005). In terms of democracy and early childhood, writers such as Dahlberg and Moss (2005), Bae (2009), Rinaldi (2006), Moss (2008) and Biesta (2009) argue that the concept of democracy can be understood either with reference to the more formal aspects just mentioned, or alternatively the emphasis can be on democracy as a process, or a phenomenon created by the participants. Dewey (1939) argued that democracy as a fundamental value is central not only to formal political life but to everyday life, interactions, and relationships.

3.5.3 Democracy and education

Democracy was an important concept for theorists such as Dewey, Freire and Malaguzzi (Moss 2011). Dewey (1902, 1916, 1933, and 1939) proposed that to preserve and protect the will of the majority rather than the powerful or elite, decision-making processes must involve discussion, dialogue, consultation, persuasion, and debate (Morris and Shapiro, 1993). According to Dewey, democracy underpins social inquiry and public discussion. He proposes that a democratic society will seek to achieve desirable goals but must argue and debate over how to do so (Festenstein, 2014). Dewey believed that democracy requires freedom and individuality that, when exercised properly, supports the common good. However, he argues that freedom alone is not enough, and that a structure is required to maximize the benefits of democracy. His arguments raise important questions about the value of democracy and the justifications for child participation.

When applying his principles of democracy to education, Dewey argues that learning is a social and interactive process, and that as school is a democratic institution, fostering democratic experiences should be one of the aims of education. Dewey's application of the principles of democracy to education is only one strand of his observations on education, learning and development, and incidentally, remains one of his lesser-known contributions. Much of Dewey's work on education still resonates with ECCE practice and policy in Ireland, particularly with ideas related to children's experiential learning. For example, Dewey is referenced in Aistear (NCCA, 2009). However, he appears to be misinterpreted by some commentators as proposing a form of democratic education that promotes unstructured freedom for children and with an excessive emphasis on child-centredness, which minimises the important role of the educator (Maher, 2001).

The values of democracy were the impetus for other educational theorists such as Freire and Malaguzzi. Freire proposed that a key goal of education is to teach children to think democratically and to question and critique as they learn. He described this as a 'critical pedagogy' in his book The Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1972). In this seminal work, Freire argued that pedagogy is a political and moral practice that supports the development of dialogue and citizenship, while at the same time facilitates the child's participation in a substantive democracy. He proposes that education should be about critical thinking, freedom, pursuit of the imagination and social responsibility, rather than the static transmission of knowledge that he refers to dismissively as 'banking'. Critical thinking, according to Freire, is a tool for self-determination, civic engagement, and citizenship (1972) and is the basis of

transformative social justice learning. Freire (1972) argued that it is crucial to have a dialogue that creates partnerships between the educator and child. Freire's work still has currency in ECCE literature, policy, and practice although he uses language that at times is abstract and complex. Critiques of Freire such as Giroux (1993) argue that by not using the language of the 'oppressed', this abstraction alienates rather than includes.

Loris Malaguzzi (1920-94) was an educator from Reggio Emilia in Northern Italy whose ideas about democratic education led to the development of a network of publicly funded and progressive preschools that viewed education as a moral and ethical practice. Like Freire, Malaguzzi believed that education required spaces where democratic practices could flourish. His philosophy of education was based on his belief that children should emerge as critical thinkers and rational, expressive, and concerned members of their communities (1993, 1998). Malaguzzi's values, according to Moss (2016), included participation and democracy. Schools, in Malaguzzi's vision, are public spaces welcoming of parents and other citizens, capable of breaking down unhelpful boundaries, and open to the surrounding neighbourhoods. Malaguzzi is not noted as a prolific author, but his work has influenced other theorists and his philosophy is often represented through secondary sources or from interviews. However, his core ideas have been disseminated widely, and continue to inspire and provoke reactions in the literature on democratic possibilities in ECCE systems.

Even though there is a consensus in the literature that there is a correlation between education and democracy, there are differences in how democratic politics and education are expressed in relation to how they each relate to authority, leading to a questioning of the extent to which education can be truly democratic. Educational spaces can be perceived as terrains of struggle (Giroux 2003), characterised by contradictory values and principles in relation to democracy, power, and authority. Today the application of democratic principles and practices in ECCE still has its proponents, most notably Moss (2007; 2011), Dahlberg and Moss (2005), Fielding and Moss (2010) and Moss and Urban (2010), but it appears that democracy as a concept is no longer a prominent theme in ECCE literature. Moss himself suggests that the discourse on ECCE as a democratic practice has been overtaken by debates on quality and market forces (2011). In contrast with the direction of much of the commentary, children's everyday lives in ECCE settings are described as being '*filled with activities that contain elements of democracy, such as negotiations and compromises, shared planning and above all listening to each other's views'* (Broström, 2012:2). Moss and Urban (2010) argue in favour of democracy, dialogue and experimentation as fundamental values and practices for early education. Some of the

attitudes, values and behaviours that are significant in a democratic community they suggest are '*plurality, respect for difference, dialogue, listening, deliberation, shared enquiry, critical judgment, cooperation, collective decision-making, individual freedom, the common good, and participation'* (Moss, 2009: 1).

3.5.4 Citizenship in early childhood

Citizenship remains a contested concept, especially in the literature pertaining to children (Lister, 2007). Marshall's (1950) identification of citizenship as a status given to members of a community encompassing civil citizenship (all that comes with having equal status before the law), political citizenship (one's status as an equal in a representative democracy), and social citizenship (the basic services needed to ensure all have the social and economic resources needed to be equal members of the community) still resonates (Hindness, 1993). However, this characterisation has been critiqued by feminist commentators as being too Anglo-centric and gender biased (Fraser and Gordon, 1992) while neoliberal commentators challenge Marshall's validation of social rights. The key elements in Marshall's conceptualisation of citizenship are membership of a community, the rights and duties that flow from membership, and equality of status. Faulks (2000) further distinguishes between civil rights and market rights (including property ownership) and civil rights and civil liberties (including freedom of speech). Other elements such as participation rights have been added since Marshall's original work, and participation is increasingly seen as a hallmark of a democratic community (Woods, 2011).

Lister (2007) argues that at a formal level, citizenship denotes membership of a nation state, recognised by the holding of a passport, but that the substantive meaning of citizenship is more expansive, as it concerns social and democratic engagement. Thus, citizenship becomes an activity as well as a legal status. This concept of 'active citizenship' is prominent in recent commentary and policy documents. The Irish Taskforce on Active Citizenship (2007:5) expands on narrower concepts of citizenship as a status, defining it as '*the voluntary capacity of citizens and communities working directly together, or through elected representatives, to exercise economic, social and political power in pursuit of shared goals'*.

Citizenship is associated with rights and duties. Legal age provisions can provide the basis for children to exercise their citizenship rights yet can also impose limitations on children's ability to participate in decision-making processes (De Rijk et al., 2005). Discourse on children's citizenship often points to the rights children are not awarded, but it needs to be acknowledged

that children are freed from many duties that adults have, including legal responsibility for their actions. It should be noted that the age of legal responsibility varies with legal jurisdictions, but nonetheless children above a certain age are held legally accountable for their actions. The role of parents, mediating between children and the wider community, is central to making sense of children's citizenship as a fledgling status that is continuously under construction (Neale et al., 2004).

Contemporary policy discourse related to childhood increasingly includes the concept of citizenship, yet there is no clarity as to what children's citizenship means (Phillips, 2011). The UNCRC identifies children as rights-bearing citizens, and accordingly places an obligation on states to ensure that children are active citizens and not merely passively governed (Stasiulis, 2002). Commentators view the participation of children in civic society as an acknowledgement of their democratic rights as citizens (Butler et al., 2009; Ärlemalm-Hagser & Davis, 2014). Much of the commentary since 1989 therefore frames children's citizenship largely within the context of participation rights as articulated in the UNCRC. Facilitating the participation of children, especially in the development of children's legislation and policy development, is recognised widely as crucial for the realisation of the citizenship status of children (Tisdall, 2008).

Despite this articulation, many researchers agree that children continue to be marginalised and largely excluded from discussions of citizenship and democracy and from decision-making processes. Larkins (2014) argues that children's relationship with citizenship as a status is not fully settled, as they are awarded some rights, yet denied others. The notion that young children can participate meaningfully in decision-making is often met with scepticism (MacNaughton et al., 2007), reflecting the scepticism noted by Mullen (2007) related to the capacity of the young children for autonomous self-regulation, as set out in 3.3.6.

Hinton (2008) argues that the debate on the concept of citizenship in childhood largely focuses on the dominant theories of childhood and on the tensions between viewing children as having the right to self-determination, while simultaneously needing protection. Lansdown (2005) outlines the dominant and conventional assumptions of childhood that impact on these debates including perspectives that see childhood as a universal process, that adults have normative status, that development goals are universal, that deviation from the norm indicates risk for the child, and that childhood is an extended period of dependence requiring adult protection. Therefore, it is suggested that it is only when adults view children as competent that they can participate in decisions affecting their lives (MacNaughton et al., 2007). Potentially this creates

a major barrier to real citizenship for children in that adults are always mediating in their lives, effectively removing them from the public arena where decisions affecting their lives are taken (Cohen, 2005; Wyness, 2001). This discourse sees that there are limits on access to citizenship for children as it considers the child as lacking competence, being immature, in need of nurturing and protection and as a human being in preparation for adult life or future citizenship. Wyness (2001: 193) equates this deficit model of childhood to a form of apprenticeship in which the '*incomplete child is compared with the fully functioning, ontologically established adult'*. Bessel (2006; 2009) elaborates further on this comparison by arguing that adult competencies are often measured against the perceived incompetence of the child.

Being classified as incompetent can become a justification for children's exclusion from citizenship, as they are afforded protection and provision rights but denied political rights. In contrast, adults retain their democratic rights even when their competence is questioned. In the legal and clinical contexts related to adult decision-making, competence is associated with *'diagnostic criteria for determining an individual's ability to make important life decisions'* (Finucane and Lees, 2005:6) rather than being age-dependent, as is the case with children.

Lister et al., (2005) point out that the perception of citizenship as a status to be attained in the future undermines children, in that it assumes they are not citizens in the present. Children are therefore only deemed to be competent once they have reached a point (decided upon by adults) at which they are able to exercise their social, economic, and political rights and simultaneously manage the moral and social obligations of being a citizen (Wyness, 2001). Cohen (2005) argues that children have political interests and needs and not all these interests and needs are linked to the future adults that they will become.

3.5.5 Ethical, political, and democratic practices in ECCE

The literature demonstrates that ECCE has the potential to become a participatory forum, however it is debatable whether democracy and citizenship are at the heart of ECCE policy, discourse, and practice in Ireland. Policy approaches to ECCE reflect underlying perspectives on its nature and purpose of ECCE: if the purpose of ECCE is school readiness or childcare that enables paid employment, the literature suggests that this can inhibit the potential to promote citizenship and a democratic learning community. Brogaard-Clausen's (2015) comparison of ECCE systems in Denmark and the UK reveals tensions between democratic participation in early years' communities and policy agendas that emphasize preparation for

school or 'schoolification'. This comparison is relevant as there is a trend in Ireland to focus on measurable and predetermined learning outcomes in ECCE, perhaps to the neglect of learning dispositions, and opportunities that equip young children for lifelong learning, especially related to social learning, civic engagement, social responsibility, and problem solving.

The UNCRC has prompted interest in citizenship as a goal for policy and practice in ECCE provision. A rights-based analysis of policy and practice is rooted in recognition that children are entitled to participate in decisions that affect their lives. Mitchell and Carr (2014) argue that this differs significantly from the predominant approach in ECCE practice that focuses on promoting children's development rather than on respecting and protecting their rights. While it is argued that the two approaches are not mutually exclusive, they do result in profoundly different emphases, objectives, and strategies for practice. Market, consumerist, 'schoolification' and quality-driven approaches rarely value democratic approaches in the practice of ECCE, and it is argued they cannot but be at odds with each other (Moss, 2011; Carr and Hartnett, 1996). Moss (2006:12) points out that there are other understandings of practice in ECCE that are more productive of democratic politics and ethics as '*first practice'*. These understandings have influenced and inspired a range of international curricula such as Reggio Emila (Italy), Te Whāriki (New Zealand), Demokratie Leben (Germany), The Early Years Curriculum of Sweden, Froebel, and Steiner Waldorf. The OECD (2001, 2006) found that countries with well-integrated ECCE systems that consider children as rights-holders (such as the Nordic countries), are more successful in creating the conditions for democracy to flourish. They contrast this with the less-than-ideal conditions prevailing under a fragmented ECCE system (such as in Ireland and the UK). A key and explicitly stated value in the Nordic tradition is that ECCE services are part of an upbringing to democracy (Wagner and Einarsdottir, 2006; Bae, 2009). Moss (2007:10) argues that while the Nordic curricula explicitly recognise '*democracy as a value, the English curricula do not'*. Norwegian curricula documents envisage ECCE settings as places where children should experience democratic relations, along with rich opportunities to play. These are values that EYPs in Norway are obliged to understand (Bae, 2010). However, she identified risks with this approach if practitioners, eager to implement these new ideas who exclusively view children as autonomous, competent beings. These EYPs can in turn, under-estimate children's dependencies and vulnerabilities, resulting in practices that are more concerned with individualistic self-determination.

In Ireland, the influence of these international curricula traditions and approaches is referred to in the background literature (French, 2007) for Aistear (NCCA, 2009). It is suggested that practitioners who strive to provide an inclusive learning experience should frame their practice using democracy as a guiding principle. Irish practitioners are advised to recognise a broad range of issues as valid topics for inclusive dialogue and joint decision-making, and to view children as capable because they have their own individual experiences, ideas, and perspectives to bring to the discussion (French, 2007). Even though citizenship is a principle in Aistear, the emphasis on citizenship and democracy in the Irish ECCE policy landscape overall is perhaps less overt than, for example, in New Zealand. Bae's analysis (2010) demonstrates the critical importance of the sociocultural and democratic framing of New Zealand's early childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki.

A dominant discourse that may conflict with commitments to democracy but that underpins much ECCE policy, views children as future adults (Qvortrup, 2004, 2009). Moss and Petrie (2002) have advocated an alternative discourse on ECCE, which they argue should be based upon the principles and values that concern children, childhood, parents, and society. Moss (2008) gives examples of values that he suggests need to be shared among the ECCE community for democratic and experimental practice to flourish. In a curriculum that values democracy, he argues, practitioners should pay attention to the following: belonging to the community, the creation and co-creation of knowledge, children sharing ideas and exploring together with practitioners providing information listening, taking responsibility, and having an eye on the common good.

In Ireland, the 'Model Framework' for the development of the ECCE sector (DoJELR, 2002) sets out a series of values and principles for practice, and while not explicitly referencing democracy or citizenship as a core value, the values and principles set out connect with the essential ideas needed for democratic practices to emerge in practice. Siolta outlines the skills, knowledge, values, and attitudes that are appropriate to the professional role and responsibilities of the EYP, while not expanding on these values within ECCE practice (CECDE, 2006). Most recently, the DCYA (2020:7) published the first code of professional responsibilities and ethical practice for the ECCE sector in Ireland, and this document outlines a number of professional values, one of which is the belief that *'children thrive best in caring and democratic communities'*.

Other literature suggests that ECCE systems can support broad learning opportunities and experiences, including democratic participation (OECD, 2006). From this perspective, ECCE

services can be understood as sites of everyday democracy by children and adults alike (Moss, 2007). However, as the literature demonstrates, this capacity can be overlooked in a policy and practice discourse which is focused on the more technical aspects of providing early learning opportunities, and the regulation and standardisation of quality provision.

There is a substantial body of historical and contemporary literature concerned with ethics, which is the branch of philosophical knowledge and the set of theories focussed on moral principles. Loubert (1999:162) defines ethics as *'the study of rules, standards and principles that dictate right conduct among members of a society'*. Deontology, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics are the most prominent moral philosophies set out in the ethics literature. These ethical theories seek to explain the morality of and justification for, an action (Hunt & Vitell, 1986). The consensus in the early years' literature is that ethics is a key part of ECCE professional practice, and as a consequence, reflections on ethical matters become central to the work (Moss, 2010). According to Dahlberg and Moss (2005), ethics involves thinking about practice-based issues, actions and decisions and then responding ethically. There is a consensus in the literature both in Ireland and internationally that ethical practice underpins quality provision (Feeney, 2009). There is an ongoing and related discourse suggesting that ECCE is an emerging profession that is characterised with professional engagement with values, ethics, reflection, advocacy, emotion, and care (Brock 2013; Taggart 2011; Osgood 2006). Urban (2008: 144) acknowledges that ECCE *is 'a messy business ... that unfolds in interactions between children and adults, individuals and groups, families and communities, laypersons and "professionals" all pursuing their own and often contradictory interests'*.

The concept of 'quality' is a dominant theme in ECCE discourse, but this concept has been challenged by authors as problematic for its implicit links to universal, technical, managerial and measurable practices (Dahlberg et al., 1999; 2007; Moss & Pence, 1994; Urban, 2008; 2012). Urban (2008) argues that too often the language of quality is used to underpin regulations in ECCE, with the effect of undermining instead of supporting professional autonomy. Despite the awareness of the significance of quality in ECCE provision, there is a recurring perception in the literature that the profession itself is undervalued (Manning-Morton, 2006). This situation has evolved from the historical context of ECCE provision in Ireland, where care and education are separate systems, governed and structured differently (OECD, 2004). Penn (1994) argues that this makes it more difficult to develop a sense of professional confidence, which may in turn have a damaging effect on professional duty (as cited in Manning-Morton, 2006). Nonetheless, Kennedy (2009: 11) claims that *'understanding and*

responding to the ethical nature of childcare will maintain greater recognition for early years' practitioners as professionals engaged in important work'.

3.5.6 Reflective practice in ECCE

Schön is often credited with developing the term 'reflective practice' (Schön, 1983), and his work introduced the concepts of reflection-in-action (thinking on your feet) and reflection-on-action (thinking after the event). Schön's work highlights the link between professionalism and reflective practice. Recognising that professionals face unique and often challenging situations in their day-to-day practice, Schön's work has been instrumental in the development of professional reflective practice in many disciplines including education and the social sciences. Moon (2004: 82) refers to suggestions in the literature that '*reflection is no more than a form of thinking'*, and in turn suggests that *'reflection is a form of mental processing'*. Thompson and Thompson (2008: 23) propose that it is the act of thinking '*that helps us make sense of our practice'*.

Dewey (1933: 12) differentiates reflective thinking from other forms of thought as it involves a '*state of doubt, hesitation, perplexity, mental difficulty in which thinking originates'*. However, a reflective thinker will be *'willing to endure suspense and to undergo the trouble of searching'* as well as to *'sustain and protract the state of doubt'* (Dewey, 1933: 16) to seek out the optimum answer. Dewey's (1933) distinction between 'routine action' (action formed out of habit and routine) and 'reflective action' (action that arises from careful consideration and justification) is cited frequently in the literature. Dewey is attributed with having developed the idea of reflection on practice as being critical to the development of professional practice (MacNaughton, 2003).

Gruska et al., (2005) describe reflective practice as a continuous cycle of reflecting on practice rather than a one-off event. There is a substantial body of literature that argues that reflective practice plays a critical role in the work that EYPs undertake with children and their families, and there is a positive relationship between practitioners who engage in reflective practice and positive outcomes for children (Sylva et al., 2004; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2008). Much of the literature on reflective practice reflects MacNaughton's (2003) ideas on the importance of developing critical thinking skills in the education and training of EYPs, to enhance their capacity to critique their own practices, assumptions, beliefs, values and what they bring to their practice. That reflective practice can guide practitioners to improve practice and

ultimately impact positively on the experiences and the outcomes for children in their care is reflected widely in the literature (Daudelin, 1996; Pollard et al., 2002).

There are many connections evident in the literature between reflective practice and democratic practices (Ritter, 2010). Dewey (1916: 84) equated democracy with a journey or process of *'associated living and conjoined communicated experience'*, suggesting it is more a path then an end. Powell (2010: 26) argues that when educators engage in reflective practices, they *'position themselves to see the possibilities inherent in the social and political nature of their work'*. Reflective practice has gained considerable currency in ECCE literature as a way of supporting quality interactions, positive early learning experiences and problem solving for practitioners, but there are considerable differences in how it is articulated and defined. Less well articulated in the literature is the role of reflective practice in promoting democratic practices, with the notable exceptions of writers such as Moss, Urban, and Dahlberg.

It is clear the discussion above that there are many interpretations of reflective practice. A synthesis of the research suggests that in ECCE, reflective practice is best described as a continuous process that involves the practitioner analysing their practice to identify what drives children's learning and development, as well as the impact of their values on children's learning and development. It is apparent that reflective practice and democratic practices are not as prominent in contemporary literature as more dominant themes such as 'quality'.

3.5.7 Developmentally Appropriate and Child-Centred Practices in ECCE

Developmentally appropriate and child-centred approaches to ECCE practice are based on developmental theories and approaches to care and learning that are centred on children's needs and interests (Wood, 2007). With roots in historical and classical scholarship (Campbell-Barr 2017), the earliest authoritative definition of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) was provided by the NAEYC (1987) in describing an approach that promotes young children's development through strengths-based and play-based approaches that are steeped in developmental theory. Copple and Bredekamp (2009: 10) describe DAP as informed by '*what we know from theory and literature about how children learn and develop'.* DAP is clearly linked to a specialised knowledge of child development theories in much of the literature and is described as a philosophy based on what is known about individual children as a basis for decision-making (Bredekamp and Rosegrant, 1992). Decisions are made about young children's learning and development based on child development knowledge, but also based

on *'family, community, societal, and cultural values, and priorities'* (Gestwicki, 2017: 7). In its fourth edition of DAP, the NAEYC (2020) outline several considerations and principles, including the need to consider commonality in children's early development and learning, the individuality of each child's unique characteristics and experiences and the context in which development and learning occur.

Child-centred practice is described by Campbell-Barr (2019) as a complex and multifaceted discourse in ECCE informed by both cultural and historical interpretations. A clear definition for the term is elusive. Chung and Walsh (2000) reviewed the use of the term 'child-centred' in the literature and provided forty different and distinct uses. A review of ECCE literature indicates that there are three broad approaches to the concept of child-centredness; democratic, romantic, and developmental (Bogatic et al., 2018). Democratic approaches are linked to the importance of the 'best interests' principle, as established in Articles 2, 3, 6 and 12 of the UNCRC, with attention paid to the child's perspective on their needs and interests (Sylva et al., 2015). The romantic approach positions the child at the centre of a social environment that meets all their needs (Bogatic et al., 2018), while the developmental approach sees the child in the centre of an environment that is organised according to the child's social, care, learning and developmental needs and interests (Chung and Walsh, 2000).

The concept of child-centredness has been described by Wood (2007) as based on a series of principles that imply the focus is on the individual child and that this individualised conceptualisation is potentially problematic in group contexts such as ECCE. In the collective, Campbell-Barr (2017: 11) argues, *'choices will be constrained by the environment and there is an inherent tension between an individualised concept of learning and one that recognises the child as part of a social group…'* Campbell-Barr (2017) refers to the work of Walkerdine (1985) who argued that child-centred approaches are paradoxical as they are based on a pedagogy that seeks to recognise children's autonomy and individualism yet grounded in theories of child development and a requirement to both monitor and achieve children's development.

Many authors who engage with child-centredness as a social construct conceptualise children as rights-bearing social actors who engage with, influence and in turn are influenced by the social worlds in which they live, play, and learn (Bessell, 2013; Qvortrup, 1994; Corsaro, 1992). Child-centredness is seen by some as an overarching approach to practice that includes the concept of children's rights (Freeman 1998), one that sees children as having the ability to speak up, and to act on their own interests (Mayall, 2000; Clark & Moss, 2011). Bae (2009:

359) argues that children's rights to participate on their own terms requires that they engage with educators and practitioners who are responsive and *'who recognise their competencies and urge to develop and learn, and who at the same time are open to aspects of vulnerability and dependence'*.

In the contexts of participation and research, child-centredness has been defined as an approach that demonstrates *'a respect for children and promotes their entitlement to be considered as persons of value and persons with rights'* (Merriman & Guerin, 2012: 48). Clark (2011) says that a child-centred approach to children`s participation can shed a different and less adult-centred perspective on social processes. Child-centred participatory practice has been described as a principled approach that is transformative, reflexive, developmentally appropriate, collaborative and rights-based and one which considers children's strengths as well as vulnerabilities (Winkworth & McArthur, 2006). It has been linked to children's citizenship and participation (Jans, 2004). Further, Cashmore (2002) finds that approaches to child participation require a shift from paternalistic ones where children are the objects of the decision, to ones that consider children to be stakeholders in the decision.

3.6 Conclusion

This section has set out and considered the literature on democracy and citizenship, and on child centred, ethical and reflective practice as they pertain to children's early learning environments. The section has considered each of these concepts separately and endeavoured to integrate the concepts within the broader professional and pedagogical contexts in which early learning occurs.

3.7. Conclusion to Literature Review

I want to now summarise the conclusions arrived at in this literature review. I began by setting out various conceptualisations of children's rights and moved on to focus specifically on the participation rights of young children in society. I have focused on the debates, preoccupations, competing positions and controversies in the discourse that have resulted from the rights and entitlements afforded to children by the UNCRC. Broadly, there are four themes that are dominant in the children's rights literature: the nature of rights; the extent to which young children are qualified to be rights holders, the diverse interpretations of 'childhood', and the extent to which children can be autonomous within decision-making processes. However,

perhaps because of the limited theoretical focus on the participation of young children in decision making processes, there remains much that is yet unknown about the nature of their participation, or the extent to which their rights are aligned with the provisions of the UNCRC.

The historical and contemporary debates and perspectives on children's learning and development provide a framework for understanding the influences on ECCE practice and policy. The academic literature is broadly concerned with children's development through a biological, social, or environmental lens, depending on the discipline of the researcher or the field of study. The debates are concerned with the determinants and dispositions thought to affect children's growth, development and learning, and there are many unresolved controversies emanating from the literature as to the significance of these determinants on the child's developing capacities.

In the literature focusing on children's agency and autonomy in decision making, there is a consensus that children's autonomy is an essential element of their meaningful participation in decision-making. However, there is disagreement concerning the nature of autonomy as it applies to young children, and the extent to which young children can be truly autonomous. The model of relational autonomy arguably offers a more nuanced vision of autonomy that gives due consideration to relationships, interactions, care, and interdependence. While the literature on the potential for relational autonomy to inform participation in decision-making in ECCE practice is limited, the relational dimensions of pedagogy is analogous to the role within the medical literature given to parents in supporting children's autonomous decision making.

The review draws attention to the varying constructions of child participation in the extensive body of knowledge on child participation. The debates are characterised by competing conceptualisations of participation, but it is broadly considered to be a social, political, or relational concept. The purpose of participation is frequently aligned with decision-making, and for some authors this is its predominant function, whereas for others it is more aligned to representation and social justice. A number of models have been presented which are influential for policy and practice. One model, the Lundy model of participation, has been discussed here in detail as it is influential in the methodology for this study. I also discussed literature on the nature of child consultation. Overall, there is limited evidence in the literature that children and young people are routinely involved in consultations or decision-making processes. The literature indicates that young children occupy a marginalised role in many decision-making contexts, and adult carers or service providers are influential within their

participatory experiences. Little has been published on the influence or impact of young children's participation outside of organisational or specific local context or on the experiences of the child within the participatory process itself.

The review considered the literature on democracy, citizenship, politics and ethical and reflective practice and their impacts on professional practice in children's ECCE environments. This included an overview of early years' curricula and philosophies that are underpinned by democratic principles. We saw the different approaches in Ireland and internationally and discussed the influences of market-based approaches on the provision of ECCE generally, and on democratic and inclusive provision of care and education for young children more specifically. The discussion illustrates inherent tensions and contradictions between the way practice is being shaped by a dominant discourse of quality on the one hand, and the key values and characteristics of professional child-centred and developmentally appropriate practice in the field of early childhood on the other.

The chapter considered the body of work that looks at children's participation in decision-making processes in organisational, social, and legal contexts, local democracy, and strategic policy decision making. Child participation at a strategic level is mostly concerned with older children and young people, and the literature is focussed primarily on procedures, practices and methods to enhance and support participation, often without clearly underpinning the rationale for participation in the first place. It is not always clear in the literature why the views of children are sought out (other than to uphold the UNCRC) and how their views were received, responded to or actioned, whether or not feedback is given to children on the impact and influence of their views, and how children responded to any feedback given. We examined a small number of strategic examples, but little attention has been given to the influence or impact of children's participation at this level, and especially so for young children. I hope that this study will respond to these gaps in the knowledge.

Chapter Four. Methodology

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I outline the methodology that I developed to conduct this study and discuss the influences of the professional context on methodological decisions. I set out the theoretical underpinnings for my study, and present my methodological orientation and approach, the research methods and research design and my overall approach to data analysis. Further, I discuss the fieldwork and data-collection processes that I undertook and further explain how the study's situation within my professional field of practice has influenced methodological considerations, before presenting an outline of the identified ethical concerns in the study. I set out the sampling and recruitment processes undertaken and discuss my experiences of employing the selected methodology in the field. The chapter concludes with my reflections on the chosen methodology and on the perceived limitations to the study. To begin the chapter, the research topic that this study is concerned with is recalled.

4.2 Research aim, question and objectives

As introduced and discussed in the opening chapters of this thesis, I aimed to study the participation of young children in a strategic decision-making process.

Research question
To further our understanding of the nature of young children's participation at strategic levels, the study was underpinned by the following research question:

Is it possible for young children to participate autonomously in strategic policy development?

The study objectives were as follows:

1. To study the participation of young children in a policy-development process, examining how young children autonomously construct and express their views when involved in such a process.

2. To research the experiences and understandings of EYPs who facilitated a consultation process with young children, and to explore how this experience affected their understandings, values and practices towards participation.

3. To understand the perspectives of local policymakers on the participation of young children in policy development processes and to examine the impact of the views of young children on their decisions.

4. To develop a model of consultation and participation that can be employed by decision-makers when seeking the views of young children.

4.3 Theoretical underpinnings

Concepts from the field of child participation provided the conceptual framework for this study. The study intended to build upon one participation theory, the Lundy Model of Participation. The Lundy Model (2007) is a conceptualisation of Article 12 of the UNRC (UN, 1989) and identifies four inter-related elements of participation set out in a rational chronological order that characterises children's meaningful participation. Lundy (2007; 2018) argues that provisions in Article 12 of the UNCRC do not exist in isolation, and that child participation rights align with other rights such as the rights to appropriate information, supports and guidance from adults (Articles 5, 13 and 17). A rights-based approach to facilitating consultation processes with young children, according to Lundy, means moving beyond the child's *'voice'* by creating participatory spaces where children can express themselves in a variety of ways. Lundy's rights-based conceptual approach to children's participation is considered by the Irish state to be the optimum model for facilitating the participation of children in planning and decision-making (DCYA, 2015).

Lundy's theoretical model of participation was influential across this research project and provided a frame for the conduct of study and decisions I made at critical points. In developing the research question, I was drawn to the element of *'space'* as set out by Lundy and wanted to explore how a space for participation created by adults could be meaningful for young children. Further to this, in developing the research objectives I used the Lundy model as a reference point for articulating the interrelated elements of my study, and as a way of integrating *'voice'*, *'audience'* and *'influence'* into an overarching consideration of the nature and utility of a participatory *'space'* for young children.

In turn, the Lundy model was influential in the development of the research design, in the sequencing of the research activities that I undertook. I consciously aligned aspects of the data-collection process with the Lundy model, as evidenced by the way the participatory space for child consultations was created, the ways in which children were supported to share their views, and how these views were presented to decision-makers for their consideration. Additionally, the Lundy model influenced the data analysis as it provided me with a means of organising the data and working through the analytical process. This is elaborated on further in this chapter.

However, when I considered the young children's participation through a democratic lens, a nuanced interrogation of the nature of their participation was possible. This helped me to focus on the perspectives, perceptions and contributions of adults and children participating in the study and allowed for a more in-depth engagement with the some of the central ideas underpinning participatory processes.

By adopting a conceptual framework that builds and extends on the Lundy model, I could enrich the study by considering the participating child as both a rights bearer and a social actor. Therefore, other theoretical concepts such as children's participation rights and children's autonomy became influential to the conceptual framework. The concept of children's autonomy is a consideration when the participatory process is essentially adult generated. Children's autonomy and their participation rights are related concepts when children's competencies are questioned by adults because of their age or stage of development. Therefore, a conceptualisation of participation encompassing autonomy, rights, relationships, and interactions as well as 'voice' within a participatory process is essential when considering the participation of young children. To illustrate the interactions and relationships between participation theories and other theoretical concepts, Figure 8 represents a conceptual model for my study.

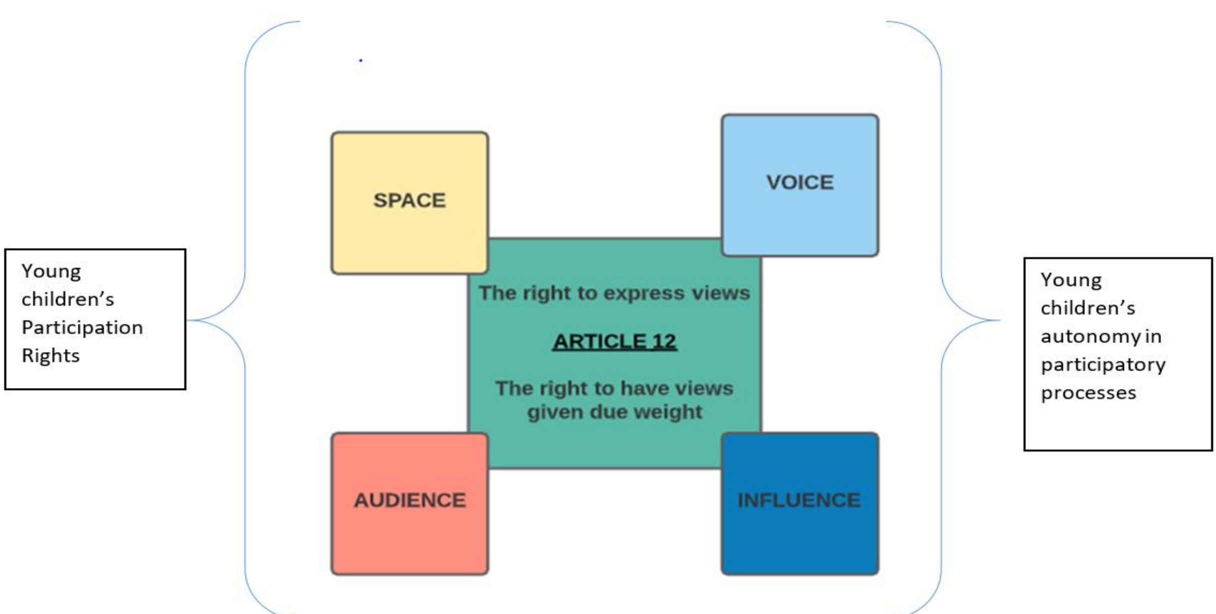


Figure 8: Theoretical framework for study

4.4 Research orientation

A research orientation or paradigm is a conceptual framework based on philosophical principles. It defines the nature of a social enquiry along the three dimensions of ontology, epistemology, and methodology (Terre-Blanche and Durrheim, 1999). Ontology and epistemology refer to the philosophical assumptions and approaches to research, influenced by a researcher's view of reality and theory of knowledge respectively. The system of ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions that influence research methodologies is universally relevant in research (Creswell et al., 2007).

I have identified that my ontology or view of reality is broadly subjective, socially constructed and contains multiple realities. In this ontology, there is an assumption that multiple and diverse interpretations of reality exist, rather than one overarching reality (Guba, 1990). This ontology shaped my approach to the development of the research question and decisions made in the study design. As a participant-observer of a process, I interacted with groups of participants rather than being fully independent of what I was studying. My subjective positionality as both participant-observer and practitioner-researcher required incorporation into the chosen methodology.

My study was primarily concerned with the experiences of three participant groups who were directly involved in, or closely connected to a participatory process. At the centre of the study were young children who were participating in a consultation process on a policy matter. Additionally, the study sought to understand the perspectives of two groups of adult participants and to research the impacts of children's participation on their responses and decision-making practices. While the EYP cohort was broadly homogenous, with participants having similar training and professional backgrounds, the CYPSC cohort was more diverse, with participants drawn from a range of disciplines and professional backgrounds representing several agencies and organisations. There were various levels of participation and involvement across the participant cohorts. While all have their own features and distinct roles in the study, there are overlaps in the interactions between all three cohorts. As a researcher and participant-observer, I had various levels of interaction with each cohort.

Turning my thoughts to epistemology, I was aware that the research methodology chosen for this study had to pay attention to the interactions between the three groups of research participants and myself, and to the professional context for the study. This called for a constructivist qualitative framework, as the study is concerned with the '*multiple,*

apprehendable and equally valid realities´ (Ponterotto, 2005:129) of three participant groups. Researchers within the constructivist paradigm believe that there is more than one 'truth' and more than one pathway to each truth and that multiple perspectives are required to answer a research question. In this study, the perspectives of three participants groups are all required to study the realities of child participation in a strategic decision-making process. Additionally, the participatory approach underpinning this study supports the idea that children and adults co-construct knowledge (de Sousa et al., 2019), and that multiple perspectives are needed to respond fully to a research question.

The Lundy model of participation and theories of autonomy influenced my approach to this study and provided a working hypothesis that young children's participation in policy decision-making requires the development of a participatory process in which children are supported in forming and then expressing their views in whichever way they choose. However, in addition to theories of autonomy that constituted the deductive elements of my methods, I wanted to build on the Lundy model, rather than merely test it and this called for a model of analysis that could combine deductive reasoning while allowing themes to emerge from the data by employing inductive coding. Therefore, I decided to adopt a hybrid approach to the analytical process, combining deductive and inductive reasoning to the data analysis. This hybrid approach, based on the work of Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006), incorporated both an inductive data-driven approach to analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) and a deductive theory-driven approach as outlined by Crabtree and Miller (1999). This approach to analysis is set out in section 4.9. In summary, my overall approach to this study is constructivist yet theory-informed while employing hybrid analytical processes to answer the research question.

4.5 Study design

This study was aligned to a real-world child consultation process and concerned the participation of three discrete populations of different ages, profiles, life experiences and disciplines in that process. To illustrate the overlap and interaction between the practice project and the research study, Figure 9 is presented on the next page.

Figure 9: Overlap between study and practice project

As participants included young children, I decided it was appropriate to employ a qualitative design. As the study engaged with views, values, and responses, I decided it required a methodology that studied the worldviews of participants. The context for the study called for a study design that ensured a range of research methods could be employed with each of the three populations. After considering the nature of my study and the research question and objectives, I decided that employing one qualitative method such as interviews would not have been successful across all participant groups in this study. In consideration of the multiple and diverse ways in which young children express themselves, relying on one method may have been ineffective in accessing children's data. Further to this, the study's location within a policy and practice context meant it was essential that the findings of this study would be easily accessible and understood by both policymakers and practitioners alike. Taken together, these considerations influenced my decision to conduct this study using a multiple-method, sequential, qualitative methodology approach that was informed by Participatory Action Research (PAR). Figure 10 on the next page sets the three phases of the plan and they are discussed in more detail in Section 4.5.3.

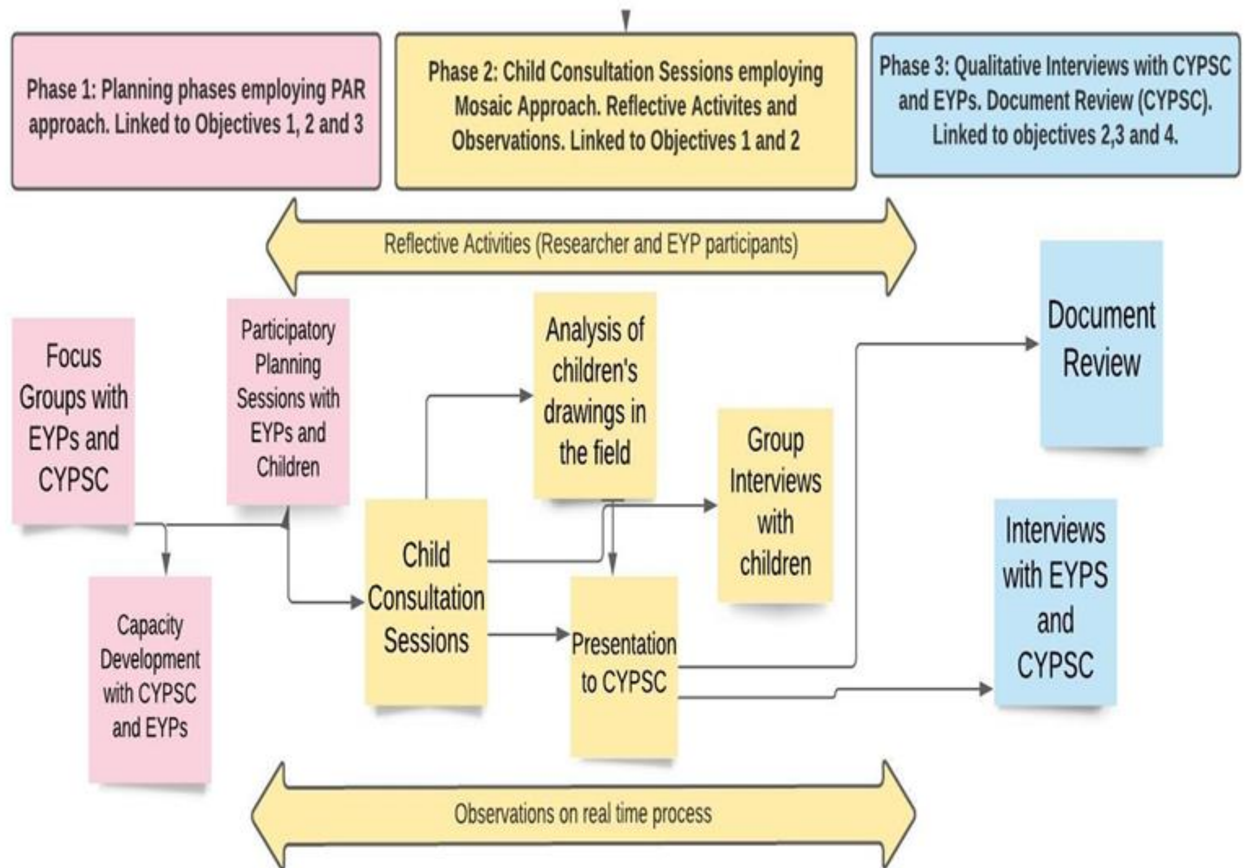


Figure 10: Sequential methodology

PAR emphasises participation, whereby communities of inquiry and action evolve and address questions that are significant for participants (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). The influence of PAR was reflected in the participation of EYPs and children in the co-production of the child consultation sessions. To achieve this I worked closely with EYPs in planning the consultation sessions, and I consulted with children as to how the sessions should run. While there were minor variations due to local preferences and choices, I aimed for a broad consistency of approach for the conduct of the sessions. PAR was not employed with CYPSC participants, as their participation was pre-determined within the research design

Data collection with children was informed by the Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss, 2011). This participatory approach uses a variety of methods to gather ways of hearing the voice of the child. Typically, visual methods such as art and the use of images, child conferencing and observations are employed in the first stage of the Mosaic Approach. The second stage consists of the interpretation of the mosaic of documentation using dialogue and reflection, with the researcher positioned as participant and children and other participants positioned as co-

researchers (Clark and Moss, 2011). As the research design was approved prior to recruitment of participants, the details of the pre-approved design needed to be flexible so they could be adjusted and re-negotiated as the participatory research process unfolded.

I adopted a Multiple Method approach as employing more than one method in qualitative studies can validate the data and subsequent findings by combining a range of data sources and methods within the research design (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998). Multiple methods provide comprehensive datasets that enhance the completeness and reliability of the collected data (Creswell & Plano Clark 2007). Having comprehensive data facilitates the "*comparing and combining [of] various sources of evidence in order to reach a better understanding of the research topic"* (Roberts-Holmes, 2014: 74). This was an important consideration for me as my study was multifaceted with three populations including young children and incorporating more than one worldview. To ensure that all methods employed during the study responded to the research objectives, I engaged in a mapping exercise, where I aligned each of the four research objectives with a method, or with multiple methods if necessary. This mapping exercise is reproduced in Appendix 1. As the data collection process was tracking a real-time consultation process, a sequential research design was utilised. Once I completed the mapping exercise for all research objectives, I formulated a sequencing plan for the data collection to ensure that I collected data in a coherent manner. The qualitative multi-method research design is visualised in Figure 10, and the three phases of the plan for data collection are described in more detail in the next section.

4.5.1 Sequencing of data collection

I will now set out the steps involved in the sequential research design as illustrated in Figure 10 and specify each of the methods planned, the participant groups involved and outline the data collection activities planned. Further on in the thesis, in the Conclusion Chapter, I set out my experiences of employing this research design in the field and reflect on the effectiveness of the data collection process in answering the research question.

-Phase 1: Participatory planning

In Phase 1, I planned to conduct focus groups and capacity development sessions with EYP and CYPSC participants, followed by planning and preparatory sessions with EYPs and children. The planning sessions were concerned with creating the Phase 2 child consultation sessions on the theme of young children's health and well-being needs and preferences.

-Phase 2: Child consultations

Building on the planning sessions, in Phase 2 of the study I planned to conduct child consultation sessions in the six research sites, with support and co-facilitation from EYP participants. Further, I intended to analyse the outputs of the child consultation sessions and present my conclusions to the CYPSC working group during one of their scheduled meetings. I then planned to follow up with group interviews with children in each of the services. Integrated into this phase and overlapping with phase one and three were my observations on the consultation sessions and on the responses of children, EYPs and CYPSC during the processes. Additionally, to capture a deeper and more reflective account of the process, I built reflective processes into the consultations.

-Phase 3: Post consultation data collection

In phase three, I planned to conduct semi-structured interviews with EYP and CYPSC participants, and to review CYPSC documentation related to the children's contributions, as part of their decision-making processes.

4.6 Recruitment process

In this section, I set out my approach to sampling and recruitment of adult and child participants of the study.

4.6.1 Sampling and recruitment

Three populations were sampled for this study, and there was a sequential sampling and recruitment processes. Therefore, there are variations in the sampling methods that I employed across participant populations. Sampling of EYP and child participants were linked processes that occurred through the ECCE sites, while the CYPSC sampling was a separate process. Therefore, the overall sampling method for the study is Combination or Mixed Purposive sampling. This method employs a combination of two or more purposive sampling techniques, allows for triangulation of data, has flexibility, and meets multiple interests and needs (Patton, 2002). Purposive sampling involves identifying potential participants from within the population who are knowledgeable of or experienced with the phenomenon being studied (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Purposive sampling is a type of non-probability technique that relies on the judgement of the researcher when it comes to identifying the sample. In contrast, with randomised-sampling techniques, non-probability sampling identifies specific

and predefined populations from within which to sample. Purposive sampling supports the identification and selection of information-rich participants essential to responding to the research question. Information-rich participants are *'those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry, thus the term purposeful sampling'* (Patton, 2002: 230). I applied this sampling technique to CYPSC and EYP participants.

The sampling method I employed with child participants was convenience sampling. This a type of non-probability sampling in which participants are sampled because they are convenient sources of data, and easily accessible to the researcher because of their location within research sites.

4.6.2 Specific sampling methods employed

-Research sites: I sampled research sites from all ECCE services registered with Tusla in Roscommon. This was purposeful sampling, as it involved sampling from a list of all eligible sites. The criteria for eligibility for sampling from services was as follows:

- Services must be registered with Tusla and located in Co. Roscommon
- Services must have sufficient staffing resources to host child consultation sessions for children aged 3 ½ upwards. This excluded services such as lone-working childminders from the list.

-EYPs: The criteria for sampling EYP participants were their employment in a research site, where the manager had already consented for the research to take place, and their ability to facilitate consultations sessions with children aged 3 ½ upwards. Therefore, the technique employed with EYPs was purposive sampling.

-CYPSC: These participants were sampled from the membership list of the Roscommon CYPSC Early Years Working Group, using purposive sampling. The membership list is not publicly available and was provided by the Convenor following the granting of permission to do so by the group membership.

-Children: Children age 3 ½ upwards for whom parental consent was in place and who were attending the ECCE programme in a research site were sampled using convenience sampling as they were already present within the research site.

4.6.3 Recruitment of research participants

This study sought to engage with three participant groups: young children, EYP practitioners and CYPSC members. As the timeline for the research plan required that children and EYPs participated in the initial phases, I recruited these two groups first.

-Recruitment of adult participants: To recruit EYPs I sent a letter to the manager (or named registered person) of all ECCE services in Roscommon, as identified on the Tusla register of notified services. I considered these managers to be gatekeepers, with whom I needed to negotiate access to the service and by extension, to potential EYP and child participants. I followed up with a phone-call to the manager of each service. In the call, I discussed my letter and queried if they were interested in finding out more about the study. Ten managers indicated that they were interested; fourteen managers reported that they were interested but were currently unable to consider taking part due to staff shortages, while the remainder reported that they were not interested in participating. I then sent the ten interested managers an information-pack by post (Appendix 2) which outlined what participation in the study involved. Seven managers responded favourably, and I visited these services to discuss their potential involvement. This initial meeting involved discussions on a range of issues such as time and staffing commitments to facilitate the consultations, parental consent and child assent and other ethical issues, and expectations around benefits to taking part. As a result, one service felt they were unable to proceed, and the remaining six managers agreed that their service could become a research site. They agreed to identify interested EYPs and to notify parents of the upcoming process. The six Roscommon services that became research sites are set out in Figure 11.

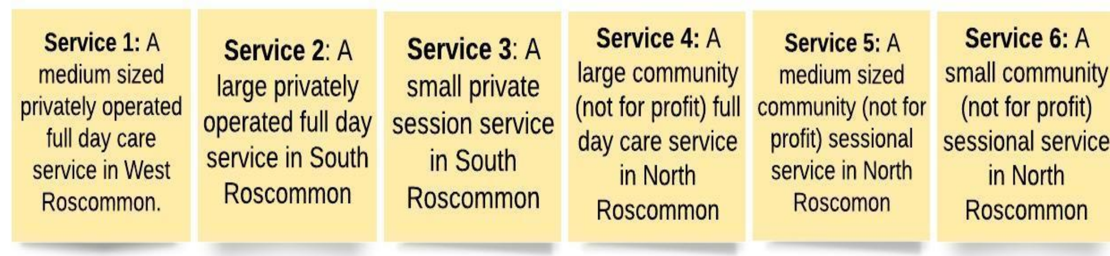


Figure 11: Research sites

Exact locations are not given to ensure services are not identifiable, however they include rural, village and suburban locations in Roscommon. While broad geographic locations of research

sites are correctly set out in the table on the previous page, I randomly assigned locations to research sites, to further add to the anonymity of services.

Recruitment of adult participants: Once permission was negotiated with gatekeepers, I met fifteen interested EYPS to discuss their potential participation in the study. Two EYPS pulled out of the process at this stage, as one was leaving her post and the second was unable commit to the process.

Profile of EYPs recruited[7]

Alice is educated to level six[8] (on the NFQ[9]) and has 14 years professional experience.

Jenny holds a level 8 degree and has eight years professional experience.

Lucy is educated to level six with twelve years professional experience.

Tina holds a degree and has three years of professional experience[10].

Annie is educated to degree level. She has 20 years professional experience.

Josh is educated to degree level with five years professional experience.

Bernie is educated to level five with twelve years' professional experience.

Caitlin is educated to level five, with twenty years professional experience.

Josephine is educated to level six, with twelve years professional experience.

Louise is educated to level six with seven years professional experience.

Vera is educated to degree level with ten years professional experience.

Tatiana is educated to level six, with eight years' experience.

Penny is female, educated to a degree level with four years professional experience.

[7] The designations of EYPs is not ascribed to the designation of services. This is to ensure another layer of anonymity to practitioners

[8] All EYPs are qualified in Early Childhood Care and Education

[9] The Irish National Framework of Qualification (NFQ) is available at: https://nfq.qqi.ie/

[10] Tina participated in the early phases of the data collection however she left her post and did not take part in any further research activities. She agreed that I could use her data in the analysis process.

To recruit CYPSC members I sought permission from the Convenor of the CYPSC Early Years' working group to attend a meeting to present information on my study. I then emailed or phoned each member to invite their participation in the study (see Appendix 6). Seven CYPSC working group members agreed to participate in the study. These participants came from a range of disciplines and from agencies providing primary health care, social services, education, health promotion, early years, family support and early intervention services to children and families in Co. Roscommon. As the CYPSC participant sample is small, no individual descriptions of participants are provided to ensure their privacy and anonymity is fully respected.

-Recruitment of children: 135 children from ECCE programmes across the six sites were identified as potential participants, and the gatekeepers agreed to engage with parents to seek parental consent for children on my behalf. Gatekeepers distributed a parents' information pack and consent form (Appendix 5), and parents were asked to sign and return the consent form to the site if they were giving consent. In this way, parental consent was obtained for 120 children across the six sites. These children were aged from 3 ½ to 4 ½ years of age. Data on children's ethnicity was not collected, but my field-notes indicated that children from Travelling and Roma communities, children from African and Asian family backgrounds and children from within the EU and the Americas participated, in addition to those with Irish ethnicity.

4.7 Employing the research design in the field

In this section, I set out the data collection process that undertaken for this study. I had designed the data collection to be flexible given the recognised professional and practice context in which it was conducted. I highlight and justify anywhere the actual process undertaken deviates from my original data collection plan.

4.7.1 Phase 1: Planning for consultations

-Focus group interviews

The first data collection activity was focus group interviews with EYPs and CYPSC participants to provide a baseline of perspectives on child participation in decision-making. My original plan was to bring each adult participant cohort together to conduct two focus groups. However, there was a concern about this plan expressed by EYPs as it involved travel away from the setting that could negatively affect the operation of the ECCE programme. I discussed this concern with my academic supervisors and decided to offer EYPs focus group sessions

within their own services, during or immediately after their scheduled working hours. In total, I held four smaller focus group sessions instead of one larger session. Three EYPs joined another service's session, which was located nearby.

For CYPSC participants, I arranged for a focus group prior to a timetabled CYPSC meeting. However, there was not full attendance of all participants at this focus group meeting due to prior commitments of three of the seven participants. See Appendix 7 for the focus group schedule of questions. As with most other data collection activities, I recorded these sessions on my audio recorder.

-Capacity development sessions

As part of phase one, I organised a capacity development session in each site for EYPs and during a scheduled meeting for CYPSC participants. I designed these sessions to refresh the skillsets of participants on the theme of child participation, with an emphasis on theory related to the participation of young children in decision-making processes. All EYPs and available CYPSC participants attended these sessions and additionally several other interested but non-participating EYPs and CYPSC members attended. See Appendix 8 for an outline of the content covered.

-Planning the child consultation sessions

In phase one I worked with EYP and child participants in the co-production of the consultation sessions. Planning meetings with EYPs agreed suitable and developmentally appropriate language, tools, and techniques for engaging with young children, using the Lundy Model (2007) as a frame. This was an incremental process where I presented my initial ideas to EYPs and these were adapted and refined using the practice wisdom and expertise of the EYPs and their professional knowledge of children in their care. As such, precise techniques and strategies for engaging child participants varied slightly across each site.

PAR influenced the engagement with children during the planning stages. In meeting children in phase one, I explained that I *'wanted to find something out….'* and I wanted them to help me come up with some ways of *'finding out'*. While I had a framework for how the sessions might look (arising from the planning sessions with the EYPs), children in each site contributed their ideas and I sought a consensus that reflected both child and EYP ideas. Not every idea was integrated into the consultation plans. For example, one child suggested a trip to a garden-centre to look at fruit and vegetables. Like all ideas, I discussed this with children and EYP participants. However, the idea was gently vetoed, as it was not possible given the time

restraints. In line with the Lundy Model (2007), I thanked the child for his idea and explained that it might be used again in the service, but unfortunately not for this activity. When an idea was agreed in one site, I introduced it in other sites so that children had a menu of options as well as being able to contribute their own ideas. This allowed data collection activities to be more consistent across all sites.

4.7.2 Phase 2: Child consultation sessions

The initial plan agreed with EYPs was to hold two consultation sessions in each site. In line with the Mosaic Approach, an iterative, flexible, and progressive process was required, whereby children's data could be gathered, reflected on, and refined collaboratively. In the planning phase, children had proposed playing a game in session one. Ideas for this game included drawing, art, and engaging with visual images with a health and well-being theme. Using these ideas, I designed a game and presented it to children in Site 1 for agreement. Children in this site named the game 'the Happy and Healthy Game', and children in subsequent sites adopted this name.

-First session

The first session in each site was conducted as follows (with minor local variations):

- I reminded children of the research question using developmentally appropriate language
- Children were invited to participate, and assent checked
- I played the Happy and Healthy game with children. This game used A4 sized laminated images of fourteen health and well-being promoting activities previously agreed with EYPs in planning meetings. There were also two images of activities not considered as health-promoting, following an EYP suggestion to present children with a continuum of ideas and activities. There were three indicative images: thumbs up, thumbs down and thumbs level.
- These ideas were represented by images of children engaged in various activities as set out in Figure 12 on the next page.

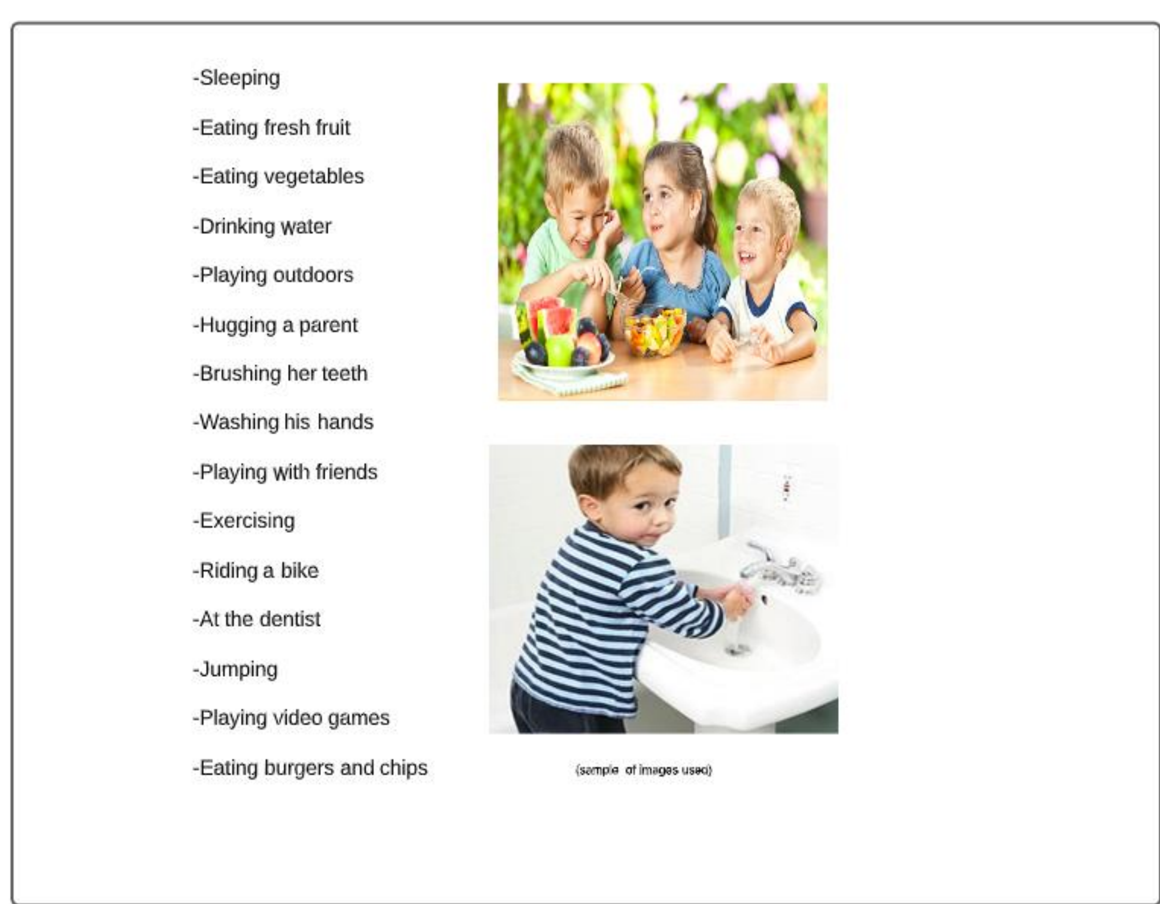


Figure 12: Health promoting ideas used in phase 1

I invited children to look at each of the images, and then to decide which of the images were important to them so that *'children can be happy and healthy'*. I encouraged children to articulate their thinking and reactions and to speak to each other and EYPs and I when making decisions. I then asked the group of children to organise the images into three piles using the 'thumbs' cards. In two services, as the game was underway, children came up with other ways of organising the images. In one service, children asked for stickers, while in another service they used coloured disks to indicate their priorities for their health and well-being. The EYPs in both these services reported that children would often use disks or stickers as a form of voting or indicating their preferences.

Figure 13: Playing the Happy and Healthy game

Once this game had concluded, I asked the children to help me figure out what images the *'adults had forgotten'* to include. EYPs and I encouraged them to draw pictures of their own ideas on what is important for their health and well-being. Some writers urge caution with how children's artwork and drawings are utilised in research (Edelstein, 1995), as there is the risk of misinterpretation and misrepresentation of the drawing. To reduce these risks, I asked EYPs to have a conversation with each child about their drawing and if child offered an interpretation of their drawing, to write a verbatim account of the child's narrative. EYP comments were to be written at the top of the sheet on which the child had completed their drawing.

I asked EYPs to remind children that they did not have to offer a description or interpretation of their drawing if they chose not to, and to be sure to check this with the child, however most drawings have written EYP comments.

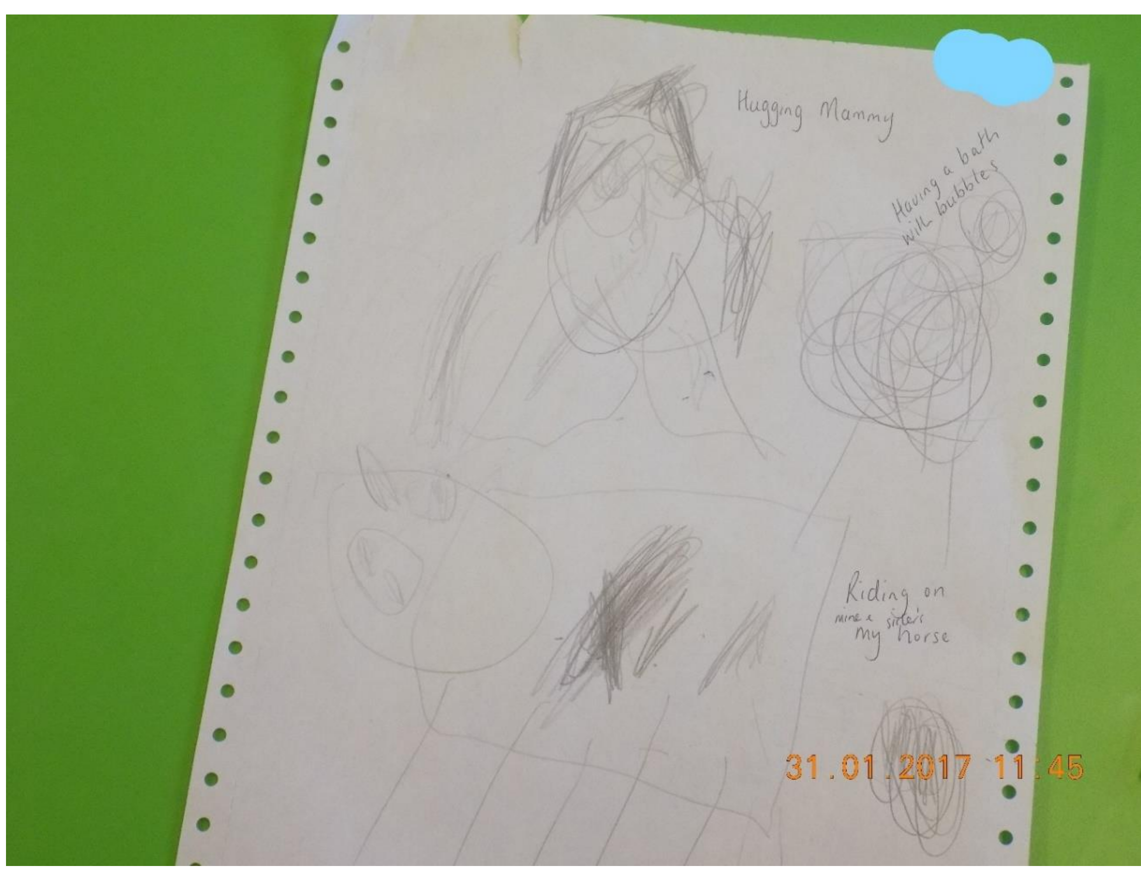


Figure 14: Lily's drawing

Figure 15: Luke's drawing

A range of ideas emerged from this part of the data collection, including images drawn by children of the following health and well-being related activities

Having bubble baths and playing with bubbles
Looking for spiders
Playing with pets
Visiting grandparents
Story time
Having fun with family members
Baking
Jumping in puddles

Figure 16: Health and well-being themes identified by children.

<u>Second session</u>

Session two was less structured and as a result more child-led. In planning, I proposed combining the child and the adult-generated health and well-being images into one process. One EYP participant suggested using the template of the Food Pyramid[11] to organise and display images, as children were familiar with this hierarchy of healthy eating choices. This was appealing as it facilitated the child-led organisation of the images in a thematic way, resulting in a visual artefact that children could display in their service. I put this idea to children in Sites 1 and 2, and they agreed.

Session two was conducted as follows:

- I reminded children of the research question and checked consent

-Children worked in groups, supported by the EYPs and I

-I provided children with visual representations of their drawings (using Google Images), along with the other images used in session 1. These printed images were small enough for a young

[11] The Food Pyramid organises foods and drinks into 5 main shelves, starting from the most important shelf on the bottom. It is available on https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/healthwellbeing/our-priority-programmes/heal/heal-docs/food-pyramid-poster-advice-version.pdf

child to handle. Children gathered around an A3 sheet which had an outline similar to the Food Pyramid, divided into three sections. Having already agreed the narrative with EYPs, I informed children that the bottom section is '*what is needed ALWAYS to be happy and healthy'*.

The middle section is '*what is needed OFTEN to be happy and healthy'* and the top section is '*what is needed SOMETIMES' to be happy and healthy'*. In Site 1, children pointed out that this section should be called *'TREATS',* so this language was used in subsequent services.

I asked children to look at all the images and then decide which should be in each section. They were encouraged to work on their own or in a group or pair as they chose. Children were supported by the EYPs and I to articulate their ideas and thinking to each other and to look for agreements and consensus as far as possible, before making their own decisions. In Site 3, I presented the idea of the 'Happy and Healthy Pyramid'. However, after looking at photographs of the pyramid, some of the children suggested that it looked more like a Volcano and proposed a Happy and Healthy Volcano instead. They informed me that volcanos were *'more fun'* so children in Site 3 proceeded to create a Happy and Healthy Volcano. I presented the volcano idea to the EYPs and children in Sites 4, 5 and 6, and in each site, children chose to display their health and well-being needs in the volcano rather than the pyramid. Therefore, at the conclusion of this phase, children had worked on two methods of visualising their work. As a result, I asked the EYPs in Sites 1 and 2 to inform children that other children had further developed on the pyramid idea, so as these children would know that their own work was represented at the conclusion of the process.

Figure 17: Working on the Happy and Healthy Volcano

-Analysing children's data in the field

Once session two had concluded in all services, I conducted a coding exercise with children's drawings and the Happy and Healthy Pyramids and Volcanos. Many children had agreed that I could take away their drawings, so I photographed and subsequently returned these drawings to children. Working with the photographs of drawings, Pyramids and Volcanos, I organised and categorised the drawings, and engaged in a coding exercise on the images and the narratives to generate themes related to young children's health and well-being needs and preferences. I summarised these themes into a presentation that I shared with CYPSC as set out in the next section (Appendix 9).

-Presenting the children's contributions to CYPSC

I attended a scheduled CYPSC meeting, presented an overview of the consultation process and the outcome, and a summary of children's perspectives and views on their health and well-being needs and preferences. CYPSC members had the opportunity to ask me questions and did so extensively. I did not employ any data collection techniques during this session, and it was not audio-recorded as other non-participating CYPSC members attended. I recorded reflective memos and broad observations after the meeting concluded.

-Observations: As an additional strategy to collect data, observations were built into this research design. To capture observed data, and finding few examples related to the participation of young children in decision-making process, I developed a recording tool that was flexible enough for all the research activities. As a participant-observer, I kept short handwritten notes on my observations as the sessions were underway, and I entered more detailed observations into the recording tool immediately following each session. See Appendix 10 for the template of this observation sheet.

-Reflective activities

Reflective journals written by participants or researchers are a source of narrative data (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Reflective journals document the experiences of participants and researchers in a research process and provide a way for the participants and researchers to express their thoughts and understandings as they move through a process. In my study, EYPs were asked to keep an individual reflective diary (Appendix 11) of their engagement with the participatory processes. However, only three such journal entries were completed over the course of data collection, all of which were from one site. EYP participants in one of the other sites advised me that they were struggling to find the time to complete the individual journal

entries, so I adjusted the format in the other five sites for the remainder of the data collection process, from individual reflective journal entries to short reflective meetings with EYPs after each session. In total six of these meetings were held, lasting no more than ten minutes. I facilitated a discussion, broadly following the template used in the reflective journals, and offering EYPs a contemporaneous way of gathering their thoughts and reflections on the session that had just ended. I then recorded a summary of EYP reflections into the journal template. Additionally, I kept a reflective journal that I completed after each data collection activity, in addition to keeping a field journal that described the activity.

4.7.3 Phase Three: post consultation

-Interviews

I conducted qualitative semi structured interviews with twelve EYPs within three weeks of the conclusion of the consultations. One EYP had left her post and did not take part in this phase of the data collection. All research sites accommodated the interviews and provided me with a room for this purpose. Interviews lasted between forty-five minutes and one hour and thirty minutes in length. Interviews were recorded on my audio recorder. I conducted seven qualitative semi structured interviews with CYPSC participants following the presentation of the children's data at one of their scheduled meetings. See Appendix 12 for interview schedule for EYPs and CYPSC participants.

4.7.4 Interviews with children

I conducted group interviews with children using a child-conferencing format drawn from the Mosaic Approach. During these interviews, I sat in a circle with some of the children who had taken part in the data collection activities and followed an interview schedule (Appendix 13). The child conferences took place in a quiet area of the service, and EYPs were on hand but did not participate. Not every child wanted to take part and numbers of child participants varied from four to seven across all six sites. I recorded these child conferences using my audio-recorder. Conferences lasted between eight to twelve minutes.

4.7.5 Review of CYPSC decision-making processes

With permission from the convenor and members, I positioned myself as a non-contributing observer at CYPSC meetings. However, as some members of the working group were not

research participants, I did not contemporaneously record observations, as this may have given the impression that meetings themselves were data-collection activities. Instead, I recorded reflective journal entries after each meeting which recorded my overall impression of the meeting, decisions relating directly to the practice project and any contributions by research participants that were relevant to the study. With the permission of all members of the working group (including non-participant members), and the convenor, I was permitted to access relevant minutes of meetings, planning notes, drafts of the Health and Well-being plan and notes and memos related to its development. Through the convenor, I requested access to records or documents that I considered relevant to the study. I made copies of documentation and did not retain any of the documents or use them for any other purpose.

4.8 Data analysis

4.8.1 Introduction

This section presents my approach to analysing the data collected from the field. Beginning with a broad discussion of qualitative data analysis, I move on to discuss the specific data analysis processes I employed for this study. As a means of guiding the analysis process, I primarily drew on the work of Braun and Clarke (2006) and approach to data analysis was broadly thematic. As this was a multi-method research study, more than one theory of analysis influenced the processes, and these are set out further

4.8.2 Data analysis in qualitative research

Qualitative data takes the form of non-numerical data, including interview transcripts, field-notes and memos, audio recordings, images, and documents. In analysing these types of data, a non-mathematical process of analysis and interpretation is required (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This involves working with the data to engage with ideas, themes and relationships identified during the analysis process. Creswell (2007) describes how qualitative researchers move through a systematic process of organising and coding the data and creating themes by working with the codified and condensed data. The final stage is the representation of the themes generated by the data analysis process. This type of analysis is a content-based approach exemplified by thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This is rarely a linear process, and usually involves the researcher moving through several cyclical steps to organise, describe, condense, codify, classify, interpret, and represent the data (Bryman, 2004).

There are two broad approaches in qualitative data analysis. Deductive analysis is theory-driven while inductive analysis is data-driven. In deductive analysis, a hypothesis is derived from an existing theory and data is collected to test the hypothesis. In contrast, an inductive approach allows new theory or hypothesis to emerge from the data (O'Reilly, 2009). However, it is possible to apply a hybrid approach to analysis, combining inductive and deductive coding and theme development (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). A hybrid analysis approach incorporates both data-driven inductive reasoning and theory-driven deduction to the analysis process. Xu and Zammit (2020) applied deductive techniques to analyse practitioner journals, while being open to interpretations that emerged from the data that they identified as interesting and relevant to their research question. This hybrid approach enabled these researchers to address the theory driven aspects of their research question, while enabling them to identify themes strongly linked to the data.

4.8.3 Data analysis approaches employed

To ensure that findings of qualitative studies are robust, validated and as objective as possible, a universally accepted and rigorous method of data analysis is seen in the literature as optimal. Yet, I was aware that my data was multifaceted, and I decided that a rigid systematic analysis process could result in the loss of some of the richest data. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) suggest there is no one correct way of analysing qualitative data and some studies require a variation in analytical methods and approaches. My study design and sequencing of the data collection meant I had already analysed some data in the field, specifically the children's drawings. Therefore, I considered that a linear and rigid approach might not be entirely suitable for this study, even if considered as the gold standard for qualitative data analysis.

As my study was informed by the Lundy Model and theories of autonomy, a broadly deductive or theory driven analysis approach was indicated to test Lundy's hypothesis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Lundy was influential in shaping my approach to data collection and I thought it highly likely to be reflected in the themes identified during the data analysis process. As Lundy hypothesised that her theoretical model would guide children's participation at strategic policy level, I considered applying a broadly deductive approach to the data analysis related to the creation of the participatory process. However, there were exploratory aspects to the study that pointed to an inductive approach. Additionally, as there is a limited understanding of young children's participation at strategic levels of decision-making in the literature, an 'inductive' approach to analysis was indicated. As well as testing the Lundy

model I aimed to elaborate on it, as there may be aspects of participatory practice that are less process-driven and more intangible such as the personal, value-laden and emotional responses and understandings of participants. As Swaine (2018:7) found when applying a hybrid model of analysis, *'theory was both a precursor to, and an outcome of data analysis'.*

The overarching analytical approach for this study was Thematic Analysis (TA) (Braun and Clarke, 2006). While TA is a systematic approach to analysis, Braun, Clarke and Weate (2016) make clear it can be conducted in a variety of ways. They propose that TA straddles several qualitative research analysis spaces including inductive and deductive approaches and can be applied flexibly.

Thematic Analysis is a six-step analysis approach to identifying, analysing, and reporting on themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The six steps or phases of the Thematic Analysis approach are as follows:

1. Familiarising yourself with your data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

The more flexible version of TA offers the same robust analysis processes as the traditional TA, providing there are clear choices made as to the inductive and deductive elements of the chosen process (Braun, Clarke and Weate, 2016). In addition to TA, I drew from other analytical frames integrated into the analysis space for some data types as will be explained further in this chapter. The data analysis process is visualised in Figure 18 on the next page.

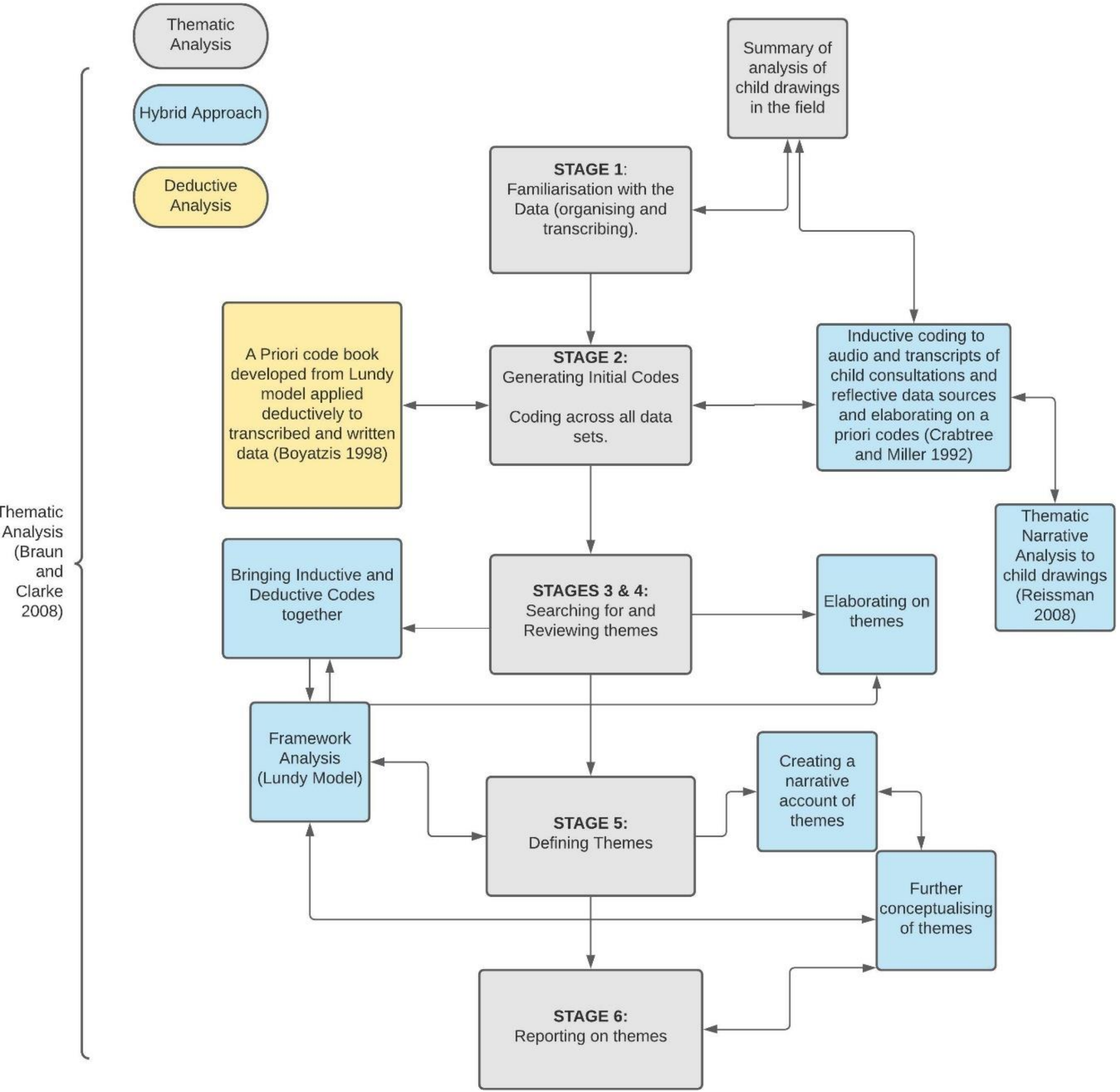


Figure 18: Data analysis process

4.8.4 Stage One

As a first analytical step, I collated and organised data collected during the fieldwork. The nature of the data required a considered data management and organisational strategy before analysis could begin. My study elicited several data types and elements (Appendix 14) and all these types of data were reviewed during this familiarisation and organisational step. As there was a mix of data types this process was slow and labour intensive but did allow me to immerse myself in the data and to notice some early patterns and trends within the data. One of the first tasks was to prepare the conversational data for transcription, a process that I decided to undertake myself as it allowed for deeper engagement with the data (Braun and Clarke, 2008).

As the data collection had taken place over several months, I used the time between the different phases of the data collection process to transcribe the audio recordings of the EYP and CYPSC focus group sessions. Once in the post fieldwork stage, I transcribed the audio recordings of EYP and CYPSC semi-structured interviews, and child consultation sessions and child conferencing. Bryman (2004) supports prompt post fieldwork transcription as it further enhances the researcher's engagement with the data.

Data from the audio recordings of consultation sessions required careful consideration in this first phase. Conversational data should be transcribed to follow the TA process: therefore, I transcribed the twelve child consultation sessions. In discussion with my supervisors, I explained that during transcription, some of the children's data was being lost. The sessions were a hive of activity and the transcripts did not capture this. For example, in an audio-recording of one session some of children were singing. The words of the song are not fully audible, so I did not transcribe them. Yet, while the singing is referred to in the transcript, there is no sense of the excitement and fun in the transcript that is evident in the audio-recording. There was limited capacity for me to fully represent the richness of child-created activity such as peripheral and background conversations and children's laughter and chatter. As the research is so concerned with studying the experiences of young children during a consultation process, without capturing these data, I felt unable to fully represent the children's data in the form of a verbatim transcript of the sessions. In keeping with the Mosaic Approach, the analysis of children's data required a process of piecing together of the different data elements or the individual tiles of the data (Moss and Clarke, 2011). This required analysis of the audio recordings the sessions in addition to the transcriptions of sessions. As Pomerantz and Fehr (2011) argue, there is justification for analysis of audio-recordings when the details of actions and interaction cannot be analysed in any other way. Therefore, I decided to approach the audio-recordings and transcripts of the sessions as a mutual analytical exercise, playing and replaying the audio recordings while transcribing a verbatim account. In this way, I could credibly represent the entirety of the children's data in the analysis process.

Other forms of data required a varied approach to analysis such as the material generated by the reflective and creative processes built into the research design. Children's drawings had already undergone a process of analysis in the field as this was a part of the research design, so I did not repeat this step. Instead, I coded a summary of the field analysis of children's drawings and the EYP comments or narratives on the drawings.

4.8.5 Stage Two

In the second phase of the analysis process, I re-read all the organised transcribed and written data, reviewed images and listened to audio of the consultation sessions, before moving on to begin coding. Coding is described as *'the process of analysing qualitative text data by taking them apart to see what they yield, before putting the data back together in a meaningful way'* (Creswell, 2015:156). Saldana (2008:3) describes a code as *'most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data'.*

When taking a theory informed approach to the analysis process, I aimed to code the data that was relevant to the theory or hypothesis emanating from the research question. I decided to code manually, rather than employing a software programme such as Nvivo. A consideration that informed my decision was the nature of much of the data, and the importance of managing the interactions between the various data elements. This position is best expressed by Maher et al., (2018), who proposed that computer coding, while useful for data management and organisation, can have the effect of side-lining the hugely important human interactions that take place within a qualitative research context.

Thematic coding involves identifying passages of text or 'codes' in transcripts that are linked by a common idea. This allows the analyst to organise the codes into categories or indices and therefore establish both a '*framework of thematic ideas'* (Gibbs. 2007:38) and the relationships between themes. Following the hybrid approach, I applied a list of *a priori* codes (see Appendix 15) to the transcribed data (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). I drew from the literature on young children's participation to create codes and organised them using the four domains of the Lundy model (2007). Applying the codebook, I manually worked through blocks of text using a colour highlighter as a means of identifying individual codes and adding the code label and developmental notes in the margins of the text. These *a priori* codes allowed me to identify and index first level, semantic codes. First level codes are *'descriptive, low inference codes… which provide the basis for later higher order coding'* (Punch, 2014:174).

Following Fereday and Cochrane-Muir's (2006) hybrid analytical model, the analysis at this stage was guided by, but not confined to these first level codes. Inductive codes were identified as either distinct from the *a priori* codes or a data-driven elaboration of an identified code. I identified higher order or latent codes as I became more familiar with the semantic code.

I ascribed a description to each label to highlight the qualities of the code (Cresswell et al., 2007). To illustrate this, I first coded the following short passage from an EYP interview transcript as the *a priori* code 'Environment':

> *'If staff in the service have this mind set, it will feel normal and natural to everyone, adults and children alike. They will see it as part of normal communication, part of our caring and nurturing, so that it is an enabler in the environment. Staff that are open minded in the service and who are up to date with the current thinking on rights and listening to children; that will open this all up to the children who come to the service'*

Additionally, *'Care' 'Beliefs' 'Listening' 'Communication'* and *'Mind-set'* were inductively coded from this one passage, and each underwent further review and analysis to create a higher order code. I thus developed the semantic code '*Values and Beliefs in the ECCE environment'* and assigned a description to the higher order code as follows: '*Values, beliefs and assumptions about children and childhood enabling participatory approaches in the ECCE environment'.* Therefore, this one passage underwent several coding processes and was revisited several times to clarify and refine each named code. Many passages of data contained more than one code, and many deductive and inductive codes were assigned to more than one data source; for example, the deductive code *'Environment'* was assigned to seventeen data sets including ten transcripts of EYP interviews, one focus group interview, two reflective journal entries and three observations sheets.

I employed a data-driven coding process to the child consultation sessions, the summary of the in-the-field analysis of child drawings and the reflective data sources. For example, the code *'recollections of childhood'* emerged from the EYP reflective data sources. Thematic Narrative Analysis supported the inductively coded narrative, or the 'story' in the children's drawings (Riessman, 2008). Additionally, this supported the analysis of the audio and transcripts of the child consultation sessions as it allowed me to engage with the children's narratives as they worked through the participatory activities.

4.8.6 Stages Three to Six

These stages were concerned with reviewing, defining, and naming themes. I organised groups of higher order codes into a framework broadly aligned with the Lundy Model (Appendix 16). Once this was complete, I moved onto the next analytical step of developing themes by creating a narrative account of the themes. Braun and Clarke (2006:82) define a theme as capturing *'something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some*

level of patterned response or meaning within the data set'. This is an active process that crafts or constructs themes, rather than passively discovering them within data-sets (Braun and Clarke, 2006). My review of the coded data identified areas of similarity and clustering or overlap of codes. I then collapsed or clustered codes with similar qualities to '*reflect and describe a coherent and meaningful pattern in the data' (*Braun and Clarke, 2012:7). I identified codes emerging from across the data, and by bringing codes together, collapsing some and renaming others, I created themes that unified much of the data (Appendix 17). For example, the code *'child centredness'* was identified across the data and was comprised of previously collapsed codes *'child-led'* and *'child-centred practice'*. This generated a theme initially named *'child centric practices'*. At this stage, following Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's (2006) hybrid model of analysis, I reviewed clustered codes to ensure they were representative of the initial assigned codes. I then developed themes by aligning clustered codes with additional codes generated by the supplementary analytical approaches. This process led to the generation of four overarching themes, which ran across the entire dataset and included 42 sub themes as set out in Appendix 18.

Continuing with phase five and into phase six, I revisited and reviewed these four themes and in a further process of conceptualisation, created three overarching themes by merging Theme one *'Child-centric participatory practices and discourse'* and Theme three *'Active and empathic engagement with the "voice" of the young child in participatory and decision-making processes'*. This new theme was renamed *'Engaging with the "voice" of the young child in participatory processes'*. This process allowed me to arrive at three overarching themes.

1. Relational autonomy and relational participatory processes involving young children
2. Engaging with the voice of the young child in participatory processes
3. Moral, ethical, and personal perspectives on young children's participation.

Moving into phase six, I have written a report on each of the three overarching themes, which is presented in the three upcoming Findings Chapters.

4.9 Research ethics

There is a responsibility on the researcher to act ethically when conducting their study, and to ensure that the ethical dimensions of a study are addressed. Research ethics is concerned with the morality of, and the justification for, the methodological decisions that a researcher makes in studies involving human subjects (Mertens and Ginsburg, 2009). Arising from the work of

the Belmont Report (DHHS, 1978), the research ethics literature related to the social sciences has coalesced around several ethical principles that researchers must respect (Beauchamp and Childress, 2001; Polit and Beck, 2004). These principles are summarised as follows:

-Respect for participants: Concern and respect is essential for the dignity and autonomy of all participants, and attention paid to their vulnerabilities.

-Informed consent: Participation is based on the voluntary choice of the participants, requiring disclosure of information by researchers and the participants' understanding of the research and of potential consequences arising from participation. The researcher must avoid deception or coercion when obtaining consent.

-The right to withdraw: Participants retain the right to withdraw from the research at any time, without needing to provide a reason

-Do good and minimise the risk of harm: The researcher must endeavour to ensure that no harm can come to participants and must conduct the study in such a way as to bring about benefits for participants and the wider society.

-The preservation of anonymity and confidentiality: Participants must be assured that their anonymity and privacy will be preserved, and confidentiality will be guaranteed.

4.9.1. Ethical considerations in research with children

While many of the same ethical issues that arise in research involving adult participants arise in research with children, Thomas and O'Kane (2009) argue that there are important ethical concerns specific to child participants that researchers must address. These include negotiating access to children as potential participants, obtaining consent from parents and ensuring that the child is an assenting participant, additional child safeguarding considerations, and building participatory processes into the study (Morrow, 2009). There are specific ethical issues related to risks, benefits, burdens, and vulnerabilities in research with child participants to be considered, so that ethical standards are robust. However, Morrow (2009) cautions against an assumption that children are necessarily vulnerable because of their age and are incapable of giving their assent to participate in a study. This was an important ethical consideration for this study as it involved young children. I will discuss how I managed these ethical issues further in the next section.

4.9.2 Applying for research ethics approval

Prior to any data collection, both my employer Tusla, and the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG) required that I submit the research protocol for assessment to ensure that it met with ethical standards for the conduct of research. As young children were participants, this was an opportunity to ensure that the data collection process complied with ethical standards for research involving children. NUIG required an application for ethical approval to the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of the university, and Tusla required an assessment by the Ethics Review Committee (ERC). Both assessment processes involved scrutiny of my intended study, a review of the research question and objectives, the study design, the rationale for the participation of young children and the potential risks and benefits of the research project to participants. Ethical approval was granted in the first instance by the REC of NUIG, and subsequently by Tusla's ERC. The feedback I received from the REC was helpful in my application for approval by the ERC. Applying for and receiving ethical approval from two institutions allowed me to consider the ethical issues arising in the research, which are discussed in more detail in the next section.

4.9.3 Ethical issues arising

In this section, I set out the application of research ethics principles to my study and discuss ethical issues that arose during the study. Extensive consideration of the ethical issues arising in this study was required because of the participation of young children as a study population.

-Respect for participants

As a central ethical principle, respect for all participants is essential in research processes. Barrow et al., (2020) state that to demonstrate that the principle of respect is upheld, researchers must ensure they are protective of participants while being respectful of participants' autonomy. Researchers should ensure that they fully disclose all the factors involved in the study, including any potential harms and benefits that may arise for participants. The provision of informed consent and assent processes ensures that participants have the capacity to withdraw as well as participate, which is essential for the respect of participant autonomy, particularly in research involving children (Cuskelly, 2007). Smith and Coady (2019) propose that respect for the autonomy and self-determination of the young child in research requires the exercise of empathy on the part of the researcher. In this study, I worked closely with EYPs as

co-facilitators of the child consultation processes to ensure an empathetic approach that was respectful of children's autonomy while being mindful of their vulnerabilities

-Consent and assent

A key ethical concern in this study was addressing the interconnected issues of informed consent and assent. In the research ethics literature, there are four principles underpinning how the researcher navigates consent. These principles require (i) informed consent to be active, involving verbal or written agreement from the participant. (ii) Consent must be voluntarily given and (iii) be based on the provision of information so that the participant understands the research. (iv) Consent must be renegotiable so that participants can withdraw from the study at any stage of the process (Gallagher, 2009). In this study, I sought the informed consent of adult participants, and informed consent from parents in relation to their child's participation. I also sought the assent of children to becoming a participant. These processes are explained in the following sections.

-Adult informed consent

Before collecting data in the ECCE sites, I provided managers with written documentation in relation to the study. The information pack for managers (Appendix 2) included an outline of the topic being studied, the research objectives, information on the data-collection process, what participants could expect, and assurances on respect for confidentiality. The pack included my contact details should more information be required. I invited managers to sign a consent form to indicate their agreement for research to be conducted in their service, and to facilitate the recruitment of EYPs as research participants.

EYPs who were interested in the study following the invitation from their managers, and CYPSC members who responded positively to my invitation to participation were provided with an information pack, covering the same issues as listed above, and with additional detail on what participants could expect during the process (Appendices 3 and 4). I further invited all EYPs and CYPSC to indicate their informed consent by signing a consent form.

-Parental consent for child participants

As I was seeking to recruit young children as participants, obtaining parental consent was an ethical consideration that I needed to address. It is a legal requirement and an ethical standard of NUIG and Tusla that where participants are under the age of 18, consent must be obtained from parents or legal guardians. To gain parental consent, I asked each site to distribute an information-pack to parents of potential child participants (Appendix 5). An enclosed letter included my personal information and contact details, as well as the contact details for the REC

in NUIG should more information be required. The pack included an outline of the study topic, the research objectives, information on the data collection process, confidentiality, and child protection measures. I invited parents to sign a consent-form to indicate their agreement to allow me to invite their child to become a research participant. I advised parents to keep a copy of the consent form for their own records.

-Child assent

The issue of assent reflects an important ethical principle in research with children. While consent is not sought from a young child, young children do have the capacity to assent. Ensuring that child assent is in place is an essential part of upholding the principle of respect for the child's autonomy as a research participant. Child Assent recognises that while the child is a legal minor (and therefore legally incapable of providing consent), they have the capacity and ability to make active decisions about their participation in research (Water et al., 2020). Thus, child assent is concerned with the child's capacity to express a willingness to participate in the study, alongside the expressed consent of their parent or legal guardian.

In this study, I ensured that child assent was based on an invitation to the child to participate, in addition to the provision of age-appropriate information on the nature of the research activities, and repeated reassurances on the voluntary nature of participation. During my introductory visits to children, supported by EYPs I explained to children that I was *'looking for their help'* because I *'wanted to find out what children in (their) preschool need to feel happy and healthy'.* I reassured children that I had *'asked mammies and daddies and they said you could help me, but only if you wanted to'.* I asked children if I could come back another day and that I would check that they would still like to help me. These introductory sessions were important in putting in place the first steps towards securing child-assent. In these sessions, children had questions or comments about their involvement in the study, which I recorded in my field-diary. For example, one child commented *'I want to play the happy and healthy games … but I'll be too busy if you come at snack-time',* while another asked *'If I help, can we sing you our Happy Song?'*

As child assent is an ongoing process rather than a one-off event, I ensured that assent was in place for each child, for each phase of the data collection. I worked closely with EYPs prior to, and during each data-collection activity to ensure that children sufficiently understood that their participation was voluntarily, and that they could opt-out at any stage. This involved a reminder to children that they had a choice about participating in each activity. I verbally checked in with children before proceeding and conducted ongoing checks during each of the sessions.

Additionally, I requested EYPs to be observant of the group and to intervene should any child indicate verbally or by their body language that they were not comfortable taking part in the sessions.

-The right to withdraw

In every site, EYPs agreed to be supportive of children's choices about their pace and level of engagement in the consultation process. EYPs set up alternative activities for any child who indicated that they did not want to participate, or who wanted to leave a session in progress. It was notable that some participating children were happy to sit and watch the research activities, while others were more actively engaged in the sessions. EYPs and I supported children to participate in their own time and children could chose to leave an activity even if it was not completed and return to it at any time of their choosing, including when I had left the site if they preferred. Most children chose to complete the activities, but in every session, a small number of children were noted to come and go from the session, or to leave it entirely.

-Doing good, and minimising the risk of harm

A further ethical concern is the extent to which a research project can benefit the participants and the wider society. There is a risk that a perception of personal benefits can undermine a research project if participants respond in a manner which they think will please the researcher, rather expressing honestly their perspectives (Patton, 2002). In this study, I made no offer of inducements or special treatment for EYP services, practitioners or CYPSC members because of their participation. I advised adult participants that their participation in the study would potentially benefit their respective sectors and areas of practice by adding to the knowledge base on the participation of young children in policy arenas, and by the development of practice guidance and policy recommendations to inform consultative practices with young children.

The ways in which I set out the potential benefits of the study to children was to let them know that their participation could *'help mammies and daddies'* and their *'teachers and other grown-ups in Roscommon'* to help '*children in Roscommon'* to be happy and healthy. I explained that after they had helped me, I was going to write a report on what they told me that I would give to the grown-ups who were in charge in Roscommon. This led to the following question being asked by at least one child in every site: '*what is a report?'* This was always followed by my explanation that a report is a way of me telling the grownups in charge what children had said. My notes indicate that some children offered their own explanations for a report, with one child confidently informing his peers that a report *'is a lot of paper with writing on it'.* My notes further indicate that a handful of children in every site were curious about '*the grownups in*

charge of Roscommon' and in subsequent visits, some of these children asked if I had reported to them yet and asked what they had said.

An important ethical issue given the age of the child participants was ensuring that the care and protection of every child was upheld. In my study, the extent of involvement of young children required a robust response, and scrutiny of the research design from the perspective of child-protection and child-wellbeing was essential. As an employee of Tusla, I have received extensive child-protection training, and my previous role as a front-line child welfare practitioner was invaluable in this regard. Tusla's child-protection and welfare policies were followed throughout. Additionally, I adhered to NUIG's child protection and welfare policies, which have a particular focus on the involvement of children in research processes. Finally, I obtained full clearance from the Garda Vetting processes of Tusla and NUIG and indicated this to managers in the research sites as further evidence of my suitability to conduct fieldwork with young children. Further layers of protection included the child protection polices of each site. All EYPs were Garda vetted and trained in Children First and were required to uphold the safeguarding policies in their services. Accordingly, if an EYP in a service became aware of any inappropriate conduct on my behalf or arising from the research activities, policies and procedures were in place to ensure appropriate responses. Further, had I any suspicions of abuse or neglect occurring, I had a duty to report these concerns. Additionally, child-protection and welfare measures were fully scrutinised by both NUIG and Tusla prior to any data collection with children taking place.

-The preservation of anonymity and confidentiality

Respecting the anonymity and confidentiality of all participants in research is a crucial ethical standard. The researcher must assure participants that their anonymity is respected, and that they are not identifiable in the research report or the dissemination of findings. They must work to ensure data is stored in such a way as to ensure confidentiality of personal information. In my study, I ensured that participants' anonymity and confidentiality was fully preserved. I did not report on the locations of ECCE services, revealed no identifying information, and anonymised any potentially identifying information about participants. Data was stored securely on a password protected laptop.

In this study, children were participating as part of a group, so there was an onus on me to ensure that children understood that they could share as much information as they were comfortable with on their views on young children's health and well-being, while at the same time ensuring their rights to privacy and confidentiality were respected. Powell and Smith

(2009) reminded me to be cognisant of how much personal information children choose to share. On a couple of occasions, children did share personal information on their home and family life with me, and by extension the group. While this was not actively encouraged through the use of broader and more impersonal language to contextualise the theme, such as by emphasising the idea that the research was about *all* young children in Roscommon, when this occurred, I responded in a way that was designed to protect the child's dignity and uphold their right to share personal information should they choose. If a child mentioned a name of a relative or parent during a group activity, I redacted this information from the written transcript.

4.10 Conclusion

This chapter has set out my methodological approach to my study. The chapter opened with an outline of the research question and supporting objectives. This study was concerned with the participation of young children in a consultation process, as part of a strategic decision-making process. It considered their participation from several perspectives, including EYPs who supported the participatory process, CYPSC members who sought young children's views on health and well-being as part of their decision-making processes and the young child participants themselves. Employing a multi-method qualitative approach, I set up the consultation sessions in collaboration with EYPs and children and the study tracked the real time consultation process as it unfolded in six research sites. Research methods employed were influenced by PAR and included focus group interviews, observations and reflective activities, semi-structured interviews with EYPs and CYPSC, child conferencing and documentary analysis.

I set out a consideration of the ethical issues encountered in this project and reflected on the steps I took to ensure that child participants were protected while their autonomy was supported within the process. I utilised several graphs, images, tables and photographs to illustrate the research process as it unfolded along its various stages, including the development of the theoretical framework for the study, the research design planned, the profile of the research sites, and images from the child consultation sessions. Additionally, I presented an outline of the different phases and stages of my data analysis process**.** I also referred in the chapter to several appendices which provide further information and clarity on actions taken and decisions made during the research process.

In setting out my analysis process, I indicated the influence of theory to the overall research project, including the research question and objectives and research design in addition to data

analysis. My research orientation was constructivist in nature, but the study was theory informed, and as a result I employed a hybrid approach to data analysis techniques and processes. In the following three chapters, I set out my findings arising from the analysis of data collected during the data collection processes.

Chapter Five. Relational Autonomy and Relational Participatory Processes involving Young Children

5.1 Introduction

In Chapters Five, Six and Seven, I present the findings of my study. In this, the first findings chapter, I open by referring back to the methodology chapter where I outlined the multiple methods approaches to data collection that I undertook for this study, including focus group interviews, observations, reflective activities, semi-structured interviews and group interviews with children. The data collected during the fieldwork was analysed using a hybrid approach, and the findings presented in these three chapters. These chapters are set out under three high-level themes arrived at through my data analysis processes, which reflect on my research question and set of objectives. Each of the findings chapters reflects one of these three themes, with each theme broken down into several subthemes.

Chapter Five presents findings on the theme of 'Relational autonomy and relational participatory processes involving young children'. This chapter examines the significance of young children's emerging autonomy in participatory processes and spaces, and does so by exploring the following three subthemes:

- The emergence of young children's autonomy in participatory processes and spaces
- Young children's autonomy as a relational concept
- Young children's autonomy in collective participation.

For each theme and sub-theme, several individual data extracts are presented that illustrate these dimensions and insights, such as quotations or sections from reflective or observational notes. When reporting on the findings, and when this is suited to the reported theme or sub-theme, I have privileged the children's data, as the central research question concentrated on child participation. However, this was not possible, or not possible to the same extent, for all subthemes. As data was collected using multiple methods, the supporting illustrations for many of the findings come from a range of data sources. In this way, the findings are strengthened by triangulation between the various methods employed.

5.2 Young children's emergent autonomy in participatory processes

5.2.1 Introduction

I first present findings on a sub-theme focused on the emergent nature of young children's autonomy in participatory processes. In this section, EYP and CYPSC participant accounts of their understandings of young children's autonomy are set out. The findings indicate a broad consensus on the emergent nature of children's autonomy in participatory processes for both groups of adult participants. Yet the findings indicate that children's autonomy within participatory processes is understood and responded to in different ways by the two groups of adult participants. The findings presented are supported by examples from the data gathered during all three phases of data collection and include indicative quotes from focus groups and interviews, records of observational notes and reflective journals and meetings.

5.2.2 The emergence of young children's autonomy in participatory processes

As has been set out in other chapters, the concept of children's autonomy is a central consideration in this study. Although 'autonomy' is considered a complex concept, its relevance to young children's participation was highlighted by both CYPSC and EYP participants at various stages in the data collection process. In the focus groups there was a consensus that young children have emerging capacities to participate. The concept of autonomy was sometimes only implied or inferred, including when participants used terms such as *'independence'* and *'agency'*. There were a range of clearly expressed participant views on the extent to which young children's autonomy interacts with their emerging participatory capacities. During the focus groups and later in the interviews, many EYPs articulated a view that young children's autonomy underpins their emerging participatory capacities. Jenny said in her interview that her understanding of participation meant thinking about autonomy first, and then about other emerging developmental areas:

> '*When I think about participation, I am thinking first and foremost about their autonomy…thinking for themselves…being able to speak up for themselves a bit more, becoming that bit more independent so that they can participate in whatever is going on'*

In phases one and two of data collection, other EYPs articulated similar views that young children's autonomy and emerging participatory capacities overlap and interact with other developmental areas as the child grows. Several EYPs reported that young children's autonomy

and capacities to participate are present from a young age, but perhaps are not recognised as such by adults. Bernie developed this point in her interview when she said that she broadly understood participation as a developmental concept but had come to realise that it cannot be as easily measured as other developmental areas. She emphasised this by adding:

> *'There is too much focus on the milestones that we can observe'.*

In Bernie's opinion, developmental areas, including emerging autonomy and participatory capacities, are given less priority than more measurable and observable developmental areas, but are no less important for children's learning and development.

However, there were differences noted in perspectives of CYPSCs and EYPs on the ways in which participatory capacity emerges. CYPSC participants broadly agreed that measurable developmental milestones are clear indicators of children's participatory readiness, and a number expressed the view that demonstrable autonomy is a precursor for the young child's developing participatory capacity. A CYPSC participant pointed to this when they said:

> *'A good indicator of when they can start to participate is when they show they their autonomy'*

Another CYPSC participant referred to young children *'finding their voice'* to be able to indicate their participatory capacity. As well as associating participatory capacity with autonomy, CYPSC participants noted that young children's emerging participatory capacities are influenced by age, stages of development and verbal abilities. As one CYPSC participant commented during their interview:

> *'Age is the big factor… for young children, their life experience is limited in comparison to older children so they might not be able to form an opinion until later in their development'.*

This view was not generally shared by EYPs in either the focus groups or interviews; rather many EYPs reported that young children can and do demonstrate agentic and autonomous thinking and behaviours, and that participatory capacity is not directly linked to their stages of development. Lucy explained this in her interview:

> *'From a young age they let us know they have something to say, that they have an opinion'.*

However, this was more than just a different perspective on the timing or the order in which these capacities emerge, as it highlighted differing perspectives and vantage points of two groups of adults on the nature and purpose of young children's participation. In the next section,

findings are set out that indicate that adults are mindful that the circumstances in which participation occurs is a key factor in the nature of the child's participatory experience.

5.2.3 Enabling circumstances for young children's autonomy to flourish

While not surprising as it is an aspect of their professional competencies, EYPs in this study demonstrated an expansive overview of how they understand the participation of young children. In focus groups, EYPs referred to young children's capacities to express themselves (including non-verbal expression), to problem solve, to make personal choices and contribute to day-to-day planning as examples of participatory capacity. Supporting child participation was described by EYPs in the focus groups as an implicit process that is *'part of our practice'* and one that is '*built into our day-to-day practice, really'*. Several CYPSC participants reported during their interviews that children's participation is primarily connected to their planning and decision-making processes. However, for the majority of CYPSC participants, their previous experiences of child participation tended to include older children and teenagers, and their experiences of the participation of young children was limited.

During the focus groups and planning stages in phase one, and as the child consultation process unfolded during Phase 2, EYPs highlighted the need for an approach to participation that is nurturing, empowering and supportive of the child. Further, during the consultation sessions, there were many occasions where I observed EYPs actively nurturing and fostering young children's participatory experiences. An example of this showed the way in which Sean's autonomous participatory experience was supported and enhanced by Penny:

> *'Sean (aged 3½) is sitting on the edges of the group and watching the other children engaged with the activity:*
>
> ***Penny:*** *Sean, do you need my help to join in?*
>
> ***Sean****: Yeah ... but I don't know where to put it (points to an image he is holding)*
>
> ***Penny:*** *Why don't we work it out together first ... and then you can decide yourself where to put it.*
>
> *Sean and Penny continue to speak quietly for a couple of moments out of earshot. Penny sits back and watches as Sean joins in with the others and places his picture on one of the levels of the Volcano. He then picks up a second image, looks at it for a moment and then places it on the Volcano. He then comes back and sits beside Penny, speaks*

to her quietly while pointing to the Volcano and then watches the rest of the children complete the activity'.

In a reflective meeting after the session, Penny was clear that she viewed the interaction as indicative of how Sean's emerging capacities for autonomous thinking and participation needed support, underpinned by the safety of the nurturing relationship between Sean and herself, and the pedagogical context that frames their relationship. She outlined her belief that Sean had a right to participate but also to not participate if he chose, and that his participation should be at his own pace. She pointed to Sean's need for reassurance and protection within the participatory space, and this highlighted the extent to which EYPs believe they need to balance the young child's vulnerabilities with their emerging capacities for meaningful participation. Penny commented:

'We are trying to protect them when they need protecting ... and to empower them when we think they can work things out for themselves'.

This illustrates EYPs' consciousness of younger children's participatory needs and rights. Additionally, it shows that EYPs were actively encouraging children to participate at their own pace by employing pedagogical practices that foster the child's emerging capacities for autonomy and active participation. In another interaction that I observed and recorded during a consultation session, Lucy asked Aoife (aged 4) if she wanted to participate in the Happy and Healthy game that was underway:

'Aoife: *'I'm just learning what to do first ...'*

Lucy: *'It looks like they are having fun ...'*

Aoife watches for a few moments and then joins in with her peers'

Lucy's recollection of this interaction was recorded during a reflective meeting in the research site after the consultation session had concluded. During the meeting, Lucy referred to Aoife's emerging developmental capacity for participation in the following way:

'Aoife is starting to be more comfortable about participating now, but she is a bit more cautious about joining in these kinds of group activities. We try to have a fun element in group activities and discussions so that it feels comfortable for her'

Lucy's earlier comment to Aoife pointing to the potential for *'fun'* that participating offered evidence of the role of play, fun and creativity as enablers for young children's participation that will be teased out in more detail in the next chapter. This reference to fun indicates that

many EYPs believe fun and enjoyment enhances emergent capacities for meaningful participation and for autonomous engagement in participatory processes.

During the group interviews with children in Phase 2 of the data collection, the idea that children themselves are aware that they are *'learning'* how to participate was highlighted. This can be seen in the following discussion between Abbie, Jack (both aged 4) and I during the group interview in Site 4:

> ***Marie****: What was it like when I was talking to you about being Happy and Healthy?*
>
> ***Abbie:*** *To tell you what I learn to be healthy, and about my rabbit.*
>
> ***Jack:*** *And I am learning to be more healthy from running around in my garden and I tell'd Lisa (an EYP) I am happy from the colouring too.*

Children's emerging capacity to participate is expressed by some of the more vocal children as *'learning'* about how to speak up and how to '*tell'* each other and *'grownups'* about what is on their mind. This leads on to a further finding on EYP's understanding of their roles in supporting the young child's emerging capacity for participation. As he made clear in his interview, for Josh, EYPs have a unique perspective on the child's emerging capacities in a range of developmental areas, including their participatory capacities. In his interview, Josh was clear that young children's emerging participatory capacity overlaps with, but is distinguishable from, their development in other areas. He indicated this by saying:

> '*Look, they might not be able to speak up that clearly yet, but that doesn't mean they can't let us know what they we need to know from them …'*

In her interview, Bernie supported this contention, and commented:

> *'They are developing in so many areas at this age, but you notice they are well able to get their point across, if you give them the right opportunities'*.

Tatiana agreed with this perception in her interview, and further added that there is a relational aspect to children's active participation in the early years:

> *'From a young age, even babies, just knowing that the communication is there … we are beginning just with communication and eye contact and knowing that there's somebody there who will respond to them. That is so beneficial'*.

What is clear is that EYPs recognise that there are enabling circumstances for young children's emerging participatory capacities to be enhanced and nurtured, and that children's relationships with caring adults are important enablers. Additionally, interactions such as making eye contact

with infants and taking time to communicate to young children were recognised as enablers. EYPs spoke in their interviews about the need to be in proximity with children during these processes, and of the importance of physical contact, such as inviting a child to sit beside them if the child was looking for this level of support. As Caitlin said:

> *'You often find they move close to you … climb on your lap when they want you to support them'.*

Caitlin's contention was supported from my observational notes, which recorded many instances of children sitting close to EYPs or sitting on their laps, when a participatory activity was underway.

Several EYPs elaborated on the connection between children's emerging capacities to express themselves within participatory processes and the extent of the adult responsibilities in this area. Vera, in her interview, pointed to the need for the adult to be active within the relationship, to support emerging autonomy:

> *'The onus is on the adults to start the ball rolling, not on the child to have to wait until they can speak up to be able to express themselves'.*

Children's views on the enabling circumstances that best support their participation were captured in the following discussion between Saoirse, Leo and I during a child group interview held after the consultation sessions in service 5:

> ***Marie**: 'What helps when you want to tell something to your teachers or mammies and daddies?'*
>
> ***Leo**: 'My mom told me to look at her when I want to tell her something'.*
>
> ***Saoirse**: 'And I say "listen to me" … and she does'.*

This interaction indicates that young children recognise that communication is an interactive and reciprocal process between child and adult involving verbal and non-verbal cues.

Several EYPs expressed in their interviews that recognising and acknowledging young children's emergent autonomy contributes to the enabling circumstances for participation to occur. As well as providing opportunities for participation, EYPs contend that when the participatory conditions are enabling, children are more likely to display a capacity to participate. To support this point, Annie stated:

> '*They are asked, yes, but under the right conditions and we see them as very able, very capable …'*

This indicates that the enabling circumstances for child participation was an active rather than a passive construct in the minds of most of the EYPs in this study. These EYPs argued that when conditions are *'right'*, the young child's capacity for participation and autonomy is noted, and then supported.

While the data showed that the vast majority of the EYPs created participatory opportunities that supported children to become involved in problem solving, making choices and in day-to-day planning, the evidence for the promotion of children's participation at other decision-making levels was less clear cut. EYPs in two sites reported during their focus groups and repeated in their interviews that children were regularly involved in participating at an organisational level. These EYPs provided the following examples to support their position: children's participation in menu planning, children's contributions to the development of group rules, and children's participation in decision-making processes about the layout of rooms and outdoor areas. However, it was clear from EYPs in all six sites that they really valued children's participation at the day-to-day level, because this is the level that they reported as being the most relevant to children's lived experiences, and therefore having additional meaning to the child. If emergent participatory capacity is to be nurtured, according to the testimony of EYPs in their interviews, this process needs to begin with the child's experience of participation in these (perhaps to us as adults) more mundane and day-to-day activities. However, in practice, EYPs admitted that many children age out of the ECCE programme with limited experience of active participation at other levels of planning and decision-making. As Vera pointed out in her interview:

> *'We start with the day-to-day participation, and ideally as they progress and develop, we would be creating a few other opportunities for them to engage at other levels, but the reality is that doesn't really happen that much, and they can leave here without those opportunities'.*

Josh expressed a slightly different perspective about young children's experiences of participation at a variety of levels of the service in his interview:

> *'It's like we said, (they participate in) planning, contributing to rules, policies … if it comes from them it has more meaning for them … and they're very good at that now, because they are very capable themselves now. Obviously, some of these are here since last year and know their own mind now'.*

Here, he alluded to the influence of the length of time that the child attends an ECCE programme on their emerging capacity for autonomy. He described a constantly evolving

process whereby young children demonstrate early indications of autonomous thinking and behaviours that are further enhanced by participatory experiences during the time the child is in the ECCE setting. This links to the view of some EYPs who considered that when it comes to the development of autonomy, the process is more important than the destination. Further to this, Josh reported that he concentrates more on helping and supporting young children to develop their autonomy while they are attending the programme and is less focussed on a goal of children leaving the programme as fully autonomous agents.

EYPs were clear during planning meetings that developmentally appropriate strategies and practices were essential for supporting young children's emerging autonomy and participatory capacities. However, even at this early stage, some EYPs stressed that empathy was a guiding principle for the consultation sessions. As Josephine reported during a focus group:

> *'We will need to go at their pace, and it's so important that we think about this from their point of view, that we think about this feels like for them ... not only what we ourselves think or want from this'.*

This was reflected in the other planning sessions in each site, as EYPs emphasised the need to tune into children's emotions and lived experiences when planning for the sessions. An example of this is the care and attention paid by EYPs to the needs of individual children within each group. In a planning session, Vera referred to several children in her group who required additional supports when participating in a group activity. Vera highlighted one child who she reported as *'sometimes struggling'* when in a group context, but also anxious if she felt left out of an activity. Vera's solution was to position herself near this child, and to tune in to any discomfort that the child was displaying. There are numerous other explicit and implicit references in the EYP data to the need for an approach to child participation that is underpinned by empathy.

5. 3 Young children's autonomy as a relational concept

5.3.1 Introduction

In this section of the chapter, I report on findings on EYP understandings of the relational dimensions of young children's emerging autonomy. I present findings on the nature of the relationships that contribute to the development of autonomy in the young child, and for meaningful participatory practice. The findings show EYP understandings of the essential value of relationships and interactions in fostering the young child's emerging capacities for

autonomy in participatory spaces. Further, EYPs consider that their efforts should buttresses children's emerging autonomy, but also place limits on its scope so that the child is aware of the boundaries. EYPs reports indicated that they valued the relational aspects of autonomy that promote interdependence and relationships. Tensions that EYPs encounter in their participatory practices are presented. Examples from that data that support the findings in this section are drawn from all phases of the data collection, and include quotations from focus group and interviews, reflective and observational notes. To begin, I set out findings on the significance that EYPs attach to relationships within participatory processes involving young children.

5.3.2 The significance of relationships in participatory processes

EYPs reported that relationships with children need to be developed and nurtured and when they are, the value of these relationships is critical to the emergence of children's autonomy. For Josh, respectful and engaging interactions and relationships that are based on listening to children, underpin his pedagogical approach:

> *'The two ears would be burnt off you listening to everyone. I have all 22 of them in there and I love just sitting on the ground for the full day playing with them and being in their company'.*

This indicates that these relationships and interactions are bound by a respectful connectivity between the child and the EYP. There is other evidence that EYPs were thinking carefully about the promotion of young children's autonomy through interdependent and relational participatory processes. In their interviews, all the EYPs spoke about their role in promoting children's autonomy by referencing the relationship between the child and EYP. In the focus groups and interviews, EYPs referred to their perceptions of their role in participatory contexts by using active nouns such as *'enhancer'*, '*facilitator', 'supporter',* and *'mentor'* when describing their positionality to the child. For one EYP, the responsibility or onus for initiating their participation in decision-making processes was placed on the child rather than the EYP, as described in her interview:

> *'We look to them to express their preferences or their viewpoints, and then we respond'.*

On the face of it, this could be empowering and supportive of more autonomous participatory processes where the child is the initiator of the process, but these types of approaches were in the minority in the responses of EYPs. Mostly, EYPs articulated in their interviews that support

for young children's participation in decision making required more of an active, collaborative, and dynamic approach, as highlighted by Annie:

> *'We need to be there ... because it will not happen just because we want it to. We have to be there to support it'.*

Penny agreed with Annie's point:

> *'It's about being the supportive person to facilitate this; we don't expect them to spontaneously come up with answers themselves'.*

Examples of how young children's autonomy was actively supported by EYPs were reported and observed during data collection. In one example, Annie recounted an interaction with a parent who was concerned about their daughter's behaviours during the drive to preschool, when every morning she demanded that the parent drive slowly with the result that she was always late arriving to the centre, missing greeting time. In her interview, Annie gave this example as an illustration of how a young child like Hannah enacted their individual agency and autonomy, influenced events, and made their views and preferences known when supported by adults within a nurturing relationship-based participatory process. As Annie recalled:

> *'Hannah said "Oh I hate greeting time" and she told (her parent) to slow down so she would miss greeting time ... So, I said to the group "some people don't really like greeting time so what can we do, how can we make it better?" So we did a big thing on that, so Hannah took the reins of greeting time the next morning, she decided she was going to read a story and then they sang their song, but some of the others, they think that is too short, because they really want to do their news…so the consensus is that everyone will meet first thing in the morning and we will have a story and do our song and then the children that want to do greeting time will stay together and the others will move on ...'.*

This example indicated how the enabling circumstances for the enactment of children's agency and autonomy to occur depend on open, supportive relationships and interactions between adult and child. This example pointed to a complex area of practice for EYPs, where they must navigate between nurturing the autonomy of the individual child and meeting the preferences of the group. This is discussed in more detail in section 5.4.

5.3.3 Relational approaches that support autonomy

During their interviews, the majority of EYPs expressed a recognition that while the promotion of autonomy is an important ECCE principle, without further elaboration and development it does not fully account for what is happening in practice, and does not engage with the more relational aspects of autonomy. The language used by EYPs to discuss the concept of autonomy developed between phase one and phase three of data collection. In phase one, EYPs used the terms *'independence'* and *'agency'* interchangeably with *'autonomy'.* In phase three many EYPs referred to *'autonomy'* in the context of relationships within participatory processes, while still discussing *'independence'* and *'agency'* as developmental attributes. As Lisa said in her interview:

> *'I always thought autonomy is about them being independent, it comes up in Aistear and parents are always looking for it. It is a fantastic goal for us, and we love to see them leaving with a bit more independence then when they came in ... but this is where you need to be the caring adult that supports them, because you can't expect 3-year-olds to fully manage things in their own lives …'*

This shows that EYPs believed young children best learn to activate their autonomy within a social process such as provided by an ECCE service, where relationships and social interactions with adults and children are valued and prioritised.

There were diverse EYP ideas on how, when, and where to appropriately impose limits or boundaries on children's agency and autonomy. An example given of participatory practice described by Caitlin in her interview highlighted how EYPs framed child participation from a protective stance:

> '*Well, if you take today … it's cold and we can't go out today because of the frost … so what the girls will do at 11.30 when it's outside time, they will consult with the children about what they want to do. But it's their choice, it's democratic. They can't go outside so they decide what they want to do instead. It's a rule of the service and they know that. They can look out the door and they see frost still on the ground so that is all explained to them'.*

In this example, a decision to stay indoors for safety reasons had been made by EYPs, and reasons for this decision have been explained to children. What is then offered to children, as reported by Caitlin, is a more limited choice due to the perception of the risks involved. This demonstrated that the limits and boundaries of children's autonomy were reached quickly once

a perception of potential risk or harm is identified. It was evident that young children's emerging autonomy can sometimes be conditional on, and restricted to mainly adult imposed choices, as outlined by Alice in her interview:

> *'They are asked what they want to do and what they want to play with, but we have already done the work in ensuring that their choices are made from within a range of toys and activities that will support learning'.*

However, different understandings of the role of the adult were reported by EYPs, and acknowledgments of the complexity of accommodating meaningful participation in practice. As Jenny set out in her interview:

> *'It's all child led from 9 o clock in the morning when they come in to when they leave, they decide what it is they like to do and we help them. It's not mayhem though because we are there to step in if we are needed to help manage things and we do help them to figure out a good deal of it'*

In some sites, this complexity appeared to have been managed by blending formal and informal consultation and participatory activities throughout the day, as reported by Lucy in her interview:

> '*We have definite spaces and times for consultation, but it also runs throughout the day, so they don't need to wait for a specific time to speak up, but we have specific planning times where they know we are actively looking for their input. We also make sure they know we have heard them; we thank them for their input, and we tell them how likely or otherwise it is that we can do what they are asking for. We try to give feedback as best we can'.*

These comments are evidence that EYPs considered that supportive and bounded relational experiences were needed for young children to learn and develop autonomy. Within this broader goal of supporting early learning and development through nurturing pedagogical practices, EYPs in the planning stages acknowledged that to accomplish the goal of meaningful participation in decision-making process, systematic supports were needed. Many of these systematic and bespoke supports were then noted during observed interactions between children and EYPs during the data collection. During the consultation sessions in Phase 2, I recorded how many of the EYPs engaged children in the activity by starting out with general broad cues and language but then moving on to providing more specific details, as required by children.

Additionally, during the consultation sessions when children were engaging with abstract concepts or themes that they could not easily resolve by themselves, I observed that, with EYP assistance and support, the children were resolving them. An example of this was the phrasing of the narrative that was developed during the planning process for the consultation sessions. When thinking about the concepts of health and well-being, EYPs felt that children needed to think of these concepts as *'feelings'* or *'experiences'* they could relate to their daily lives. Thus, *'health'* was considered by the EYPs to be a more complex concept for a young child then *'feeling healthy'*. Additionally, *'well-being'* was adapted to *'happy'* or '*feeling/being happy'*. When these ideas were introduced to children as feelings or experiences, rather than static and relatively complex concepts, children were observed to easily resolve these ideas and showed little hesitancy or confusion about their meaning. To check this, during the first session in Site 1, when the theme of the consultations was being discussed with children, I asked if they understood what I meant by *'feeling healthy'*. The following is from the transcript of this discussion:

'***Marie:*** *Do you know what I mean when I talk about "feeling healthy"?*

Alex: *Vegetables.*

Marie: *So vegetables are part of what we need to feel healthy ... that's very helpful, thank you. Anyone else want to say what they think I mean by "feeling healthy"?*

Ciara: *I brush my teeth every day. Look how healthy my teeth are!*

Marie: *You all have lovely teeth.*

Allie*: I know… you also have to go to bed.*

Marie: *I wonder why that is important for feeling healthy?*

Allie: *It makes you feel good in the morning if you get a lot of sleep.'*

These responses support the belief of the EYPs who felt that young children would be able to engage with health-related behaviours by introducing the idea as a feeling or an experience that is relevant to their daily lives. My field work diaries indicated that I too required support from the EYPs to develop a systematic approach to thinking about these concepts, an approach which it seems EYPs had already developed a strong sense of in their practice. In a reflective meeting after one session, Annie commented on this:

'We are conscious of the language we use; we are always thinking "How appropriate is our language for this age group?". We do use a fewer number of words with this age group ... but we want the words to have clear meaning, so we do think about this a

good bit, and young practitioners come in and then they hear the way we phrase things and they pick it up. We gradually introduce more complex words as the year goes on, so we are scaffolding how they are introduced to these things'

This is more evidence of a systematic approach in EY practice to supporting young children's autonomy and to a widespread consideration of the implications of the language employed by adults when engaging in participatory activities with young children. Annie further reflected on children's engagement with complex concepts during the consultation process in her interview and referenced the analysis process that children worked through during the consultation session. She reported:

'These are abstract enough concepts even for an adult…it's amazing their comprehension and the process they undertook to work things out…it reminded me of Maslow's Hierarchy of needs, like all the basics at the bottom, fresh air, food, exercise, water and then working up to the things that they admit they like to do but know they shouldn't do too often'

There was a recognition by EYPs during their interviews that even though they tended to concentrate participatory opportunities on what they perceived to be directly related to young children's lived experiences, young children can and do express views on concepts or occurrences that are external to themselves and their own direct experiences. Many EYPs reported providing opportunities for young children to express a view on social and political concepts. During Annie's interview, she reported on a discussion on current affairs and politics that she had with her group about the presidency of Donald Trump:

'We had the newspapers out and we were talking to them about the politics, and we asked them, "What do you know about Donald Trump?" and Jack said "He always wears a red tie" and when I looked at the pictures sure enough he always seems to have a red tie, and another little one comes out with "He's crap"! So, they are aware of these events in the world'.

Lucy reported during her interview that in her experience, young children can and do engage with social concepts external to their own direct lived experiences, once the concepts were presented to them in a dialogue with adults:

'They know what is going on in the world; they know about children being homeless, they know about children being poor…. we talk to them about that a lot'

5.3.4 Tensions in practices that support autonomy

Tensions in relation to how adults engage with young children in participatory processes related to autonomy-supporting practice were identified in the study. During the focus groups and interviews, several EYPs pointed to a tension between participation and protection, regarding their perception of the young child as having vulnerabilities. There was a shared view expressed by these EYPS that provision for young children's participation should take a balanced approach so that their vulnerabilities are also considered. These vulnerabilities were identified by these EYPs as linked to the age and stage of development of young children, their relatively limited life experience, their dependence on adult support and intervention, and their developing capacity to verbalise opinions, all of which they considered as requiring a protective response from adults.

A further tension was identified when EYPS spoke about the enabling circumstances for participatory practices. There was a perception expressed by several EYPs during their interviews that that these circumstances in themselves may not be enough to fully support the emerging capacity for participation of all young children. Some EYPs expressed a view that young children may not yet have the capacity (nor should they always be asked) to contribute their original perspectives as part of a participatory process. This highlights a tension related to the idea that actively encouraging a child to participate can in some situations be perceived by the EYP as developmentally inappropriate or indeed a burden on the young child, rather than a learning or developmental opportunity. Having to navigate through these tensions can be tricky for practitioners. Alice developed this point in her interview:

> *'In practice, we are open to children speaking up…. certainly, letting us know what they think about things. The younger they are though, the less we should directly involve them…. and there are many areas we wouldn't feel we needed to consult them on. They are here to have fun and learn, not to be too pressured about all our decisions'.*

A tension that was not consciously acknowledged by EYPs relates to how they engaged with children's drawings during the first consultation sessions. Many EYPs were noted to ask the child for their interpretation of the drawing, but in some cases EYPs offered their own interpretation of the child's drawing without checking this with the child. A small number did not engage in any interpretation. This finding highlighted that when control is nominally handed to young children, it can be accompanied by unacknowledged limits and boundaries on

the extent of that control. This was reinforced by an exchange I observed during the closing of one session in where children had been engaged in drawing:

> *'Louise asked Conor to tell her what was in his drawing. Conor responded: "I'm playing with Fluffy" (his pet Rabbit). Louise wrote "Playing with my pets makes me happy' on the drawing".*

I hoped to uncover what was happening here, so after the session, I asked Louise more about this. Louise explained that she felt Conor's autonomy and agency were being evidenced by her interpretation of the message in Conor's drawing, and that her reasons for interpreting the drawing were about:

> *'Making the child's thoughts more visible'.*

In the same meeting, I asked how children's drawings are generally handled by EYPS. Josephine explained that a drawing is often interpreted because:

> '*We want parents to be able to make sense of their child's drawing'*

Curious to see how this was being managed in the other research sites, I posed the same question during reflective meetings. Many of the EYPs in the other research sites reported that they frequently interpret children's drawing and artwork so that parents can understand their meanings. An adult's interpretation of a child's drawing is seen by many EYPs as valuable in bringing attention to the child's views. Lucy added a point about the need to respond with empathy when engaging in interpretation of the child's work:

> *'You need to interpret their ideas sometimes and look into them a bit more, but from the perspective of the child and not the perspective of an adult'.*

In other reflective meetings, EYPs who reported they did not routinely engage in interpretation of children's drawings said they were operating under the impression that the child retained control over the drawing, as part of their commitment to autonomy. Therefore, they had already consciously decided that they should not interfere with the child's work unless the child asked them to do so.

5.4 Young children's autonomy in collective participation

5.4.1 Introduction

This section presents findings on the effects of collective participatory processes on young children's emerging autonomy. The section opens with EYP reflections on their role, and on

the complexities of responding to the individual child within a collective. Further findings are presented on children's growing awareness of social roles and social processes both within the collective of children, and external to the context for the participatory activities. Young children described the role of child leaders within their groups as significant for their experiences during the participatory process and EYPs reported new insights into children's participatory capacities arising from these experiences.

5.4.2 EYP understandings of their role in collective participation

EYP accounts of their understandings of their role as a support to the individual child in participatory processes such as day-to-day consultations, planning and decision-making processes highlighted the complexities of creating a space where each child's viewpoint is fully respected and responded to within a collective. The majority of EYPs in their interviews referred to this as a challenging and complex area of practice. As Jenny said:

> *'We want them to feel comfortable with this but that means we have to work hard ourselves, so it is not chaos, instead it is a managed sort of a space where each one of them in the group feels at ease with us and feels comfortable to speak up about what is on their minds'.*

EYPs reported that, in their opinion, participatory activities with different age groups of older children and young people would not require such complex framing or scaffolding from adults. As Bernie outlined in her interview:

> *'I think we know that there's a specific role for adults with groups of young children. I imagine it is different for the older children, you would expect they wouldn't rely so much on the adults but with the young groups, we are very important…we do consciously think about these things'.*

Vera took up this point in her interview, when she talked about how she buttresses children's autonomy within group scenarios:

> *'If I am talking to another child or another adult, they have a signal, they come up and put their hand on my leg, to let me know that they are waiting, because normally I will respond to them straight away and if I don't, they can signal to me'.*

Annie reported finding the appropriate response for the individual child in a scenario where the group does not share their view. She outlined how she responds to this when it occurs:

'Every day there will be disagreements within the group, someone will want to go one way, and the rest of the group the other, so you must listen to all sides, and model that for the group. Sometimes, they can figure it out for themselves or someone will back down, other times I tell them I have listened to them all and now I have to decide'.

In the main, EYPs were clear during their interviews that they can and do respond differently to individual children within the group, and there is a recognition that often the more vocal children are those whose contributions are most impactful on the collective decision-making processes. This finding is elaborated on in more detail in Chapter Six.

5.4.3 Multiple perspectives in collective participation

As the ECCE operates as a collective participatory forum for young children, I was interested to uncover the views of EYPs on the effect that the incorporation of multiple perspectives had on individual children's participatory experiences, and on their emerging autonomy. During both the EYP and child interviews, I found that there was general agreement that children's participation is both impactful on decision-making processes and supportive of young children's developing autonomy when the participatory space is inclusive of multiple perspectives. Jack (aged 4) offered an example of this during a group interview with children, by describing how the collective of children operated autonomously to prompt a response from adults:

'When we all wanted new paint because glitter got in the old one, and we all tell'd and then they got us new paint'.

EYPs are clear in their interviews that having multiple perspectives (such as in a collective) does not diminish the value of the individual child's perspectives but rather adds to it, but only if the process is child-centred and characterised by empathy. Multiple perspectives, including those of other children and adults, were thought by EYPs to be needed to arrive at clear conclusions on children's collective views, particularly as they believe young children mostly draw on their own lived experiences during consultation processes. CYPSC participants reported that they were conscious of the value of multiple perspectives within participatory processes and agreed in the focus groups that engaging with multiple perspectives was helpful to them in decision-making processes that involved young children.

Referring to CYPSC as the *'audience'* one CYPSC member reported:

> *'It is more interesting and meaningful for us…the audience, who are hearing the children's views to know that we are hearing more than one voice'.*

In their interviews, many EYPs similarly agreed that supporting young children to work together in a group enhances the voices of young or quieter children in these processes. They reported a belief that a child who does not verbally express an individual opinion can still claim ownership of the decisions of the collective. That this happens was supported by the following observation note taken at the conclusion of data collection in Site 5:

> *'Ben did not take an active part in the consultation activities but watched from the side-lines. At the end of the session, when his mother arrived to take him home, Ben ran up to her and took her by the hand over to the table where the Volcano was being worked on and, excitedly explained to her what he, and the other members of the group had been doing. Ben's mother responded positively and appeared to be delighted with Ben's reaction'.*

In the observational notes taken during the data collection, there were other accounts of children who chose to remain on the edge of the participatory activities, and the responses of EYPs towards these children was observed. It was notable that a number of these children were from families where English is not the first language, as observed in Site 4:

> *'During the session, Tatiana was observed sitting with a child and speaking to her in Polish about what was happening, and what was being discussed. This child did not join in the activity, but also did not lose interest in what was happening and stayed near to the activity and Tatiana until it was finished'.*

For the most part, children who remained on the side-lines of the participatory activities were observed by me to be comfortable and still interacting with the group or the EYP even if not expressly contributing to the process. In addition to Ben's reaction, there were other examples of children asking their parents to look at the output of the group activity, even when their own contribution had been relatively limited. As was described in the example of Sean and Penny in Section 5.2.3, EYPs in most of these scenarios were noted to be watchful of these children, encouraging them to participate but not directing them to, checking in with them at various points and offering help and support. The EYPs emphasised children's interest to parents when discussing an activity, even when the child had not been an active participant. When I asked about this response during reflective meetings, several EYPs reported that they were supporting

the child to express the consensus developed by the group in a way that maximised the child's interest rather than their contribution**.**

5.4.4 Children's understandings of social roles

The findings indicated that young children's awareness of social roles within a collective participatory process is emergent. From my first introduction and during the planning sessions with children during the data collection, I had built up a narrative about the *'grownups who are in charge of Roscommon'* who were waiting for me to bring back the children's viewpoints. This idea of a *'group of grownups'* appeared to intrigue many children who asked me more and more frequently about these grownups as the process unfolded. According to my field notes, it became evident to me that the children had understood that there was an external context for their work, even if the exact nature of this context was perhaps relatively unclear to the children. Indeed, I noted it was challenging for the EYPs or me to explain this context in any more detail. So even though children's understanding of the external context may not have been as clear as it would be for a group of older children or adults, young children in this study were noted to understand that these *'grownups'* were in a decision-making role in Roscommon. Additionally, they appeared to understand that the external context for the consideration of their work was in their county, and that it affected all young children and not just those involved in the process.

The level of curiosity about what would happen with their work when these '*grownups'* were presented with it was surprising to me and to the EYPs as recorded in reflective meetings. Children's curiosity was indicated by the persistent questioning by some children on my second visit to research sites as to what the externally located *'grownups in charge of Roscommon'* thought about what the children had already said. As an example of this, Tom (aged 4) asked me for the name of one of the grownups who would be receiving their work, and then asked me what she thought about it at regular intervals over the process. I recorded that Tom referred to this person by her first name during subsequent visits. This indicated that to me even though the children had no clear line of sight to the policymakers who would eventually engage with their work, there was a connection created in children's minds between their outputs and decision-makers, and a sense that there was a development process underway, of which they were an important part.

The support that children offered each other was another theme related to social roles that was uncovered during the analytical process. The evidence that children looked to other children as

well as adults for support and leadership within the participatory process was clear. Examples of this were observed within each of the six groups of children, and are evidenced by the following transcript from a group interview with children in Site 3, when several children identified another child as the main *'helper'*:

> ***'Marie:*** *'Who helped you when we were working on the Volcano?'*
>
> ***Jake:*** *Liam*
>
> ***Leah:*** *Liam always helps us'.*

In my own field diary and observation sheets, I had already noted that Liam (aged 4) possessed characteristics that marked him out as a leader within the wider child group. He was perhaps the most skilful communicator in the group, and he appeared to be confident when engaging with adults and other children. I observed him delegating work to other children and offering them support during the activity. While Liam was the only child that other children referenced by name as helping them, there were other children in all the other services who took control of certain aspects of the process and supported and guided other children who were engaging with the process. Liam's impact on the group, and his own sense of agency and self-determination were noticed by EYPs working with him. While they reported in reflective meetings that they were aware he was an important member of the group, they did not realise the extent of his impact on the other children in the group. They reported having new insights not just only on Liam's role within the group, but also on the potential of children to support each other within participatory processes.

5.5 Conclusion to Chapter Five

This chapter presented findings related to the theme of relational autonomy and relational participatory processes involving young children. The chapter established that both EYP and CYPSC acknowledged the emergent nature of the capacities of young children to engage autonomously in participatory and decision-making processes. Drawing on these perspectives, children's active and autonomous participation was widely seen as a developmental process. However, EYPs placed more emphasis on relationships and interactions within the participatory environment as enablers of participation than CYPSC participants did. On the other hand, CYPSC participants described the participatory capacity of young children as being linked to the child's age and stage of development. This was not a widely shared opinion of EYPs. The findings offered evidence on the complexities of the role of the EYP practitioners

in creating the enabling circumstances for the young child to flourish within a participatory space, where they can influence decision-making process. Additionally, the findings that were concerned with what young children said and did during the research process showed that young children value the interactions and relationships with their adult carers in facilitating their emergent autonomy within participatory processes. The chapter presented findings on young children's autonomy in collective participatory processes and highlighted the many complexities of responding to young children within a group scenario. An additional finding set out the way in which young children developed a sense of social roles, both within the collective participatory process, and external to the process. Finally, the chapter concluded with young children's own reports on the role of child leaders as supports for their own participatory experiences.

Chapter Six. Engaging with Young Children's Voices in Participatory Processes

6.1 Introduction

In the preceding chapter, I set out findings related to the theme of relational autonomy and relational participatory processes involving young children. In Chapter Six, I present findings on the theme of 'engaging with young children's voices in participatory processes'. This overarching theme is broken down into three subthemes. The first concerns the ways in which EYPs promote child-centred and rights-based approaches that support the participation of young children. The second is the extent to which EYPs' attitudes and practices impact on young children's participatory experiences, and on the child-centred responses and supports from EYPs that enhance young children's voices in participatory processes. And the third sub-theme concerns enablers of the meaningful participation of young children. While play and fun were identified as enablers for children's participatory experiences, other factors such as the ethos of the service or agency were identified as well. The chapter also considers barriers and challenges to the meaningful participation of young children.

6. 2 Child-centred approaches support young children's participation

6.2.1 Introduction

This sub-theme points to a finding that child-centred and rights-based participatory processes are thought by EYPs to enhance the 'voice of the child'. This section considers how EYPs plan for participatory processes that engage with young children's diverse means of expression, and what they focus on during their planning. The issue of young children's capacity to engage with language rather than their capacity to vocalise is presented as a key consideration for EYPs. The section presents findings on the types of responses and supports that EYPs believe enhance the young child's participatory experience.

6.2.2 Planning for child-centred participatory processes

The analysis of the data shows that when EYPs were planning for participatory processes, they focussed on the idea that these processes should be *'child-friendly'* to be considered *'appropriate'* for this age group. In observing the early planning stages and during the focus groups, I noted that the main considerations for EYPs were to ensure that the language used by adults would be accessible to young children, and that the session would incorporate both

strengths-based and play-based approaches. This was described to me as '*developmentally appropriate practice'* by several EYPs.

I noted some differences in the EYP narrative on developmentally appropriate approaches, as recorded in EYP reflective journals and meetings over the duration of child consultation sessions. In my field notes I recorded as the sessions were underway, I noted an EYP acknowledgement of the complexities of ensuring that participatory processes are rights-based and child-centred, as well as being developmentally appropriate. In reflective meetings and journals, many EYP participants reported that young children's participatory practices require a facilitated process: one that 'scaffolds' children in their participatory experiences. This links back to an earlier finding in Chapter Five related to the idea of EYPs scaffolding children's emerging autonomy. This was well expressed by Vera:

> *'Before this, I would have said 'it's all about making sure that what we were doing fits with child development theory and developmentally appropriate practice'. But now I think it is much more than that…we need to start thinking more about their rights and about how we can support them so that they get the most out of the opportunities we are providing for them'*

As I outlined in Chapter Five, language was a key consideration for EYPs who expressed during the planning stages that they were concerned that young children's vulnerabilities including their emerging language capacity may affect their meaningful participation. In the planning phase, several EYPs discussed young children's emerging language capacities as a possible impediment to participatory practices, as highlighted by Josh:

> *'Language is very important here. Language is 80% of the battle'.*

In addition, in the post-consultation stage, EYP responses in relation to the extent that language influenced the participatory processes had a different focus. A comparison of the data from the planning phase and the transcripts of EYP post-consultation interviews indicated that EYP thinking on language was being considered from a child-centred and rights-based perspective. In post-consultation reflective meetings and interviews, EYPs placed more emphasis on their own role in creating the conditions for the young child to find their own voice in whichever way they choose, and less on purely developmental issues related to children's verbalisation and vocal abilities. Rather than viewing language as a constraint on young children's participation, EYPs broadly agreed, post-consultation, that language can be a support for young children's participation, if care is taken to explain concepts in an accessible manner. They believed that abstract concepts are best explored by connecting these to children's own lives

and experiences. The concerns expressed by EYPs during the planning phase regarding language as a challenge for meaningful participation appeared to be being mainly resolved by the time of the interview stage. EYP participants were clear that the issue regarding language remained as a potential challenge for young children's participation but the process of working together to develop language that the young child could engage with had reduced its potential to be an impediment to participation. This was evidenced by Josh, who in the planning stages described language as a '*battle'*:

> *'I said to you at the start that I thought language would be the big problem, that we wouldn't be able to find the right form of words to explain what this was all about, but when we put our heads together and broke it down for them, made it real for them, it wasn't a challenge at all'*

Further, in the post consultation interviews, there was general EYP agreement that while supports for children's participation should always take into account the child's age, language and verbal skills, there was a need to consider the social context in which the child lives, in addition to children's personalities, vulnerabilities and strengths. This is made clear by Aine when she said:

> *'As well as thinking about the choice of words we will use, we were also thinking more about the child's lived experiences…like "does this make sense to this child because of what might be happening for him out there in the world?"'*

While many EYPs reported in their interview that their practice already reflected this, a number of these participants outlined they did not consciously factor this dimension into their planning for participatory processes, and instead focussed mainly on language and developmental considerations when setting up activities and processes. Further elaboration of how EYPs articulate their role in enhancing children's voices in participatory processes is set out in the next section.

6.2.3 Responses that enhance young children's voices

In addition to the importance that EYPs place on planning for participatory processes, the findings highlighted EYPs' views on the different types of responses and participatory supports needed to enhance the voice of the young child within peer groups. By reviewing the transcripts of EYP focus-group meetings and planning sessions, I noticed a focus on the types of supports that individual children needed to express themselves in collective participatory processes.

In the planning meetings, many of the EYPs noted that, in their experience, young children, even when in similar age groups, participate at different levels and that all levels need to be catered for. However, in the reflective meetings and in their interviews, several EYPs developed this point when they stated that pre-vocal or quieter children could feel less included in participatory processes than their more vocal peers. My observation notes and reflective diaries did record some differences in adult responsiveness to, and engagement with, vocal and less vocal children. Indeed, the most vocal child participants in the study influenced key decisions taken during the process. This was exemplified in the following exchange from an audio recording at the conclusion of a consultation activity. Here, Amy (3 ½) and Louis (4) and I were looking at the Volcano the children had worked on:

> ***'Amy****: When can we put it on the wall?*
>
> ***Louis:*** *I know…. we should copy it. As well… we should put them up all over town.*
>
> ***Marie****: You think we need to put these all over town Louis?*
>
> ***Louis****: Yes, so everyone will look at what we done. Will you put them up for us?'*

This was the first point at which the idea of developing a poster to represent the Volcano was recorded over the process. Louis was noted in my observation sheets as a vocal child who displayed emerging leadership qualities when working within his peer group. In response to Louis' verbalisation of his suggestions for the Volcano, the EYPs and I began to think for the first time about dissemination of a poster version of the Happy and Healthy Volcano[12], and spoke to Louis about his idea even when many of the other children, including Amy, were still focussed on completing the product.

While this was predicted by some of the EYPs during planning, the need for differing types and levels of responses for individual children within groups was reported as being a revelation to other EYPs. The latter group told me in their interviews that they had come to recognise a tendency in their own practice to respond more definitely and conclusively to more vocal children, and that they often considered these children as speaking for the group. These EYPs outlined in their interviews that the views of more vocal children were not always checked with the other young members of the group before being adopted as the consensus.

[12] The Happy and Healthy Volcano poster can be viewed at: https://www.cypsc.ie/_fileupload/Documents/Resources/Roscommon/A3-Volcano-Poster-Roscommon-Final.pdf

This approach to practice was referred to by some of the EYPs as a practice that is *'strengths-based'* as it supported the already vocal child to become increasingly confident in vocalising their opinion. This was not a widely shared view however, and other EYPs during their interview noted that privileging the voice of the more vocal children may inadvertently add to the vulnerabilities of less vocal children. Bernie reported in her interview how this can happen in practice, when she was reflecting on the impact of a vocal child on decision-making within a group scenario:

> '*Jack is the chatty one in that group… we can find ourselves asking him what he wants to do and then we run with that (because)… if we ask the group, he'll speak up first anyway'*.

This indicates the challenge of establishing a group consensus with young children, as the voice of more vocal children may be unintentionally promoted as the consensus, particularly when planning for group activities.

6. 3 EYP attitudes impact on young children's participatory experiences

6.3.1 Introduction

This section considers findings on the sub-theme of how the attitudes and practices of adults can affect the child's experiences of participation. Consideration is given to how EYPs report on the representation of child-centred participatory practices in the early years' frameworks. The findings further indicate that some EYPs are unclear as to their mandate for engaging with 'the voice of the child' in collective participatory processes. Challenges for adults in engaging in meaningful participatory processes with young children as reported by EYPs are presented in this section.

6.3.2 Child-centred and rights-based approaches and the early years' frameworks

Child-centredness and respect for rights are practice principles supported by Aistear and Siolta, and it is perhaps not surprising that EYPs made regular reference to these frameworks, both in planning for the sessions, when reflecting on their participatory practice after the sessions, and during their interviews. Many of the EYPs referenced the guidance from the frameworks when thinking about how participatory practice is being promoted across the sector, while some EYPs were less clear that developments in participatory practice were being driven by the frameworks. As Lisa said during her interview:

'Maybe 5 or 6 years ago it changed ... maybe it has to do with Aistear and Siolta ... getting us to think along these lines, but it has certainly changed'

Lucy reflected on recent practice changes, and spoke more definitively about the impact of the frameworks on child participation processes during her interview:

'It always felt that this was the right thing to do, so even years back we did it to some extent, but it was not thought through too well, it was really only with Aistear and Siolta that there started to become some shape to it, some thinking or theory behind it'

Yet, several EYPs expressed the view during their interviews that even though there is an emphasis in the frameworks on child-centred participatory practice, the values and principles that underpin child-centredness might not be fully reflected in practice on the ground. Child-centredness was described by many EYPs in this study as a *'mind-set'* that is influenced by professional experience, practice wisdom and exposure to meaningful participatory processes, as well as training. As Louise outlined in her interview:

'Staff are not always open to these ideas…When I started, I found it hard to, you know… fully understand the concept of participation but once you engage with it and it is through working, experience, and seeing how it works. They (staff) may not come in with that mind-set, you have to see it working as well'.

Caitlin, on the other hand, reported in her interview that the messages in the frameworks about the value of participation were crucial for effective practice:

'Aistear tells us we would not have the ECCE programme but for the participation of children, it is central, it's at the essence of practice, we couldn't operate without it'.

For other EYPs in this study, while cognisant of the emphasis on rights in the frameworks, they were not always fully confident that practice in the sector is universally oriented towards rights, and in particular, participation rights. For several EYPs, the tension between rights and participation was evident, despite the emphasis on rights in the frameworks. Vera expressed this perspective during her interview when talking about how this is being managed within the sector:

'I think we do respect many rights, but always on our own terms so that it must suit the adult agenda'.

There was a tendency in practice, as reported by other EYPs, to express their practice as being rights-based because of the rights orientation of the frameworks. Additionally, EYPs reported

that they are engaging in rights-based practice, even when they are not able to conceptualise it, with rights being part of the taken-for-granted practice. Jenny said in her interview:

> *'It is rights-based practice even when we don't really know that it is, like there are some girls here who probably don't even know about the UNCRC, but they would be working that way, but they wouldn't know the roots of it or why they are working that way, they probably think it is because of Aistear and Siolta'.*

6.3.3 EYP attitudes towards child-centred and rights-based practices

Several EYP participants highlighted how the attitudes of staff can pose a challenge to integrating child-centred and rights-based participatory processes into practice, even when they are supported in the frameworks. The emphasis for some of their EYP colleagues was reported by participants as being more concerned with demonstrating to parents that children are learning and developing, than on assuring parents that practices are rights-based and child-centred. Lucy described this in the following way:

> *'I think they (other staff) sometimes think you are "off the wall" completely; they might think "ah sure look haven't they had a good enough time with the gloves and the paint, why do you want to be doing anything else?"*

Josephine brought up a similar point in her interview:

> *'Children's rights… that can be way down the list for some staff… they want the child to go home with a painting first and foremost, to show that they are learning'.*

Tatiana suggested in her interview that some practitioners could overlook the value of child-centred and rights-based approaches provided parents and colleagues could see evidence that children were learning and developing. There were other EYP attitudes to child-centred and rights-based participatory practices captured during data analysis. In his interview, Josh pointed to the complexity of the role played by the adult in creating the circumstances for rights-based child-centred participatory practices to occur:

> *'It's not easy to get the balance right when you want them to participate, and you have to keep the programme ticking over as well. There is a lot of theory behind it, it takes time, and it takes experience; you need to make sure you keep your focus on what the child is telling you but your own ideas come into it as well, so it is a balancing act sometimes…'*

Meanwhile, in her interview Annie reported that, in her opinion, child-centred practice is primarily a collaboration between adults and children, rather than being a practice that is only concerned with addressing children's presenting needs, and that this is sometimes misunderstood by EYPs. She explained her position on this as follows:

> *'… I remind them (other EYP staff) that they have to consider themselves as part of the circle when they talk about child-centred practice… they are in it with the child, they should be working together with the child to make sure they are meeting the needs'.*

6.3.4 EYP attitudes to children's voluntary participation

Earlier, a finding was presented on children as leaders in collective participation. The support that children provided to their peers was acknowledged by EYPs as an under-recognised aspect of young children's participation. Another aspect of child-centred participatory practices that was considered important by all the EYPs and CYPSC participants in this study was that children who choose to participate, do so voluntarily. However, many EYPs reported during their interviews and in reflective meetings that it was a challenge to get the balance right between respecting young children's right to be silent, or to be dis-engaged, while at the same time seeking to create the circumstances where all young children felt comfortable to express their viewpoints, should they choose to do so. These EYPs reported that, from time-to-time during the consultation process, they found themselves actively seeking out and encouraging responses from children when the child was not showing any particular interest in participating. A number reported checking themselves when they realised, as will be outlined further in this section.

In relation to the voluntary nature of children's participation, several EYPs referenced in their interviews that it was their opinion that participatory processes should be designed so as not to be intrusive to young children's thoughts and spaces, and that the child should enjoy the experience of participating. However, many of these EYPs further reported that this requires built-in opportunities to reflect on practice. As outlined by Annie in her interview:

> '*We do need to check in with children if they want to join in, and if they do join in the next question is "Are they enjoying it, are they happy to take part?", and that's all about observation and reflective practices'.*

For other EYPs, the concept of an *'invitation'* to participate was discussed as a mark of child-centred practice. These EYPs spoke during the planning sessions about the importance of adults

'*being invited'* to join in children's play and activities and in turn, of *'inviting'* children to participate in adult initiated and adult led participatory activities. In my notes from the planning sessions, I recorded that I initially introduced *'the invitation to participate'* into the planning discussions. My motivations were mainly about ensuring that the research activities reflected ethical standards for research with children, then for any practice concerns. Therefore, in the planning sessions I proposed to EYPs that participating children needed clear guidance that their participation was voluntary and based on an invitation. I recorded in my reflective diary that many EYPs reported to me during the planning sessions that it was already their practice to invite children to join in an activity or to wait for the invitation to come from children before joining in themselves. A number of these EYPs acknowledged during the planning sessions however, that this idea might not be a universally shared practice across the sector. These EYPs reported that it is their experience that, for some practitioners the idea that you would seek a child's assent to join in an activity may be a novel idea, unless it is already established practice. Josh explained this:

> *'I might be in another service where they would look at me like I had two heads if they heard me inviting myself into a situation. Here we know that that's how we should act and behave but I know other services where that's not encouraged or understood very well'.*

I recorded in my observational notes that the child participants in all six research sites appeared to be comfortable with the invitation to take part in the consultation process. Their obvious comfort resonated with EYPs, who articulated that this reassured them that they were already integrating the principles of meaningful participation in practice. This was reported by Josephine in her interview:

> *'When we were talking about it all afterwards, we were all delighted with how relaxed they (the children) were and that told us a lot about our own participation practices'.*

EYPs had all participated in capacity development sessions before the consultation process occurred in their service, and many of them reflected on the impact of these sessions at different places in the data collection process. Jenny reported during one of the reflective meetings that she felt an element of pressure to ensure that every child in her group participated in the process, as a way of demonstrating and evidencing that they *could* participate. She outlined how this feeling soon abated as the process got under way and after she observed children engaging with the sessions at their own pace. According to Jenny, her initial response was an instinctual

reaction to her perceptions of the expectations of the research project, which she reflected on after the session had concluded. She reported that in her day-to-day practice she would:

> *'Sit back and listen to them, you know, not interfere, or interrupt… be on the fringes until you're invited in'.*

6.3.5 Scaffolding young children's participatory experiences

In Chapter Five, I set out a finding related to that way in which EYPs reported scaffolding of young children's emerging autonomy. Additionally, several EYPs reported in the planning and in the post consultation reflective sessions that they engaged in scaffolding of children's participatory experiences. These EYPs described scaffolding as a practice response that is bespoke to each child and each learning opportunity, where support is withdrawn or added to depending on the needs of the child and the group. Lucy described this approach as follows:

> *'Scaffolding means that we work closely with each child at their own pace, when we know they need a bit more guidance from us… to problem-solve or to do something independently. We give as much support as they need ... but no more ... so they can learn from the experience'.*

My observation notes indicated evidence of scaffolding as described by Lucy in action. I recorded that in each research site, EYPs prepared children for the consultation activities by offering a verbal account of what was to come and what children could expect from the sessions. They then intervened or withdrew at different places and different points of the activities in response to children's identified needs. I observed that some children needed more intensive support than others did, as is to be expected in a collective. In the reflective meetings, I referenced this, and EYPs expressed a view that they considered scaffolding children's learning and participatory experiences as '*part of the flow of practice'* and *'just the way we do it'*.

In the circle time discussions, I asked children:

> '*Who helped you when you were talking about your ideas for young children to be healthy?* and '*How did they help you to speak up?'*

As set out in Chapter Five, some children named their peers here, but other children referred to staff members and managers that they identified as supporting their participation. Cian (aged 4) referred to the service manager by name when identifying who helped him to speak up, and then added:

'She's always listening to me'.

Meanwhile, Alice (aged 4) added that EYPs in the service she attends:

'…listen to me, and 'listening' means 'caring….'

Many EYPs reported that an active practitioner response is needed to support participatory processes. This, they reported, involves tailoring their response to each child's presenting needs and responding actively to both the individual child and the wider group simultaneously. In reflective meetings, several EYPs gave the opinion that adults can support young children's emerging autonomy in participatory processes by relating the topic or theme under discussion to the child's own lived experiences. Penny spoke in one reflective meeting about her experiences of:

'… bringing participation right into the child's world'.

The data gathered before and during the consultation sessions clearly indicated that the young child's frame of reference for discussing concepts of health and well-being differed from the frame of reference of the adult participants in this study. In the planning stages when the EYPs were thinking about and discussing the concepts of health and wellbeing as they related to the lives of young children, they frequently referred to studies, campaigns, learning from training and education and practice wisdom. In contrast, children's perspectives captured during the consultation sessions on health and well-being were largely expressed in terms of their own family life, or what happens in Preschool. An example of this is taken from a transcript of one consultation session. In this exchange, Lilly, Sean, (both aged 4), along with their EYP Annie were discussing an image of a boy asleep on a couch in front of a TV (which was included to provoke a response from children, as it is not automatically indicative of a healthy behaviour).

'Sean: *'That's not healthy…if you lie down all day. That's bad for you.*

Lily: *No, it isn't bad, it* **is** *healthy!*

Sean: *Yes, it is bad, he's not a healthy boy, he's lazy!*

Lily: *My daddy lies on the couch every day, and he's very healthy!*

Annie *(gently intervening in the discussion): Yes, your daddy is healthy Lily, but remember he works nights, so he is asleep during the day when he's on the couch. This boy has fallen asleep watching TV and we don't know if he is healthy.*

This anecdote was subsequently referenced in Annie's post consultation interview:

> *'… and even with Lily and the position she took with Sean who was pronouncing some of the things as "bad" and she was able to expand on it and discuss how her daddy lies on the couch and he is healthy and how that moved on then to a broader discussion about how maybe it's not that bad, but you shouldn't do it too often …'*

There were other references noted in the children's data that pointed to a direct correlation between the way in which young children related to the concepts of health and well-being and the child's own lived experiences. In the reflective meetings and in my own observation notes and reflective diary, I recorded an EYP perspective (and one that I shared) that many children had framed their engagement with the concepts of health and well-being primarily with reference to their own lived experiences, as in the example of Lily and Sean. Several other EYPs reported in their interviews how a scaffolding response helped to support children to make the connections between their lived experiences and complex concepts. I also observed how young children were often able to broaden out their thoughts when engaged in a supportive dialogue with EYPs, again as reflected in the example from Lily, Sean, and Annie.

Several EYP participants reflected in their interviews that, if there is a perception in practice of the child's frame of reference being limited due to the extent of their life experiences, their opportunities to participate can be limited. Many of the EYPs who mentioned this in the reflective meetings and interviews also suggested that reflective practice is helpful in this respect. These EYPs further emphasised in interviews that practice that scaffolds children's participatory experiences can act as a bridge between children's lived experience and the complex concepts they are engaging with, and the dialogue between the adult and the child is crucial in supporting the child's understanding of the meaning of the concept.

6.4 Enablers and inhibitors for the participation of young children

6.4.1 Introduction

The final sub-theme in this chapter concerns enablers, barriers and challenges identified by EYP for young children's participation. Playful and fun-filled participation was seen by EYPs as crucial in mediating children's participatory experiences. Organisational enablers, barrier and challenges identified by research participants as impacting on the meaningful participation of young children are presented in this chapter.

6.4.2 Play and fun as enablers for participation

My field notes from the planning stages of data collection recorded that EYPs had framed the meaningful participation of children as being most effectively delivered through *'fun'* and *'playful'* activities and processes. When participation is presented to the child in this way, EYPs argued, engagement is more effective and meaningful for the child. As this appeared to be an important aspect of practitioner thinking, my notes from the planning sessions indicated that I was led by the EYP enthusiasm for play to make it the key enabler for children's participation in the consultative process.

EYPs reported during the planning sessions that this aspect of their approach to participatory practice is largely informed by the early years' frameworks Aistear and Siolta, as they both promote engaging with children through play in a range of learning processes. While none of the EYPs were recorded as articulating the extent to which the frameworks explicitly reference the role of play in participatory processes, they did report that, as play is such a natural and flexible means of engaging young children and is so prevalent in the frameworks, they intuitively applied it to any participatory process they are involved in. As a result, the early planning sessions were dominated by discussion of which types of play and games were the most appropriate to promote children's playful and meaningful engagement with the topic and the proposed consultation process.

My field notes indicated that when the participatory activities were being introduced to children at the beginning of the consultations in each site, almost all EYPs referred to the upcoming process as a *'game'* and invited children to play, while reassuring them that it will be *'fun'*. I also recorded in my observation notes that they checked in regularly with children during the activity, often with the enquiries- '*are you having fun?'* and *'isn't this fun?'*

I was reminded of the significance of this observed practice response during several EYP interviews later in the data collection process: when young children are demonstrably having fun, EYPs reported this as a key measure of the success of the activity, more so than any specific outputs or tangible results. My field notes indicated that I became more watchful for indicators that children were having fun during these processes, once I became aware of the significance of this to the EYPs, and there were frequent references to fun and playfulness in the field notes. The tapes of the sessions capture a sense of fun and playful interactions, and there were audible sounds of laughter, squeals, children singing, and excited chatter captured during the sessions. In the circle time discussions with children after the consultation sessions,

I asked what they liked about the process and many children reported that the process was *'fun'* and that they '*had fun'*. Across the transcripts of these discussions with children, they reported that they had liked *'playing the games', 'playing with my friends', 'playing the games with you', 'playing the voting game'*.

Several EYPs reported during their interviews that playful activities engage children in participatory processes and spaces much more effectively than more formal or discussion-based activities. This was clearly expressed by Vera:

> *'…I suppose you actually get most of the conversation when they are playing and you're observing and noting what they say and then you think "I'll go back to that later". We do pick up a lot when they are playing…those spontaneous moments when they are playing…'*

Penny, in her interview, described the significance of play for broader planning and learning leading into more specific planning for participatory processes:

> *'Play is huge in this centre…when there is group play going on, we get a lot of interesting material that we can then use in our planning'*

6.4.3 Organisational enablers of participation

An ethos and leadership that were supportive of participation in the service or agency were both identified as enablers of young children's participation by EYP and CYPSC participants. During their interviews, many EYPs expressed a view that the ethos of the service affects the extent to which they include young children in participatory and decision-making processes. The shared view of the majority of EYPs and CYPSC participants was that a participatory ethos in their respective services or agencies is enhanced by the qualities and mind-set of the leadership in the service, or in the decision-making structures of the agency. During their interviews, a number of CYPSC participants referred to a *'culture of listening'* and a *'organisational philosophy that respects rights'* within their own agencies and organisations that they consider as central to their thinking on children's participation in decision making processes.

The qualities of a leader that EYPs reported in their interviews as being more conducive to the development of an ethos of participation include being open-minded, a good listener, being respectful of rights, and having empathy. Lucy said in her interview that the leader must possess these qualities so that staff are motivated to include children in participatory processes:

'I think you need someone pushing this, like a champion, staff just won't always fall into this themselves, someone needs to be pushing it all the time ... so it really is about leadership qualities ...'

Bernie reported in her interview that support for participatory practices needs to come from the individual practitioner and her colleagues, but the starting point is the leader:

'You need to have the support of your manager and the staff you work with. If they are not supportive, this just won't happen. You also need to have this worked out for yourself like "Why are you doing it?" ... but this all starts with the manager'

Annie who is the manager of a service, acknowledged the significant influence of the leader in her interview, but she added that the mind-set and beliefs of her team were important to the development of a culture of participation. She described the ethos she shares in her own service with her team:

'A lot of this comes from my team and how we work together ... the staff here understand that this is worthwhile, and they are willing to invest their time and their emotional energy is doing it…So I suppose that having staff who share that mind-set is important. I would guess that staff that don't share that mind-set might wonder what this is all about'.

Josh, who is one of Annie's staff members, recalled a specific example of how this ethos was demonstrated in their practice where children and staff worked together as a team, making decisions on the room layout:

'We had a recent example of moving the room layout where we all sat down as a team…and asked them what they would change…then they started coming up with ideas…we sort of looked at the changes that were possible, like we kept them on the message rather than made the decisions…but it was a team effort…we just put the ideas out there to start the ball rolling'.

Penny argued in her interview that the mind-set of staff could act against the promotion of a participatory ethos:

'The only real barrier is the adult's thinking. The only barrier… obviously the safety regulations and policies and procedures might throw up the odd obstacle… but that mind-set is the only real obstacle'.

While several the EYPs stated in their interview that an ethos of participation is an enabler, the other most frequently identified enabler was the *'environment'* in the service. EYPs referred to

both the *'emotional environment'* that they are creating for children, and the professional environment in which they themselves work and practice. As Louise said in her interview:

> *'It is a lot to do with the environment that we are creating… there needs to be an understanding and a supportive environment …we talk, we listen, we discuss, we compromise and so on and we can do that with our manager so that needs to be there'.*

Lucy agreed with Louise's position on the potential of the environment to be an enabler of participation in her interview:

> *'The environment that supports this is the main thing, we have that environment where this is expected, like second nature; we expect them (the children) to tell us, and they know we will listen…so a positive environment is so important for participation'.*

While EYP and CYPSC participants in this study generally agreed that a supportive environment is an enabler for child participation, several barriers and inhibitors within the ECCE environment to meaningful participation with young children were identified. Many of these barriers were reported by EYPs during their interviews as structural issues within the ECCE sector, rather than a reflection on their own services' ethos of participation. There was a repeated claim by EYP participants that the professionals within the ECCE sector itself were not being listened to, and this was presented as an example of a structural issue by EYPs. As Louise said in her interview:

> *'You need to feel firstly that you have a voice and you are heard, that is crucial to this working well. Here, we do feel that we have space ourselves to speak up…that's not the case for everyone working in childcare'.*

Tina agreed that there is a perception that EYPs are not being listened to, this can act as an inhibitor to participation. She explained:

> *'…if I felt not listened to, I would find it hard to listen to others…'*

Other structural barriers and inhibitors identified by EYPs included a lack of scheduled time within the day for more formal participatory activities, lack of familiarity or exposure of new staff to participatory approaches to practice, language and communication issues for staff and children, lack of resources that support participation, and inadequate supervision and/or opportunities for reflective practices. Caitlin outlined her concerns at how unfamiliarity with the ideas underpinning child participation may be affecting participatory practices across the early childhood sector, when she said in her interview:

'Even those barriers, training, resources and specific skills and professionals who don't have access to these, you'd worry about them because some of these ideas are new and unless they are exposed to these ideas, they might not know about them. Maybe they won't change their practice unless they are exposed to specific programmes and resources, training and that…'

6.5 Conclusion

This Chapter has presented findings on the extent to which child-centred and rights-based participatory processes are valued by EYPs. The first sub-theme concerns the ways in which EYPs support the participation of young children by engaging in child-centred and rights-based processes. We have seen evidence of the complexities of ensuring participatory processes are rights-based and child-centred as well as being developmentally appropriate. Language is a key consideration when planning for participatory processes with young children. It was clear from these findings that EYPs recognise their role in engaging with children's lived experiences, strengths, and vulnerabilities, as well as their voice. The findings suggest a tendency to represent the views of the more vocal children as being the consensus view of the group, yet EYPs do try to rebalance in favour of less vocal children. In this respect, young children are conscious of EYP efforts to listen to them during these processes, and they see this as a caring response.

EYPs attitudes and practices also impact on young children's participatory experiences. The early years' frameworks, Aistear and Siolta, frame participatory practices and are influential in supporting rights-based practices. The attitudes and mind-sets of staff in early years' services towards rights-based and child-centred participatory practices can be either enablers or barriers to integrating participatory processes into a practice, even when those processes are supported by the frameworks. Ensuring that children are engaging voluntarily in participatory processes can create tensions when there are no opportunities for reflective practice. Also, a practice described as 'scaffolding' is used to support young children's participatory experiences. Scaffolding acts as a bridge between complex concepts that may be presented to children, and the individual child's life experiences.

Finally, we have seen evidence concerning mediators for the meaningful participation of young children. While play and fun are key mediators for children's participatory experiences, the ethos of the service and the environment in the service are key enablers for young children's involvement in participatory and decision-making processes. The leader determines the extent

to which young children's participation is facilitated in the service, and the nature of their participation. Additionally, there needs to be a shared orientation and mind-set amongst staff for participatory processes to be meaningful, and EYPs need to be able to see themselves engaged in a participatory process in their relations with their managers. Both barriers and enablers are significant in influencing the extent to which young children's participation is facilitated in services.

Chapter Seven. Moral, Ethical, and Personal Perspectives on Young Children's Participation

7.1 Introduction

In Chapter Five, I set out findings on the theme of relational autonomy and relational participatory processes involving young children. In Chapter Six, I presented findings that indicated that engagement with young children's voices is central to young children's meaningful participatory experiences**.** Chapter Seven is concerned with moral, ethical, and personal perspectives on participatory processes involving young children. It shows that adult participants agree that the participation of young children in participatory processes has moral, value-laden and ethical dimensions, and the potential for personal and professional impacts on adults who facilitate these processes. Concerns related to sub-methodological appropriateness are reported here.

7.2 The ethics of young children's participation

7.2.1 Introduction

This first subtheme concerns the ethics of young children's participation. It relates to the extent to which CYPSC and EYP participants reported looking for a fair and ethical process and outlines a moral justification for why they seek to include young children in participatory processes. Beginning with an account of the principles that participants identify as central to a participatory approach, the section moves on to discuss the ethics of observation in participatory processes involving young children. This section will set out practice dilemmas for EYPs who value the role of observations in supporting participatory and decision-making processes.

7.2.2 Just and fair participatory processes

The data analysis process I undertook for this study indicated that there were moral dimensions to the participation of young children identified by EYP and CYPSC participants and supported by the accounts of child participants in this study. In reporting these dimensions, many participants expressed a belief that young children's participation is justifiable. Overwhelmingly, both CYPSC and EYP participants during focus groups, planning sessions and during their interviews expressed a view that including young children in participatory

processes is *'right'* '*moral'* and '*just'*. One CYPSC member reported on this during their interview:

> *'Of course we should consult with them, get their opinions, it's the right thing to do, and it's only fair to include them'.*

Another CYPSC participant was recorded during their interview as highlighting a connection between participation as a *'right,'* and as a *'moral'* action. They summed up their position in this way:

> *'We do respect that this is a right for them as children, but for me it is clearly also the moral thing to do…'*

Josh, one of the EYP participants, concurred with these CYPSC positions in his interview:

> '*Giving them chances to participate is the right thing to do and we should have a principle of including them as much as we can, and as much as they would like to be included, no more and no less'.*

In their interviews, many EYP and CYPSC participants expressed a view that even though it can be challenging to engage young children in participatory processes related to policy development, if the decision will affect them directly, it is only right that they be included. Penny reported during her interview that ensuring that the participation of young children happens is the responsibility of adults, as, in her opinion, young children will not easily claim their rights in this respect:

> *'Let's face it, 3-year-olds are not going to mobilise if they are left out of a policy decision, but that doesn't mean that we should leave them out. Ok, we have to work harder, and present it in a way they can come to grips with but that is down to us, the adults and if we don't do that, then we all lose out'*

During the circle time discussions with young children after the consultation sessions, several children added to this when they referenced the principle of fairness (or the absence of fairness) when describing their experiences of being listened to when decisions are being made. The question I posed to children in these groups was:

> *'What was it like to be listened to, when we were talking about being happy and healthy?'*

Thomas (aged 4) answered by referring to his experiences of not being listened to:

> *'As well, sometimes they're not fair to me… I have loads of cool ideas'*

Caoimhe (aged 4) agreed with Thomas that being listened to by adults generates more ideas and answers:

'When my teachers listen to me, more and more answers pop out of my head'

Caoimhe went on to talk about a time when she was not listened to and referred to an incident in the preschool when she asked for a specific colour paint to be brought down from a high shelf, and as she says:

'She said "not now", it wasn't fair, and I didn't get to finish' (her painting).

7.2.3 Appropriate methodologies for young children's participation

Most CYPSC participants acknowledged during their interviews that even though it was considered the right thing to do, young children were not routinely included as stakeholders in strategic decision-making processes even when it directly impacted on their lives. When outlining why this is might be the case, a small number of CYPSC participants suggested that young children's exclusion from participatory processes could be justified if there are unresolved developmental, language and consent issues. A further position expressed by CYPSC participants later during their interviews was that they were generally unsure if appropriate methodologies existed that could support young children's meaningful participation. Several CYPSC participants further argued in their interviews that a fair process is required to ensure that methodologies are appropriate to support young children's participation, so that they could trust in the reliability of the process.

One position that was expressed by a small number of CYPSC participants during the focus group was that young children may not have full capacity yet to meaningfully participate in decision-making processes, and it may be unfair and even burdensome to expect them to do so when decision-makers have other ways of accessing their perspectives. These CYPSC participants reported a shared belief the perspectives of young children may be more easily, fairly, and safely *'assumed'* by consulting indirectly with their parents and carers, rather than by consulting directly with this age group of young children. These CYPSC participants saw the notion of third party or representative consultations, where adults who know the young children well speak up on behalf of the child, as being a satisfactory, fair, and accurate method of obtaining and clarifying the perspectives of young and perhaps pre-verbal children. However, while they expressed reservations about methodologies, these CYPSC participants

reported they were not closed-minded to the idea of direct consultations with young verbal children.

Additionally, other CYPSC members insisted that a fair and a just process required that every effort should be made to consult directly with young children. Rather than take a position that it should not happen as young children are vulnerable, or that it should happen in an indirect format, one CYPSC participant referenced their *'duty'* to recognise young children as potential stakeholders. Rather than take what they described as:

> *'The easy route out…',*

and either dismiss their potential to contribute at all, or seek to indirectly obtain their contributions, this CYPSC participant further added:

> *'If we want to get to the true position, the truth of it from the child's point of view and without our own spin on things, we need to include them, see them as being contributors to the decisions'.*

In contrast, many EYP participants, during their focus group meetings and later in their interviews, reported that they were more accustomed to conducting direct or primary consultations with young children and considered these to be an appropriate and safe format for gaining an insight into young children's perspectives on a range of informal and day-to-day issues. As Louise said during her interview:

> *'We tend to zoom in on what they say or what they do, when others might just go straight away to what the parents say'.*

7.2.4 The ethics of observation

When discussing the extent to which young children would engage with the planned consultation process during the planning sessions, several of the EYPs reported that they were confident that young children would engage well. However, they added the caveat that their positive expectations for the process was partly a result of their confidence in their own observational skills, as well as the inherent capacities of young children to participate. Tina said during a planning session that the participation of young children is necessarily framed by adult observations:

> '*Because that is the way that you are consulting … by observing them'.*

During a planning session, Vera spoke about her previous experiences of using observations as a tool to draw conclusions about young children's perspectives, and how this led her to be hopeful for productive consultations:

> *'In the past, we have been surprised by what we see, and then we change and then we can go in another direction. They can be playing with something and you know, be using it in a way that we didn't think about and then we can also plan activities around that'.*

EYPs reported during planning sessions that they were comfortable with the idea of interpretation of children's contributions. Several EYPs described interpretation as being both an appropriate and a proportionate response to support children's participation once the child agreed with the interpretation. Bernie reported during a planning session that engaging with the young child's expressed views and opinions, even when they required interpretation, should be a practitioner goal for the participatory process. This, she argued is because for many children, interpretation is the most appropriate and straightforward method of supporting their participation:

> *'It's really basic: talking to child, observing the child, and interpreting what it is they want and then trying to work around it'.*

The consensus from the discussions with EYPs during the planning sessions indicated that the majority believed that young children's viewpoints and perspectives are most effectively accessed and clarified through a process of observation, dialogue between the adult and the child, and subsequent interpretation of the child's contribution by caring and empathetic adults. These were the key participatory tools that the EYPs anticipated we would employ during the planned consultations with young children for this research process.

While 'dialogue' was identified by the majority of EYPs as an essential element of interpretation, a smaller number of EYPs reported that, as they were keenly observant of children's behaviour, actions and interactions, they primarily draw their own conclusions from these observations about children's wishes, needs and preferences. These EYPs reported that they reached conclusions without always engaging in a dialogue with the child to check their interpretation, particularly for young children and within a group context.

As Josephine reported:

> *'The observations we do are really detailed…they can tell us everything we need to know. I wouldn't always feel the need to confirm my observations with a child, you know…interrupt them when it's so obvious'*

However, the practice of conducting observations as a central part of a participatory decision-making process was reported as bringing up ethical issues for several EYPs, which they subsequently raised during the post consultation interviews. These EYPs reported on a practice dilemma regarding the extent to which young children are aware of, and are capable of assenting to, their involvement in an observation process. This was thought to be especially pertinent when these observations were identified by EYPs as central to decision-making and participatory processes. The EYPs who highlighted this issue during their interviews reported they were generally unsure if children themselves should be aware that they are being consulted with or observed during these activities. Penny reported:

> *'Some of them are aware that we are observing them, some of them are not … I suppose we think that it is best not to be too obvious about it but I can see the how this throws up some other issues about their rights…'*

Whereas Lucy felt:

> *'We don't say "We are doing observations, do you consent?". Because that sounds so "adult" and so off putting, but we do tell them we are happy when we see them doing things and we want to tell their parents and take photos and use them for their journals'.*

Many of the EYPs who highlighted this issue during their interviews also reacted to the ethical dimensions of the dilemma. Annie described this dilemma in the following way:

> *'I think there is a play-off between respecting their rights and getting the information we need to make the right sorts of decisions, you know, to support their learning. Many practitioners probably don't realise it, but it is a choice we need to make, maybe without thinking about it'*

In her interview, Caitlin reflected on the practice tensions that can arise when conducting observations in participatory processes, and appeared to have resolved at least some of these issues in her approach to this question:

> *'They are aware that we are observing because we value what they do, and we let them know. Do they know the purpose of the observations? Maybe not, but do they need to know that? I'm not sure...... you need to make sure they are comfortable, you need to*

let them know we are celebrating the nice things…you don't need to deceive them…you let them know you have noticed something good, and you are recording it'.

Overall, many EYP participants raised a level of concern with the extent to which they are respecting children's rights by conducting observations as an aspect of their approach to children's participation, but there was no clear consensus emerging from the data as to how to resolve the ethical issues it raised for them. Additionally, a number of these EYPs reported feeling unsupported in relation to the ethical conduct of observations, despite all stating that observations are at the heart of participatory processes involving young children. Lucy summed this up in her interview:

'I suppose we need more guidance; it's been just sort of thrown at us…'

Children were not specifically asked about their responses to practice observations more broadly during my circle time discussions with them, so their views on this are not available. However, before the consultations took place, the children were informed that I wanted their assent to observe them taking part in the activities. Louise reflected on this during a reflective meeting:

'I thought it was very transparent, that you asked if they minded you watching them playing and taking part in the activities and if it was ok with them. It made me think about 'why we don't do the same?'

Louise's account reflected my own observation note on my request to observe them at play. The following are accounts from my observation notes from a consultation session:

'I said "I am hoping to sit here for a while, and just watch you while you are playing the game. Is that alright? If anyone doesn't want me to watch them, you can let me know and I won't. Is that OK"? This was followed by several shouts of "Yeahhh" and one or two small voices who said "Nooo". The EYPs then asked these children if they wanted to do something else rather than join in, which they did'.

7.3 Values, beliefs and expectations and young children's participation

7.3.1 Introduction

This section begins with a discussion on the findings related to the values that were reported as influencing participatory processes involving young children. Moving on, the section considers the impact on value-laden decision-making of appropriate methodologies that can

support young children's participatory experiences. The section then outlines findings on how the benefits of child participation for children and more broadly for the wider society are articulated by the adults in this study.

7.3.2 Values and participation

Several core personal and professional values were articulated at various points during the data collection, both at the beginning of the process in focus group interviews, in reflective journal entries, and in the post consultation interviews. Participants in the focus groups and interviews articulated that *'respect'* was a core value that underpinned their approach to young children's participation. The value of respectful interactions between young children and adults was noted in reflective meetings with EYPs during the consultation process. Additionally, my observational notes of CYPSC meetings indicated that these participants looked for reassurances that the consultation process had been conducted in a respectful manner when they were presented with the children's contribution during one of their meetings. One CYPSC participant was recorded as commenting:

> *'It's good hearing that the process was respectful when children are so young, that is so important'.*

The value of *'respect'* came up in EYP reflective journal entries. As Caitlin reported:

> *'I am clearer now than ever about the value of respect and how it is a core value for me'.*

In addition to *'respect'* there were references to other values which EYPs and CYPSC participants reported as being influential for participatory processes involving young children. The values included professionalism, generosity, inclusiveness, relationships, friendship, empathy, and trust. Annie summed up the impacts of facilitating this process on her thinking about the value of trusting relationships in participatory processes:

> *'… I saw how you were depending on us as having the relationship, and how important that was for the children and once we appeared to trust you, they relaxed, and they never second guessed it after that. They thought "We're in good hands because the staff are letting us know", so they were relaxed and happy then to take part...'*

My field notes recorded observations of these core values in action. For example, even though I did not ask them to do any additional work to prepare children for the consultations, all of the EYP participants spent time in the days before the consultation sessions in preparatory work

with children, such as reading stories and playing games with a health and well-being focus. When I became aware of this, according to my reflective entries, I tried to gauge the impact this preparatory work had on the conduct of the sessions, and in my notes, I referred to the EYPs as:

> '*...generously engaging in pre consultation work (which) helped, as the children had already heard some of the language about health and well-being'.*

The value of transparency that underpinned ideas about the appropriateness of methodologies framing participatory processes was evident in the data. However, there was a separate epistemological issue at play here. The analysis of CYPSC data gathered from the observations of meetings and from CYPSC interviews indicated an agreement amongst these decision-makers that young children's contributions are likely to be drawn on by policymakers when accompanied by a transparent description and explanation of the participatory process. Yet, it was correspondingly clear that CYPSC participants wanted to be reassured that the process itself was conducted properly, so that they could accept with the children were saying as having value. In the pre-consultation focus group interview, CYPSC participants reported that they were either curious or unsure about the proposed methodologies for the upcoming child consultation sessions, and they sought clarifications from me on how the sessions would operate. One CYPSC participant stated that they were *'reassured'* to hear that EYPs would be influential in guiding the process with these young children. Another CYPSC participant said:

> *'I'll be very interested in the process… as well as what you come back with'*

That this was a shared view was illustrated by another CYPSC participant's comment:

> '*You are pushing an open door, but we'll need to be sure that the way you go about it is, you know, appropriate for this age group before it goes into the mix'.*

In analysing the post consultation interviews, I noted that there was limited reference by these CYPSC participants to these earlier concerns about the appropriateness or otherwise of the process undertaken and it appeared to me that these concerns were largely pertinent to the earlier stages of the process. However, my observational notes of CYPSC meetings indicated that these concerns were discussed again when I was presenting the children's contributions. My reflective notes indicated that CYPSC participants asked many process-related questions and sought clarifications on several points during the presentation. My reflective diary entry after the presentation indicated that I was aware that CYPSC members were relying heavily on my reports of the process, as they were not first-hand witnesses to the sessions. In addition to

a verbal report of the process, my observation and reflective notes showed that they were interested in seeing other evidential material such as photographs from the sessions and samples of children's drawings. One CYPSC participant had an interesting response when presented with the outputs of the process, and this illustrated the impact this had on their decision-making processes:

> *'I wanted you to explain all of this to us, how you organised it, what you did and what you said, and how they were with all of that. That matters as much to me as what they said to be honest…'*

Another CYPSC participant who said they were *'delighted'* with my account of the process and thought the children were *'brilliantly clear',* referenced this '*testing of the process'* in their interview. They alluded to differences in the extent to which this testing of the process would occur with older age groups of children and young people:

> *'If they were that bit older, and we asked for their opinions on anything, we take them as we get them, no double checking. I was fascinated by the amount of discussion that we had in relation to this consultation process. We needed to see that this was carried out to a very high standard before fully accepting it, not because we think less of what young children say… not at all…but because we know instinctively that it has to be a different type of process, with safeguards built in, as they are so young'.*

7.3.3 Articulating the benefits of child participation

All CYPSC and EYP participants in this study agreed that child participation is beneficial for young children as it supports their learning and development, as well as their self-esteem and self-confidence. As Louise said during her interview:

> *'Sometimes they tell you… "Mammy doesn't listen to me" but if you just "shh" them, if you don't go back to that child, you can see their face and they might be off form for the rest of the day because you didn't listen and it might be something they said very silly… minor to you, but it's huge to them, so let them have their say'.*

In the circle time interviews with children I asked:

> '*What was it like when you were talking to me about what you think children in Roscommon need to be happy and healthy?*

Several responses to this question illustrated some children's reactions to the participatory activities, rather than the participatory process itself:

'I liked talking about broccoli'

'I liked looking at the pictures'

However, there were small number of responses to my question that referenced the child's reaction to being listened to:

Jacob: '(*I liked)…telling you about all my ideas about the Volcano'.*

Leah: *'I liked it when we made our own poster and the woman is coming to see it when it's finished, and she's going to tell everyone else about it'.*

Amia*:* *'I told Mom that I said about fresh air for being healthy, and that it was up on the wall now'.*

In addition to identifying benefits for the young child, CYPSC and EYP participants identified benefits of child participation for other actors within social context in which the child lives. During her interview, Annie spoke of how parents reacted when she informed them of the upcoming participatory process:

'They couldn't get their heads around it……every parent gave me the same response; a bamboozled reaction, like… "She wants to talk to the kids!" they couldn't get their head around it.

However, Annie reported that after the sessions had taken place, she noted the parents' responses as much more accepting of the validity and value of the process. She then went on to outline how, in her opinion, exposure to these processes can be impactful from a social perspective, particularly when it comes to ideas and beliefs about children and childhood. This is especially true, according to Annie, in the case of participatory processes involving young children. She summarised this by saying:

'For society, I think it is still there… very deeply embedded… like "why would we want to ask young children"? Like… "We know best, and why would you want to? Nobody else seems to be asking, so why would you? Especially young children", but when they see it and hear about it, it's a different reaction, and then they are like "Well of course you should talk to them, they have loads to say"!

Several other EYPs and CYPSC participants picked up on this point, and exposure to participatory processes involving young children was identified as an important enabler in influencing ideas about the potential for young children to meaningfully engage in decision-making processes. Vera reported during her interview that she had started to inform parents of any participatory processes that their children had been involved in, since the conclusion of the

child consultation sessions. She went on to explain why she had decided it was so important to let parents know more about their children's participatory experiences:

> *'We need to think about how we can pull parents into this more, it gives them a whole new perspective on their child. So, I included the news about the children making their own decisions about the layout of the room and I was very confident in doing so, whereas I might have played it down before this, or not made a big thing out of it when talking to parent. But now that is all celebrated at home and in here now and we have developed a real passion for this area'.*

7.4 Impacts of young children's participation for adults

7.4.1 Introduction

The last section considered findings that related to the impact on young children's participatory experiences and opportunities of the values, beliefs, and expectations of adults. This section concerns how adult participants in this study reported on the extent to which their involvement as facilitators or sponsors of young children's participation influences their own practices, values, thinking and understandings of childhood. The section opens with an account of adult expectations of the potential for participatory processes to access child perspectives fairly and accurately. Moving on, the next sections deal with the way adults express the impacts on their values and practice of facilitating participatory processes involving young children. The final section relates to the identification of an emotionally evocative connection between young children and adults, and the impact this can have on adult facilitators and decision-makings within participatory processes.

7.4.2 Adult expectations of young children's participation

As has been reported earlier in this chapter many of the EYP and CYPSC participants indicated that they felt it was *'right'* to facilitate a consultation process involving young children on matters that directly affect them. However, they reported mixed levels of confidence that it would prove to be a productive process, which would add anything of value to CYPSC decision-making. There were some distinctions noted in the responses of both EYPs and CYPSC participants in how they articulated their expectations of young children's participation, during the focus group meetings and during the EYP planning sessions. CYPSC participants, while confirming that child participation was an influential factor in their decision-

making generally, were mostly unable to agree on the extent to which participatory processes involving young children was likely to influence or impact on their decision-making practices. One CYPSC participant reported being:

'Unsure…what will it tell us that we don't already know?'

In contrast, another CYPSC participant said:

'They are sure to surprise us… we will absolutely learn something from this'.

In the focus groups and during the planning sessions, EYPs were noted to be broadly in agreement with each other that the planned participatory process was likely to be impactful, but even so, some EYPs were tentative when reporting how successful they anticipated the upcoming consultation process would be. Several EYPs during the planning sessions expressed that they were *'hopeful'* and had their *'fingers crossed'* that the consultation process would result in findings, and that in turn, these findings would be informative and influential for decision making processes. Many EYP participants reported a strong belief that young children have the capacity to contribute a unique perspective to planning and informal decision-making processes on day-to-day issues, but a less certain belief that they could contribute at organisational or strategic levels. This was explained by Louise during a planning session:

'They are well used to being asked for their opinions in the service …this is a bit different because it is going outside the service…so I am not sure how it will work out'.

Another position shared by some EYPs in the focus groups when thinking ahead to the consultation sessions was that there is the potential for learning for young children from taking part in participatory processes, even if child perspectives were not always regarded as influential or worth listening too. Josh summarised this view when he said:

'It is great to give them the opportunity to tell us what they think, even if it is not that serious an issue or you don't think anyone will take them seriously…because when they are telling us, they are learning to speak up and to share what's on their mind'.

These expectations and beliefs were followed up on in interviews after the consultation sessions. In their interviews, many EYP and CYPSC participants articulated that were *'surprised'* by the nature of the children's contribution during this consultation process, more so than their ability to participate and to contribute. Only one or two expressed that they were surprised by young children's capacity to participate meaningfully in the consultation process. This contrasts with the diversity of views from the pre-consultation session, where there was no clear consensus on young children's capacity to contribute anything useful.

7.4.3 Impacts on practices of facilitating participatory processes

There were a number of examples of EYP practice changes identified and recorded in the post consultation interviews, such as: the development of plans to involve children at other levels within the service when planning and decision making; developing child participation policies; involving parents in their children's participation and engaging with visual aids to promote participation. In addition to practice changes, several other EYPs in their interviews referenced the impacts of reflecting on their core values during the process. As Josh says in his post consultation interview, when thinking about the way his value system has evolved:

> *'It goes to the core; after the sessions I was really reflecting on my mind-set and my thinking and I had to make some changes…'*

In her interview, Louise referenced the development of her thinking, and spoke about an evolution in her rights-based approach, which she identified was a result of her participation in the process:

> *'…maybe we needed to see it in action and to see that it is a process, and you need to have the right thinking and the right frame of mind for this. …I think we see that much of this can be challenged or undone when they go home or go to big school but if we can do it here, then maybe it will embed itself and they will remember the times when their rights were upheld'.*

Annie spoke in her interview about how she plans to use the knowledge she gained during the process to influence change in her service:

> *'We are all trying our best but often at a basic level, at the level of 'choice'. I think there is an assumption, and an attitude that young children think very concretely, and they can't think abstractly, so there is a tendency to overlook them if we need to make anything other than a simple and basic decision. So, seeing that we can talk to them about things that are more complex has been great for me, and I will be really championing that whole idea with the staff'.*

During their interviews, CYPSC participants spoke about the impact of children's participation on their thinking and practice. Many reported that they remained unsure about their capacity to directly engage with this age group themselves, due to identified constraints such as lack of time and a perception that direct consultations are not part of their current roles. However, most CYPSC members reported during their interviews that they will accept young children's contributions as part of future consultation processes. As was previously outlined, the

consensus of many CYPSC participants was that reassurances that a safe, fair, child-centred, and developmentally appropriate participatory process took place is needed before they can fully engage with younger children's contributions. In the case of this consultation process, my observation notes and reflective entries showed that once I had reassured CYPSC participants that the process was robust, respectful, and ethical, they then reported that they were fully accepting of children's perspectives on health and well-being and that their contributions were being taken seriously. It was not clear from the CYPSC interviews what would have happened if I was unable to reassure CYPSC participants that this was the case, but the overwhelming response was that it was essential for their full acceptance of the children's contributions.

Additionally, my field notes recorded that CYPSC members asked me to make sure that children be given feedback that their views had been listened to and taken seriously by the members of the CYPSC working group. They asked me to inform the children that their contributions had influenced the EYHSW for Co Roscommon[13]. In tracking the process of development of this plan, I recorded that the outputs of the consultation process were prominent in the document and the children's contribution had been highlighted. The committee invited the children to attend the launch of the plan, and the Happy and Healthy Volcano poster, and engaged with them before and during the launch.

During their interviews, several CYPSC participants reported that their exposure to young children's participatory processes had an impact beyond informing their focussed decision-making on the development of the Early Years Health and Wellbeing Strategy for Co. Roscommon. These participants spoke of how it had influenced their participatory and consultative interactions in different contexts, such as with older age groups of children and young people, and with other groups of stakeholders and colleagues within their own organisations and agencies. This was illustrated by one CYPSC participant, who reported:

> *'This whole process has made me think more broadly about participation itself and what it means to staff in my organisation, the parents and the service users we work with … and that we need to bring them more into our decision-making'.*

[13] The Roscommon EYHWS is available on: https://www.cypsc.ie/_fileupload/Documents/Resources/Roscommon/0835%20Atlantic-Tusla%20Early%20Years%20Health%20Well-being%20Plan%20Rosc%206.pdf

7.4.4 The emotional aspects of young children's participation

Clearly emerging from the data gathered during EYP and CYPSC participant interviews was an emotional response to children's participation in this consultation process, and to their broader engagement with children in other participatory and decision-making processes. In her interview, Tatiana referenced the extent to which her own personal philosophy and worldview influenced her participatory practice:

> *'I believe that every child is a good child, but not all of them are lucky enough to have the same start in life. I don't think that is about being rich, or poor, because for me they are all the same, they all want to be listened to and to be loved and I just try to help them to learn to think…that is my role, thinking is important but also "think the good choices, think positively, make the right choices".*

She then went on to describe her reactions to the participatory process she engaged in as part of this research process, and how it:

> *'… brought up my inner child and also brought me back to when my own children were this age and…that insight into the child's world and what is important to them; I remembered that for myself and my own children'.*

In their interviews, many EYP and CYPSC participants referenced their own memories of their childhood, or their children's experiences of childhood when reflecting on young children's perspectives on health and well-being. Participants from both adult groups expressed a strong connection with children's views, and there were many reflections and recollections on their own memories of included or excluded from decision making processes. A CYPSC participant recalled:

> '*It brings me back to when we were in school … feeling ignored and not valued; it's an awful feeling really'*

Additionally, for both CYPSC and EYP participants there are many references in their interviews to their childhood memories of playing outdoors and having a sense of freedom to explore their own environment. As well as the interview transcripts, my observation notes, and reflective entries from the CYPSC decision-making processes recorded an apparent emotional connection and identification to children's outputs regarding health and well-being. Following the presentation of the children's contribution to CYPSC, my notes indicated that I recorded that the way in which several committee members were reacting:

'Visible reactions, smiling, heads tilted, listening carefully … they appeared fascinated with children's outputs … emotional reactions, an apparent strong connection to "spending time with mammy and daddy" and "playing outdoors"

7.5 Conclusion

Chapter Seven set out findings on the overarching theme of moral, ethical, value laden, practice related and personal perspectives on participatory processes involving young children. The chapter was set out in sections that reflected on three subthemes. The first subtheme was related to the ethical dimensions of facilitating participatory processes involving young children. To begin, I presented an account of the moral dimensions of justice and fairness as identified by EYP and CYPSC participants and supported by the accounts of child participants in this study. Facilitating or supporting the participation of young children was perceived as a moral action by adult participants. Participants reported that fairness should be a practice principle that underpins appropriate methodologies for engaging young children in participatory processes. The perceived lack of appropriate methodologies is as a reason why young children are often excluded from these opportunities, particularly when there may be other ways of engaging with their viewpoints such as indirect consultations. This pointed to an area of divergence between EYP and CYPSC participants, with the former group reporting they rarely engage in secondary consultation, and the latter reporting that they considered it a viable option in the absence of appropriate methodologies. Moving on, the section considered findings on the ethics of observation in participatory processes involving young children. This pointed to a dilemma identified by EYPs for their practice in relation to the extent to which young children's rights are respected when observations are being conducted as part of participatory and decision-making processes.

The second subtheme concerned values, beliefs and expectations, and their impacts on young children's participation. Core personal and professional values such as respect, empathy and relationship-based practice were said to influence the participatory opportunities afforded to young children. We saw the impacts on value-laden decision-making of appropriate methodologies that can support young children's participatory experiences, as well as benefits of child participation for children and more broadly for wider society. Indeed, the positive impacts for children, parents, and wider society of these types of processes motivated EYPs to explain and defend their own participatory approaches.

The final subtheme concerned the impacts of facilitating participatory processes with young children on adult's practices, values and understandings about children and childhood. The section opened with a consideration of how EYP and CYPSC participants articulated their expectations on the potential of fair participatory processes to access child perspective. For CYPSC participants, the extent to which they were prepared to fully validate and accept the contributions of young children depended to a large extent on how satisfied they were that an appropriate and ethical process has been followed. They were more demanding in this respect when dealing with the contributions of young children when compared to older children, but this is not because they have little regard for young children's contributions, but rather need greater reassurance that a robust process has been followed. EYPs reported on the developments in their thinking and spoke about an evolution in their rights-based approaches.

CYPSC and EYP participants reported an emotional and evocative engagement to the idea of child participation, and it brought up memories for several participants of being excluded from decision-making processes when they themselves were young children. These emotional reactions were noted in the observational and reflective data collection tools. There was a notable emotional connection with the children's contributions and to the ideas identified as important for health and well-being by young children, and references to their own childhoods and their own children's childhood from many participants.

Chapter Eight. Discussion

8.1 Introduction

I now turn to a discussion of the research findings in conjunction with a reflection on the literature relating to dimensions of the participation of young children in strategic policy development processes. The aim of this research project was to respond to the underpinning research question: *'Is it possible for young children to participate autonomously in strategic policy development?'* The study was set within the collaborative and interagency contexts of planning and provision of children and family services which are supported and enhanced by Roscommon CYPSC. The research project was centred on a real-world consultation process that sought the views of young children on their health and well-being needs, as part of a strategic policy development process in Roscommon. The rationale for conducting the study was that, despite a recognition of the increasing facilitation of children and young people's participation in decision-making processes at various levels of society, this does not apply equally to young children (Lansdown, 2020).

As set out in the Methodology Chapter, this study concerned the participation of three populations in a participatory policy development process. A qualitative study design that was informed by PAR guided the research process, and a multi-method, sequential data collection process was employed in the field. The specific methods included capacity development sessions, focus groups and participant interviews, the planning and implementation of a consultation process with young children, observations, the analysis of documents and other artefacts generated as a result of the consultation and research process and reflective activities throughout the process. Following on from a hybrid analysis of the data involving both inductive and deductive analysis processes, the findings were set out in three thematic chapters. This chapter builds on the findings as set out in Chapters Five, Six and Seven by presenting a discussion of the themes through the lens of the underpinning theoretical framework and with a reflection on the extant literature to further conceptualise the participation of young children in a policy development process. In the following sections of this chapter, I set out a discussion of the three thematic findings arising from this study. The chapter concludes with the presentation of a model of participation that can be applied to young children's participation in policy-development processes.

8.2 Relational autonomy and young children's participation

8.2.1 Introduction

In Chapter Five, this study revealed the significance of young children's emerging autonomy in participatory processes that support decision-making, including at the level of strategic policy development. This study has revealed differences in how adults understand and respond to young children's autonomy in participatory processes, and I discuss these differences and analyse their importance for the participation of young children in strategic policy decision-making processes. The chapter discusses the relational aspects of autonomy and how acknowledging and accommodating these aspects in policy and practice may have a positive impact on young children's participation.

8.2.2 Understandings of young children's autonomy

As it applies to young children's participation, adult participants in this study understood autonomy to be part of an emergent and incremental developmental process that is closely connected to other developmental domains, in particular the young child's participatory capacities. This is an understanding of children's autonomy that we find well represented in the literature (Sokol et al., 2015). However, the findings in Chapter Five pointed to subtle differences in the perspectives of EYP and CYPSC participants on the ways in which the young child's autonomy emerges, and on the point at which their emergent autonomy becomes a significant enabling factor for their participation in decision-making processes. CYPSC participants largely associated emerging autonomy with age, stages of development, verbal abilities and noted that the relatively limited life experiences of the young child may hinder their capacity to participate autonomously. Meanwhile, EYPs argued that even the youngest children can be and are autonomous and this is not solely dependent on the child's age, developmental stage and verbal abilities or the extent of their life experiences.

'Voice' was identified as an indicator of the child's emerging autonomy by CYPSC participants. However, EYPs believed young children have the capacity to express themselves in many ways, including non-verbal expression. Again, both arguments can be found in the literature on child participation. 'Voice' exists as one of Lundy's (2007) domains of participation, and the concept of the 'voice of the child' is considered a key factor underpinning their participatory rights (Tisdall, 2012; Baker, 1999; l'Anson, 2013). However, other authors argue that the most effective form of participation is one that considers agency as well as voice

(Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010). It may be that the concept of young children's emerging autonomy is a more relevant consideration for those seeking to engage young or non-verbal children in participatory processes than for those engaging with older, more articulate children.

To be clear, EYPs in this study did not suggest that the child's age or verbal abilities are insignificant considerations for children's autonomous participation, and CYPSC participants did not suggest it was the only consideration. Rather, both positions reflect what Ärlemalm-Hagser & Davis (2014) describe as an orientation that supports a holistic perspective of young children as human-beings that combines rights with capacities for civic engagement. As Barrable (2019) argues, autonomy-supporting practices in ECCE must consider developmental issues, as this is the precise time when autonomy is emerging and the child's need to pursue their own interests is becoming increasingly apparent. It appears therefore that EYPs' perspective on the emergence of autonomy is likely explained by their existing pedagogical relationships with young children, their deep knowledge base of early childhood theory and practice, and their extensive professional experiences with young children. The perspective of individuals on the CYPSC may be explained both by the fact that they did not have the day-to-day professional experience of working with young children in ways that supported their emerging autonomy, and because of an understandable concern that there may be valid reasons for attributing beliefs and desires to young children and that verbalisation provided that reassurance. Both perspectives appear to be valid and appropriate, given the positions occupied by each group of adult participants as facilitators or decision-makers in the participatory process at the centre of this study.

In attempting to understand the implications of these positions for young children's participatory opportunities, it is helpful to revisit the literature on the concept of autonomy. While there is an extensive body of knowledge on the concept of the autonomous child, there is limited consideration of the young autonomous child within participatory or decision-making scenarios at strategic levels of decision-making. Therefore, it is necessary to broaden our focus and consider how autonomy is represented in the literature on children and childhood more generally. Children's autonomy is widely understood as the child's ability to think and act freely and independently (Mashford-Scott & Church, 2011; Wyness, 2013). Autonomy requires or involves self-regulation, agency, independence, competence and the capacity to consent, and the use of reason; and so, in order to be able to exercise autonomy the child must first demonstrate the capacity for rational thought (Twomey, 2015; Sokol et al., 2015). The concept of autonomy is prominent in the medico-legal literature, where it is widely considered

to be a prerequisite for participation in decision-making (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001). However, as Saywitz et al., (2010) point out, as children grow, their age and developing competencies and autonomy do not necessarily lead to better decision-making.

Respect for the emerging autonomy of the young child is recognised as a central principle underpinning policy and practice in ECCE in Ireland and internationally. Autonomy is defined in the Irish early years' frameworks as the '*capacity for independence, identity, exploration and thinking that prompts a child to make such statements as "I wonder what is around the corner" and "let me do that"* (NCCA, 2007:22). As we have seen, EYPs in this study do not equate autonomy only with 'voice', whereas the NCCA definition links the child's emerging autonomy with the child's capacity to verbalise and make statements about their thoughts or their desires to act independently.

The literature points to a number of diverse positions related to children's autonomy within decision-making and participatory processes (James & James, 2012; Barrable, 2019), which echo the divergent views of the EYPs and CYPSC participants in this study and may help us to understand the implications of these positions for young children's participation at strategic policy levels. On the one hand, perspectives on children's autonomy that highlight the limits of their competencies and maturity require children to demonstrate these characteristics before they are seen as having the capacity to autonomously participate (Ahn et al., 2011), a perspective reflected in some aspects of the CYPSC participants' responses in this study. Alternatively, the construction of the child as a competent and agentic co-constructor of their own learning and development views the young child as having autonomy and does not require that this be demonstrated (Woodhead, 2006), a position that reflects more on the EYP perspectives as set out in Chapter Five.

CYPSC participants in this study reported having either limited or no previous experience of directly or indirectly engaging in participatory processes with young children at the level of strategic decision-making, and for many, this was their first experience of sponsoring such a process. Similarly, EYPs, for whom child participation is a central part of their everyday rights-based practices and according to whom even the youngest children can engage in participatory and decision-making processes, reported having few if any experiences of children's participation at the level of strategic policy development.

So, the ways in which autonomy is understood and responded to by actors in different positions in the participatory process appear to relate to the extent to which they facilitate participatory opportunities for young children, but this on its own may not be enough to explain why there

are so few opportunities provided to young children at strategic policy development levels. This appears to be a structural and systemic issue, as evidenced by the lack of opportunities afforded to young children to participate in strategic policy development in Ireland and internationally and should not be interpreted as unique to the practice of CYPSC or EYP participants in this study.

8.2.3 Autonomy and young children's participatory opportunities

As suggested in the previous section, one explanation for one's ideas about autonomy is one's role in the participatory process itself. The CYPSC participants in this study appeared to be motivated to support and validate their (i.e., CYPSC) decision-making processes, to uphold their obligations towards children's participatory rights, which together would lead to better and more child-centred services and strategies that would meet the needs of young children in Roscommon. Meanwhile, EYPs were less concerned about the outputs or outcomes of the consultation process, and more concerned with the empowering and transformational potential of the process and the impacts on the child's emerging autonomy. This is one reason why a collaborative and cohesive approach is essential when supporting the participation of young children in policy development, as the adult actors may have different understandings of, and expectations for, the process. It would be difficult to imagine a meaningful strategic policy development process involving young children that was respectful of their emerging autonomy, without recognising the influence of practitioners and policymakers within Lundy's (2007) domains of 'space,' 'voice,' 'audience' and 'influence'. By working collaboratively, adult actors can ensure that they are buttressing and supporting young children's emerging autonomy within participatory structures in each of the four domains of the Lundy model. For example, the domain of 'audience' in the Lundy Model emphasises that children's views must be listened to. However, Lundy argues that those listening to children's voices should have the ability to make decisions and to effect change (Lundy, 2007). In working collaboratively within the 'audience' domain, EYPs and CYPSC participants in this study have demonstrated that young children's views can be accessed, heard and listened to, and that when these views are communicated to policymakers, they can affect change.

Taft (2015) has argued that the aim of autonomy-supporting practices should not be that adults give children more autonomy but should instead be focussed on the creation of the social contexts in which children can participate together with adults. Focussing on the interactions between adults and children underlines the importance of a relational approach to children's

autonomy that recognises the interconnected roles and positions of children and adults within participatory processes (Hammersely, 2016; Wyness, 2009). This study provided evidence that there are complementary and overlapping interactions between all actors in the participatory process, and these interactions could be considered a feature of young children's participation at strategic policy development levels. It can be argued that the younger the children the more interaction, coordination and engagement between adult facilitators and decision-makers is needed to ensure that each of Lundy's participatory domains is advanced equally, and that the child's emerging autonomy is supported in the participatory process. Although there was no direct interaction between the EYPs and CYPSC participants over the duration of the consultation process at the heart of this study, co-ordination was provided by my role in engaging with each of these two groups on an ongoing basis in planning and delivering the consultation sessions, and in reporting back to CYPSC on the outcomes. This replicated the level of coordination and collaboration between facilitators and sponsors that appears to be essential to support these types of processes.

8.2.4 Relational aspects of autonomy

The literature indicates that it is through relationships with others that young children's capacity to exercise autonomy is supported (Walter & Friedman-Ross, 2014). This was supported by findings in Chapter Five on the relational aspects of autonomy and the role of relationships in fostering young children's emerging autonomy in participatory processes. The findings indicated that EYPs are conscious of their significant role in creating the enabling circumstances that support the young child's emerging autonomy and capacities for participation. The findings revealed that nurturing and well-established relationships between children and caring adults are critical to the emergence of children's autonomy, and to the nature of young children's participatory experiences. This reflects on Broström's (2012) vision of an ECCE where children's everyday lives are filled with activities that are influenced by democratic practices such as negotiation, compromise, shared planning and listening to each other.

The promotion of young children's autonomy through interdependent and relational participatory processes and activities was identified as a core part of their role by all EYP participants in the study. By identifying themselves as active supporters of young children's emerging autonomy and as facilitators of their participatory experiences, the significance that EYPs attribute to the relational aspects of autonomy becomes clear. How these relationships

underpin the enabling circumstances or environments for meaningful participation to occur is evident in the findings. EYPs reported that young children's participation in decision-making processes requires an active and dynamic approach which emphasises the relational nature of autonomy, while working towards a goal of developing the young child's independence and supporting their emerging autonomy. The idea of a dynamic supporting role played by EYPs is like the concept of the 'socialising agent' (Sokol et al., 2013). The tendencies of the young child towards self-regulation and self-interest *'can be supported or thwarted by the actions of socialising agents'* (Barrable, 2019: 291-292). Barrable goes on to argue (*ibid*) that, the environment and the socialising agents in the environment (in this study EYPs and I, and the CYPSC members and, within the home environment, parents) must be *'actively supportive of the child's tendency to lead the self'*.

One of the areas that EYPs identified as requiring a dynamic focus is when planning for, and creating, participatory processes. The effect of creating the optimum enabling conditions for young children's participation is two-fold: firstly, the child's emerging autonomy is more easily recognised by adults in an enabling environment, and secondly with recognition, their emergent capacities for autonomy and participation can be nurtured and supported and thus further developed with each participatory opportunity provided. This reflects Bae's (2009) argument that children's rights to participate on their own terms requires that they engage with those practitioners who are responsive to their urge to participate, but also to their vulnerabilities. In this study, children's own reports of operating autonomously to influence an action or decision were set out. Examples included the group of children coming together to ask for new paint supplies, and the child who influenced her parent to drive slowly so she could time her arrival at preschool in a way that met her own interests. The role of the socialising agent who supported the child's emerging autonomy was clear in these and other examples. Where there is a gap in the literature concerns the impact of other children on the young child's autonomy within participatory processes. The child participants in this study pointed to the influence of their peers in supporting their emergent autonomy. The role of child leaders or children with well-developed autonomy and leadership capacities was highlighted by the children themselves, who reported that these children helped them engage in the process in much the same way as the adult facilitators.

8.2.5 Young children's autonomy in participatory processes

Dove et al., (2017) propose that individuals are rarely, if ever, fully independent. Rather, we are relational beings shaped by our connections and interdependencies with other people. This is especially true for youngr children, they argue, as it is through relationships with others that young children come to develop their identities, and capacities to exercise self-determination and pursue their self-interest. The findings show that, even though EYPs identified independence as a significant goal of ECCE, they viewed emerging autonomy as needing the buttressing of interdependence and relationships. The evidence from this study indicates that a relational conceptualisation of autonomy is needed to underpin early ECCE participatory practices. This should consider the interdependence of the young child with their EYP or carer, like the idea of the 'associational presence' as conceptualised by McLaughlin (2020). This conceptualisation of emergent autonomy within a relational frame should be helpful for practitioners and policymakers who seek to support participatory processes in an early years' context. The concept of relational and emergent autonomy can be used to show that the autonomous participation of young children does not involve or entail the prioritisation of self-sufficiency, independence, or excessive individualism. Instead, it prioritises the social and relational contexts in which the child lives and learns, while working to support emerging autonomy, even though it is recognised in the literature that relational autonomy does not only apply in early childhood and is equally valid as children grow and develop into adulthood (Sherwin and Winsby, 2011).

EYPs in this study pointed to the need for bounded relationships, reflecting the debates on balancing children's competences, freedoms and well-being as set out in the participation literature (Hart & Brando, 2018), and the need to respect the principle of the 'best interests of the child' in participatory processes (UN, 1989). This corresponds to the position of Hinton (2008) and other writers who point to the tensions between viewing children as having the right to self-determination, while simultaneously needing protection. The findings demonstrated that the boundaries of children's autonomy were reached quickly in practice once adults identify a potential risk or harm, or where there is an anticipation that the young child may make a poor judgement or an unwise decision. At this point, as demonstrated by the example in the findings of the children not being given the opportunity to make an unwise decision (i.e., to play outdoors on icy surfaces), adults will either intervene to reframe the choice offered to the young child, or will make the decision themselves, based on the 'best interests' principle.

MacKenzie (2008) has argued that autonomy may not be a useful concept in guiding practices where decision-making is taken away from young children because of the 'best interests' principle, as children with autonomy are assumed to have capacities for decision-making even if they do not always exercise it wisely. Meanwhile, a more relational model of autonomy sees individuals' interests as continually constructed and reconstructed in dialogical relations with other people (Walter & Friedman-Ross, 2014). This understanding of autonomy considers that decisions based on discussion and dialogue, and where persuasion and influence are used, can still value the input and participation of others in the decision. As Walter & Friedman-Ross (2014:19) argue, '*dialogue with others about these interests and choices is not an affront to an individual's autonomy in this relational account. It is, instead, the only way to allow autonomy to fully flourish'.* The findings in this study illustrate how participatory and decision-making processes involving young children are fundamentally relational and autonomy-supporting, built on dialogue and discussion, so that when a decision is taken by others, it can still be considered their relational autonomous decision.

8.3 Engaging with the voice of the young child in participatory processes

8.3.1 Introduction

The findings from Chapter Six pointed to the ways in which EYPs value and promote child-centred and rights-based approaches that they identify as supportive of the participation of young children. The findings indicated the impact that adult attitudes and approaches can have on young children's participatory experience, particularly in collective participatory contexts such as ECCE.

8.3.2 Child-centredness as a principle for participation

Respect for children's rights was identified by EYPs and CYPSC participants in this study as an overarching principle that should guide the participation of young children. EYPs were clear that they support the participation of young children by their engagement in an approach to participation that they characterise as child-centred and rights-based. Meanwhile, CYPSC participants reported their acknowledgment of the principle of child-centredness in participatory decision-making processes, and this led to their concerns about the appropriateness of methodologies employed to support the participation of young children. EYPs described child-centred participatory practices as employing developmentally

appropriate methodologies that incorporate strengths-based and play-based approaches and are underpinned by language that is accessible to young children. They also included respect for rights, empathy, a culture of listening, and the scaffolding of children's emerging capacities to participate, as characteristics of child-centred participatory practice.

These positions are aligned to the conceptualisation of child-centredness which locates children as rights-bearing social actors at the centre of their learning, who engage with, influence and in turn are influenced by the social worlds in which they exist (Bessell, 2013; Qvortrup, 1994; Corsaro, 1992). As Clark (2011) says, child-centred participatory processes can result in unique and less adult-centred perspectives, a conclusion that was shared by the EYP and CYPSC participants in their interviews.

EYPs outlined the complexities of ensuring that participatory processes are rights-based and child-centred, as well as being developmentally appropriate and designed to protect children from harm and argued that an active and a facilitated process is required. This facilitated process begins with planning for both participatory and protective practices when engaging with young children. The literature reflects the way in which EYPs describe child-centred practice as both participatory and protective. Jans (2004: 27) has argued that on the one hand '*children are surrounded with care, while on the other, they are stimulated to present themselves as individuals with their own rights'.* This duality is particularly evident in the approach to young children's participatory processes as reported by EYPs in this study. Child-centred approaches should consider children's vulnerabilities as well as their strengths (Winkworth & McArthur, 2006). These vulnerabilities were identified by EYPs and CYPSC participants in this study as age and stage of development of young children; their relatively limited life experience; their dependence on adult support and intervention; being less able to verbalise opinions and seeking to please adults, all of which require a considered, pro-active, and protective response from adult facilitators of participatory processes. By pointing to young children's vulnerabilities as well as strengths, EYPs reflect the rights-based responses to young children's dependence on adults as conceptualised by Bae (2009). A child-centred approach to participation offers EYPs the opportunity to respond to these perceived vulnerabilities, while opening up the possibility of accessing authentic child perspectives. These considerations all suggest highly responsive participatory processes are required where children's needs and rights are equally addressed, to fully reflect the provisions of Articles 3, 5 and 12 of the UNCRC.

This study revealed that child-centred practice offers the potential to enable the emergence of child-leaders and to support children to help and support each other to engage in participatory processes. As set out in Chapter Five, and discussed in the previous section in this chapter, several children were recorded as possessing well-developed autonomy and emerging leadership qualities. These children were central to how the groups organised themselves and were forthcoming with their ideas for the sessions. They notably helped other children during the activities and engaged with facilitators vocally and using well-developed language skills to communicate with their peers and adult facilitators. EYPs expressed a view that the child-centred nature of their practice supports the emergence of child leaders, as this approach encourages children to support each other, as well as seeking assistance from adults. This child-to-child support was seen, in retrospect, by EYPS as maximising the participatory experiences of quieter or less involved children. Further, they suggested that quiet and less vocal children will often make their views known to a peer in their group, rather than necessarily speak out to the wider group. So, this process has highlighted that young children who possess emerging leadership qualities are acknowledged by EYPs as part of the response to ensure that young children find their voice in a child-centred process. However, there is the potential for 'child leaders' to simply dominate participatory and consultative processes, and this is something that EYPs acknowledge and recognise that they need to plan for and protect against, while harnessing the strengths of these leaders.

It is clear from children's own testimonies that young children can be both help-givers and help-seekers in participatory processes, which reflects the position that children can be viewed as both autonomous individuals and as needing protection (Jans, 2004). This suggests an understanding of the position of young children in participatory processes needs to include the under-recognised contribution of children in supporting these processes, as well as being supported in them. The findings in this study show that involving children in the shaping of the consultation process and explaining the purpose of the consultation using developmentally appropriate language, enhanced the child's awareness and understanding of their own social roles and of their own potential contributions to the process. This approach reassured EYPs that children's protective needs were being responded to during the planning for this participatory process.

Overall, it appears that child-centredness is a particularly important principle for EYPs, but the enabling circumstances for participatory processes also need to consider EYP attitudes and practices, which are discussed in the next section.

8.3.3 Adults' attitudes impact on young children's participatory opportunities

The literature tells us the inclusion of young children in meaningful decision-making processes at both policy and practice levels is largely dependent on the attitudes and approaches of adults. Attitudes can be influenced when the dominant approaches in ECCE concentrate more on promoting development then on respecting and protecting rights, as argued by Mitchell and Carr (2014). Adult acceptance that young children's perspectives are as valuable as any other group of stakeholders can directly impact on the extent of the participatory opportunities opened up to the young child (Emilson, 2007). This corresponds to Larkins' (2014) account of the unsettled nature of children's citizenship, where they are awarded some rights yet denied others. However, adults' attitudes and perspectives towards child participation can be driven by poorly informed assumptions about children's capacities to participate, and about children and childhood (Matthews et al., 1999). This suggests that participatory rights for young children can be limited by an attitude that young children are incapable of reasonable and rational decision-making (Larkins, 2019).

As Cashmore (2002) has argued, child-centred approaches are a move away from paternalistic approaches and recognise the child as a stakeholder in decision. Lansdown (1995) argues that adults' perceptions of young children as irrational or irresponsible or alternatively as cute and amusing, can result in no serious efforts to recognise young children's contributions in decision-making processes. However, as Bae (2010) argues, practitioners who exclusively view children as autonomous, competent beings can in turn, under-estimate children's dependencies and vulnerabilities, resulting in practices that are more concerned with individualistic self-determination.

Whatever the explanations that are presented in the literature, the overall effect of these adult attitudes is the general absence of young children's participation in policy processes, and the lack of any discernible impact of the views of young children on decision-making processes at strategic level (Byrne and Lundy, 2015; Horgan et al., 2015). This corresponds to the findings in this study which highlighted that both CYPSC and EYP participants had limited or non-existent previous experiences of the participation of young children at strategic policy-development level. Therefore, it appears from these findings that while adults accept that young children can and should participate in some types of decision-making processes, they are generally excluded from opportunities to participate in other types of decision-making processes. These findings indicate that the reasons for their under-representation in decision-

making are complex and highlight the challenges of including young children in decision-making at strategic policy development levels.

One position in the literature is the under-representation of young children in these processes represents a high-level deficit in participatory structures within these decision-making processes (Kelleher, 2014), rather than being a reflection on the capacity of young children to participate. The importance of the enabling circumstances for the participation of young children to flourish was pointed to by EYPs, and their input in the design of the consultation sessions was in turn seen as a reassuring factor by CYPSC participants. Therefore, both groups of adult participants were aware that the participatory environment and structures acted as enablers or inhibitors for young children's participation.

In this study, EYPs identified several environmental enablers for young children's participatory opportunities including employing fun-filled playful approaches, the integration of appropriate language into the processes, and the practice of scaffolding the young child's participatory experience. 'Scaffolding' was described as a way of buttressing and supporting the young child's emerging autonomy within the participatory process, and as a way of bridging complex concepts with young children's life experiences. EYPs identified a service ethos that promotes child-centred and rights-based approaches, and an orientation towards participation of leaders and colleagues, as enablers for young children's involvement in participatory and decision-making processes. These enabling factors are thought by EYPs to determine the extent to which young children's participation is facilitated in the service, and the nature of their participation. If these elements are not in place, EYPs argue, the effect is to inhibit or limit young children's participation. This suggests that attitudes and mind-sets of adults towards rights-based and child-centred participatory practices can be either enablers or inhibitors to integrating participatory processes into a practice, even when those approaches, attitudes and processes are promoted in the early years' frameworks Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Siolta (CECDE, 2006). It corresponds with Moss and Urban (2010) who argue that attitudes, values and behaviours such as plurality, respect for difference, dialogue, listening, deliberation and shared enquiry amongst others are significant in a democratic community.

8.4 Moral, ethical, and personal perspectives on young children's participation

8.4.1 Introduction

This section discusses the findings set out in Chapter Seven which revealed that the participation of young children in consultation and decision-making processes has moral and ethical dimensions. The findings highlighted personal and professional impacts on adults arising from engaging with young children in participatory processes. Tensions and dilemmas that surfaced during the study are discussed. Findings on children's experiences of participatory processes is a feature of the discussion in this section, in addition to the literature on the theme.

8.4.2 The ethics of young children's participation

The study revealed the depth of EYP and CYPSC participants' attentiveness to the ethical and moral dimensions of young children's participation in decision-making processes. As set out in the Literature Review chapter, ethics is the branch of philosophical knowledge, theories and moral principles that guide choices and practices that are right and good (Loubert, 1999; Amstutz, 1999). In this study, the findings showed that both groups of adult participants agreed that the participation of young children in decision-making processes at strategic and other levels is right, fair, and just. There was a shared recognition that young children should be facilitated to participate in decision-making processes, and an expressed willingness of both adult cohorts to do so, once the ethical and moral concerns have been responded to.

Thomas and Pierson (1995) argue that ethical and moral principles are required to sets high standards for good practice and conduct in a professional context involving children. Lansdown (2001) has set out practice principles that underpin children's participation including preparation of the child for the process so that the child understands the purpose of the process, and preparation of the adult so that they are prepared to listen and take the child seriously; ensuring decision-making structures are transparent, reflecting both ethical and epistemological concerns; ensuring children are treated with respect; ensuring participation is voluntary, and that children are involved in developing participatory activities. Lansdown's principles are significant in ensuring that child participation is conducted ethically, while Aistear (NCCA, 2009) outlines a principled approach to practice that is characterised by fairness, justice, respect, and democracy. Additionally, the requirement to protect children from harm is an ethical requirement and is a principle that shapes opportunities for young children's participation. These principles were identified in the findings of this study and were

consistently expressed by adult participants as guiding their understandings and approaches to child participation. In addition to these principles, this study pointed to the identification of 'fairness' as a principle that should underpin how children's participation is managed and responded to.

The literature suggests that ECCE as a forum has the potential to nourish these democratic and ethical practices, by children and adults alike (Moss, 2007). However, it is clear from EYP accounts that they have little guidance on how to address the ethical issues they identify, particularly in their participatory practices. The UNCRC is clear that practice approaches should be based on children's rights to be involved, informed, consulted, and heard. This is a clear mandate for ensuring that young children understand the nature of a process in which they are asked to participate and are aware of what will happen to the information generated as a result of their participation and the way it will be used. However, for example, observations are routinely conducted in ECCE for a range of purposes including to support decisions about children's learning and development, without, it appears, much attention being paid to the ethical dimensions of the practice. The ethical dimensions of decision-making and planning processes involving young children is an issue that deserves to be considered in more detail by policymakers and practitioners alike, as it is under-recognised in the ECCE frameworks despite being considered as a significant participatory practice issue for EYPs. The tensions and contradictions uncovered in this study towards young children's participation are discussed in more detail in the next section.

8.4.3 Tensions in facilitating young children's participation.

This study has uncovered tensions related to young children's participation in decision-making at strategic level. The existence of tensions and dilemmas are well recognised in the literature on the participation of children in research and in public decision-making contexts (Shier 2010). These tensions can affect participatory processes, but as Shier (2010: 35) argues, it is not a simple choice between sides in the tension or dilemma. This requires the practitioner to navigate the tensions, '*steering a path around the constraints imposed by different social, organisational and political contexts, with their sights firmly set on a more effective and empowering practice that resonates with their personal beliefs and values'*. The tensions that have been identified in this study and which will be discussed in this section are presented in Figure 19:

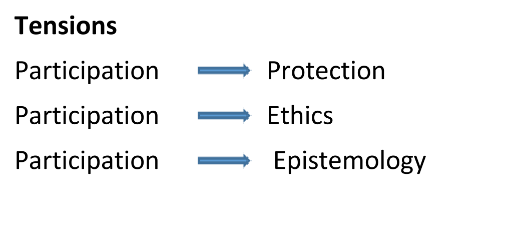


Figure 19: Tensions in Participatory Processes

A ‘participation and protection’ tension was articulated by EYPs and CYPSC participants in discussing how the enactment of young children’s participation rights must reflect the ‘best interests’ principle in the context of young children, as discussed in Section 8.2.5. All the evidence points to a recognition by CYPSC and EYP participants of a complex process that requires an ethical framework so that the participation of young children is conducted in a manner that both respects their right to participation and equally protects their interests. Young children have specific vulnerabilities, according to participants in this study, so participatory practice must be protective, as well as empowering. The questions posed by the research findings are: *is participation too much of a burden for young children or should we consider young children sufficiently autonomous to participate?*

As alluded to in the last section, an ethical dilemma was identified by EYPs relating to the way in which observations are employed to support the participation of young children. Observations were described as an important practice tool in the ECCE, and EYPs identified that the participation of young children is underpinned by adult observations. However, EYPs were challenged by the extent to which young children’s participatory rights are respected when observations are being conducted in their practice. EYPs were unsure if young children are aware of, and are capable of assenting to, their involvement in an observation process. There is limited literature on this aspect of young children’s participation in decision-making processes. It is more prevalent in the literature on research participation, where observational methods are a feature of research with young children and the ethical dimensions of observational practices are widely discussed. With roots in Piagetian research approaches, observations have been used in research projects with young children, such as in the Mosaic Approach (Moss and Clark, 2011). Harcourt and Conroy (2005) have argued that the use of observations raises issues related to young children's understandings of a research process.

The ethics of employing observational methods in research is linked to the process of ensuring that children give their personal consent or assent to participate, and that their privacy and dignity is respected (Dockett et al., 2012). A different but related issue to the ethics of consent

raised by the phenomenon of 'observations' is the epistemological issue of whether young children's statements are reliable. It becomes an issue when adults act as proxies for children, deciding what children meant and felt arising from observations, and reporting that, rather than asking the child themselves. Johansson and Karlsson (2013) and Parsons et al., (2015) both propose that the researcher is always responsible for ensuring that the research is conducted in an ethical way, and the child is fully aware of what is happening during the observational process. This approach does not appear to clearly inform observational processes in ECCE practice more generally, and specifically when observations are employed in participatory processes. The ethical and epistemological questions this raises are: *can young children provide valid and reliable information, or should we turn to adults for that information*?

The complexities for practitioners and policymakers in navigating these tensions are illustrated in arguments for child-centred practices as a buttress against more paternalistic approaches by adults because of perceptions about the extent of children's vulnerabilities (Parton & Wattam, 1999). This perspective is found in some aspects of the CYPSC responses where there was an argument put forward that the perspectives of young children should be accessed by consulting indirectly with their parents and carers, rather than by consulting directly with this age group of young children. This was presented as a way of ensuring that young children are not burdened or treated unfairly by the participatory methods employed and represents an epistemological claim that parents will be able to report on children's perspectives more accurately.

In social research, child-centred approaches position children as active participants in the process and recognise that they are the most reliable and valid sources of information and data on their own lives (Mayeza, 2017). The significance of authentic child-generated outputs and perspectives resulting from child-centred participatory process was highlighted by both EYPs and CYPSC participants alike. However, the findings indicated that before the consultation process got underway, neither group were fully confident that the outputs would prove to be ultimately useful for the decision-makers. This suggests that, while there is an understanding that ethical participatory processes should be underpinned by the principles of child-centredness and rights, there were still epistemological concerns as to whether these principles could translate into appropriate methodologies that would guide effective and meaningful participatory processes with young children on their health and well-being perspectives. There is a further epistemological claim that child participation is the most reliable and valid way to find out the child's views, regardless of the ethics and moral considerations of participation as

being 'right'. This further points to the complexity of ensuring we have reliable and accurate information about children's lives, while providing for an ethical process.

8.4.4 Impacts on adults of engaging in participatory processes

Section 8.4.3 indicated that young children's voices are generally absent from strategic policy development processes. The literature further provided evidence that the attitudes of adults may have the effect of enhancing or limiting the extent of young children's participatory opportunities. This section sets out to discuss a finding of this study related to the way in which adults themselves are impacted and affected by their own involvement in participatory processes with young children. The impacts and effects revealed by this study were centred on the practices, values and beliefs of adults arising from their close involvement with young children when facilitating participatory processes. There was a reporting of personal and emotional engagement with participatory processes involving young children. The study revealed that opportunities for reflection embedded into the participatory process can lead to developments in adult facilitators' understandings about childhood and an evolution in their rights-based approaches to practice. Examples of the impacts on practice, thinking and understandings about children and childhood, and emotional and personal reactions and responses were reported in Chapter Seven in support of this finding.

The way in which the participation of young children in this study has impacted both on the eventual decision and on the decision-maker is generally an under-discussed theme within the broader participation debate. Ross et al., (2018) offer a distinction between the impacts and influences of child participation on decisions reached in relation to policy matters, and the impact and effects on organisational and individual practice. They pointed to a connection between the level of impact in both areas, and the extent to which children were engaged in the process**.** Further, they found that high-quality engagement with children can have a snowball effect in other areas of service delivery by influencing the practice of those involved. Johnson et al., (1998) argued that the facilitation of children's participation requires actively raising the status and credibility of children within the community. It is no surprise that in doing so, adult facilitators will experience developments in their thinking and understandings of children and childhood that can spill over into other areas of their practices.

This study has uncovered the effects on emotional and personal responses that facilitating participatory processes with young children can have on adults. EYPs and CYPSC participants both reported the ways in which they responded emotionally and personally to the process

itself, and to the outputs of the process. In contrast to the findings of Perrry Hazan's (2016) study which highlighted either fawning or dismissive responses from adults, in this study both groups of adult participants expressed a strong connection with the children's views. In referencing their own memories of childhood, CYPSC participants offered reflections and recollections being included, or excluded from decision-making processes, and what that felt like. Participants identified on a personal and emotional level with the outputs of the consultation process, as they related to childhood memories of playing outdoors and having a sense of freedom to explore their own environment. These reactions are like that described in the participatory literature as adult 'sensitivity' to participating children, (Lansdown, 2011) which needs to be supported to improve the quality of the child's participatory experience. Adults are often impressed when they encounter young children's contributions and recognising and supporting adult's sensitivities has positive implications for young children's participation, according to Lansdown (2011). The connection between emotion, learning and participation is supported by Bronfenbrenner (1979:60) who refers to '*complex patterns of reciprocal activity'* in participatory and learning environments. This brings us back full circle in the discussion, to making a connection between young children's emerging autonomy and the emotional reactions of decision-makers.

Autonomy has been conceptualised in this study in relation to the social and relational contexts within which the autonomous child exists, and this acknowledges the significant role played by other people in decision-making and highlights the *'emotional and embodied aspects of decision-makers'* (Walter and Friedman-Ross, 2014: 516). Freeman et al., (2003) who examined the relationships between decision-makers in local government and children who participated in decision-making processes recommended a process of critical reflection on the reciprocal nature of these relationships. This reciprocity in relationships and interactions can be seen in the findings of this study and is reported by all three groups of participants. Perhaps the impact on decision-makers is one of the more enigmatic and least understood aspects arising from young children's participation in decision-making processes. It could be argued therefore that the 'audience' and 'influence' domains as envisioned by Lundy (2007) are enriched by conceptualisations of autonomy and agency that acknowledges the influence of children on both the decision and the decision maker.

8.5 A proposed model to support the participation of young children in policy development

8.5.1 Introduction

This study was an academic enquiry concerned with the theoretical nature of young children's autonomous participation in strategic policy development. The findings of the study highlighted the ethical and relational dimensions of facilitating the participation of young children and calls for attention to be paid to these dimensions by policymakers and practitioners who are engaging young children in policy development processes. It is clear from these findings that policymakers are concerned with the ethical robustness of methodologies employed to support young children's participation, and that when ethical concerns are responded to, young children's participation can be facilitated. One of the four research objectives of my study was to develop a model to support child participation in strategic decision making. Such a model should have practice as well as theoretical intentions and implications, and my intent in designing a participatory model to support policy development processes involving young children is that it will prove to be accessible to practitioners, policymakers and academics who are concerned with young children's participation.

Before presenting the participatory model, it is helpful to revisit the theoretical concepts which underpinned this study. Figure 20 illustrates how the theoretical framework interacts with concepts and themes presented in the findings, underpinning the practice model.

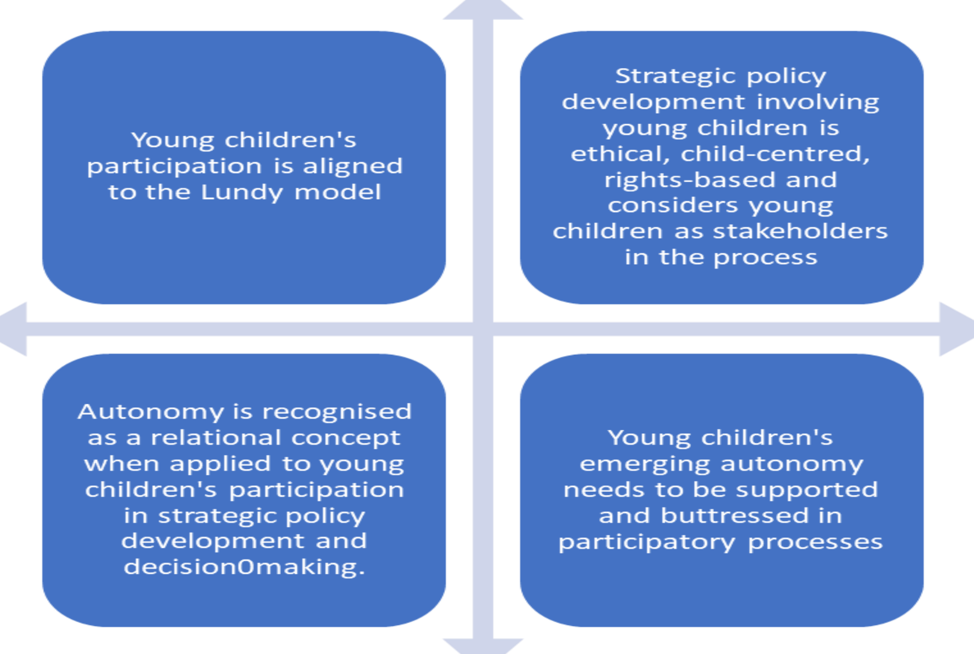


Figure 20: Theoretical model to inform young children's participation in decision-making

The ‘Consulting with Young Children’ model’ that is now introduced here, is based on the findings of this study and is designed to support and enhance participatory processes involving young children in strategic policy development and decision-making. The model presents the sequencing of stages in the process, and outlines the key themes, concepts, and ideas at each stage. Although each stage builds on the preceding stage, some aspects may merge, overlap, and occur simultaneously as the participatory process unfolds. This model envisages the relational interactions between young children, adults, and the participatory environment as both underpinning and providing the momentum for the process. Inspired by the work of Hultgren and Johannson (2018) and aligned with the Lundy Model of Participation (2007), this model points to a number of interdependent levels of participatory processes in strategic policy development involving young children: a values and understandings level, an implementation level, and a level concerned with representation and dissemination and feedback. The model is illustrated in Figure 21.

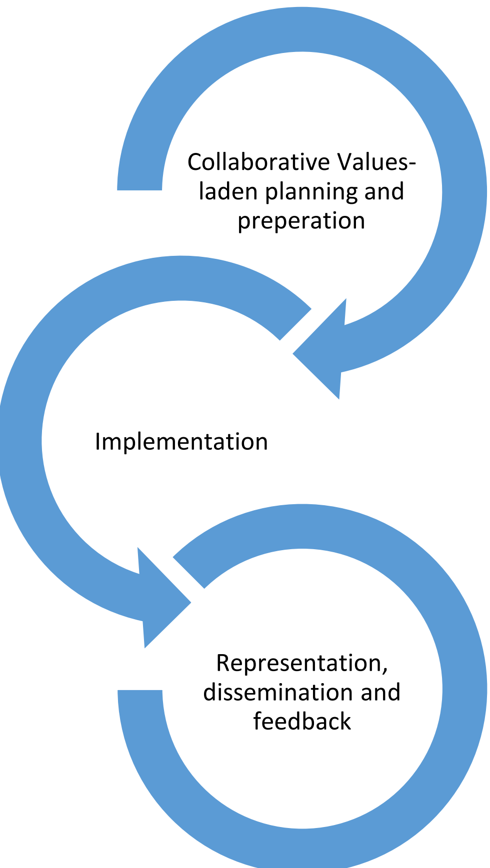


Figure 21: Consulting with young children model

The model reflects tensions that arise in participatory practices and processes involving young children, which have been identified in the findings of this study. Further, as this model has been developed from the findings of this study there is an emphasis on the participation of young children in strategic decision-making processes, but it can be used in conjunction with other established models, such as Lundy (2007), to enhance the participation of children of any age and in a range of decision-making processes. These tensions are set out in Figure 22 and are intended for consideration across all three stages of the model.

Tensions to be acknowledged and responded to across the 3 stages of the model

Participation and Protection:
-How can children be viewed as both autonomous participants and in need of protection in participatory processes?

Participation and Epistemology:
-How can we ensure we have reliable and accurate information about children's lives?

Participation and Ethics
-How can young children's views be represented authentically, and what level of control do children have over the way they are represented?

Figure 22: Tensions to be acknowledged and responded to.

The 'Consulting with Young Children on Policy' model is illustrated in Figure 23 on the next page, and each of the stages, and the considerations, themes and strategies for each stage are laid out.

Stage 1:	Collaborative and values-laden planning and preparation	
Dimensions	**Themes**	**Actions/ Strategies**
Aligns with Lundy's domain of 'Space' and 'Voice'. This stage is underpinned by the collaborative approach of the 'sponsor' (i.e. the party who is seeking to consult with young children in relation to policy development), and the 'facilitator' (i.e. those who responsible for the conduct the consultations and who report back to the sponsor). Values are articulated in the shared goals of the partners in the participatory process and are clearly reflected in the planning processes. The preparatory stage is formulated in the rights-based principles underpinning child participation as set out in the UNCRC and early years' frameworks and other relevant policy and theoretical material.	Value-laden planning and preparation involves reviewing and analysing the participatory structures available to support the policy development process. A collaborative approach explicitly recognises children and parents as stakeholders in the policy area, in addition to their role as participants or consent providers in the participatory process. Planning should consider children's participation rights as set out in Articles 12 and 13 of the UNCRC, and their protection rights as catered for in Articles 3 and 5. 'Agency' is emphasised in addition to 'voice' Planning to support emerging autonomy is enhanced by a relational approach.	A principled collaborative approach should respond to any identified barriers or inhibitors in the environment by building on the existing capacities and participatory structures in the environment. Operating in this level, partners recognise that young children have agency and autonomy that is buttressed and supported in relational interactions with caring adults. Plans must be reflexive, child-centred, incorporating relational rights-based and play-based approaches. Language must be accessible to young children and children are encouraged to articulate their own ideas and goals for the process. Preparation should accommodate the scaffolding of children's emerging capacities to participate and as way of connecting the children's lived experiences to any complex concepts that they may encounter in the participatory process.

Stage 2: Implementation		
Dimensions	**Themes**	**Actions/ Strategies**
Implementing the plans *Aligns to Lundy's domain of 'Audience'.* Stage 2 translates the previous level into participatory practice. 'Implementation' is concerned with putting the participatory process developed in the previous stage into action and generating outputs and artefacts that best capture and represent young children's perspectives.	Implementation is relational, reflexive and child-centred and draws on the observational skills of facilitators. Implementation involves ensuring that young children give their assent to participate, and then feel comfortable in participating at their own pace, or not at all. Implementation begins the process of interpretation and authentic representation of children's views. This process should be informed by the previous stage so that interpretation builds on the principled process.	The facilitators are responsible for the conduct of the participatory sessions. Children are recognised as co-producers and co-contributors to the implementation of the plans. The potential of children to act as supporters and mentors to other children should be harnessed in the implementation. Children are encouraged to express their views in any way of their choosing. Fun and playful participatory activities are offered. Language supports children's engagement with conceptual aspects of their participation.
Stage 3: Representation, dissemination, and feedback		
Stage	**Actors/ Context**	**Themes/Actions**
Representation, Dissemination and Feedback *Aligns to Lundy's domain of 'Influence'* This level is concerned with accurate representation and dissemination of children's views in a way that is accessible to all interested parties.	This stage brings together the sponsors and facilitators of the process and the child participants in reporting on the outputs and outcomes of the process, and on the children's contributions.	Children's views are accurately represented and reported in an authentic way that best suits the expressed preferences of children. Feedback to children is sought by facilitators, provided by sponsors and is relayed to children in a timely manner. The impacts of their contributions to the decision-making process are explained using appropriate language.

Figure 23: 'Consulting with young children on policy' model guidance

8.6 Conclusion

This chapter presented a discussion of the key findings of this study. Beginning with an overview of the study, and a reminder of the research question and objectives and theoretical framework, the chapter presented a discussion of the thematic findings from Chapters Five to Seven, in conjunction with a reflection on the literature on young children's participation. The chapter introduced a proposed model that can be employed to support young children's participation in policy development processes. This thesis has contributed to a greater understanding of young children's participation, and of how young children's emergent autonomy can be facilitated within participatory processes. This study has presented several unique contributions to the knowledge and literature on this topic. These contributions include:

- Recognising that young children can participate in strategic levels of decision-making, when processes are organised to activate and support their emerging autonomy.
- Demonstrating to policymakers and practitioners that a vision of autonomy as a relational concept is applicable in early learning generally, and specifically in participatory and decision-making processes.
- Acknowledging the significant role of child leaders in participatory processes and pointing to their potential as supporters of other young children's emerging autonomy in participatory processes.
- Pointing to the impacts on decision-makers as well as on the eventual decision of engaging in participatory processes with young children.
- Highlighting the ethical dimensions of conducting observations as part of an approach to decision-making and calling for attention to be paid to this by policymakers and educators of EYPs, and
- Offering a model to support the development of participatory processes at strategic policy development levels of decision-making, that is aligned to the Lundy model of participation.

Chapter Nine. Conclusion

9.1 Introduction

In this concluding chapter, I present a summary of the entire research project and explain the contribution that this study makes to the body of knowledge on young children's participation in strategic policy development. Firstly, I set out a reminder of the structure of this thesis. This thesis was developed over nine chapters, beginning with an Introduction Chapter that presented the background to the study, announced the research aim and objectives and set out the rationale for the research study. Chapter Two highlighted the context for the study and set out the policy, practice and local contexts within which the study was located. Chapter Three presented the literature pertaining to young children's participation, with a specific focus on the literature informing the theoretical framework for this study. Chapter Four outlined the methodology guiding the study, while Chapter Five, Six and Seven set out the research findings arising from the data analysis process undertaken. Chapter Eight offered a discussion of the thematic findings, while setting out a model to support young children's participation in strategic policy development. This concluding chapter examines the extent to which I have answered the research question and fulfilled the objectives of the study. A reflection on my experiences of employing the methodology in the field is presented, in conjunction with an examination of my dual roles within the process. The chapter reflects on the significance and the implications of the findings of my study for policymakers and practitioners concerned with young children's participation and lay out questions for future research. I also point to identified limitations of the study, and the chapter will conclude with my overall reflections on the thesis.

9.2 Conclusions on the research question and objectives

9.2.1 Introduction

This section of the chapter sets out a reflection on the findings in response to each of the research objectives. The research question which this study aimed to address was: *Is it possible for young children to participate autonomously in strategic policy development?* The study sought to provide an answer to this overarching question by responding to four research objectives which are set out below. As a result of the empirical research that I conducted for this thesis, we can conclude that it is possible for young children to participate autonomously,

once the relational, ethical, and epistemological dimensions of a participatory process are addressed satisfactorily.

Objective One: *To study the nature of young children's autonomous participation in a collaborative policy decision-making process, examining in particular how young children construct and express their views when involved in such a process.*

The concept of relational autonomy best explains the nature of children's autonomous participation in decision-making processes. Rather than seeing children's autonomy as simply involving independence and self-reliance, relational autonomy points to the importance of supportive relations with adults and with other children, that scaffold and buttress young children's autonomous participation.

This study has revealed that young children value interactions and relationships with adults who are facilitating their emergent autonomy. Young children recognise that communication is an interactive and a reciprocal process between child and adult.

Children's participation in informal decision-making related to their day-to-day life experiences is particularly meaningful to the children. At the same time, young children's emerging autonomy can be supported and buttressed by EYPs within relational participatory processes by the practice of 'scaffolding', and this acts as an autonomy-supporting bridge bringing young children beyond their day-to day life experiences to engage with more complex issues and concepts.

Finally, the study has shown how much children value the support they receive from their peers within collective participation processes. The significant role of child leaders was highlighted by the children themselves, who reported that these children helped them engage in participatory processes and supported their emerging autonomy in much the same way as the adult facilitators. At the same time, while harnessing the strengths of these leaders, EYPs acknowledged that they work to mitigate against the potential of some children to dominate participatory processes.

Objective Two: 2. *To research the experiences of Early Years' Practitioners who facilitated a consultation process with young children, and to explore how it affected their understandings, values, and practices towards participation.*

This study has found that EYPs understand that young children's autonomy and emerging participatory capacities and abilities overlap and interact with other developmental areas as the child grows, and that participatory processes must reflect these considerations. In respect of

young children, EYPs are clear that autonomy is a goal for the child but that its attainment requires a relational and interdependent approach to practice. However, EYPs reported having had few if any opportunities to facilitate participatory processes with young children at strategic policy-development levels.

The findings of this study show that the creation of enabling circumstances for the emergence of young children's autonomy in participatory processes requires a complex rights-based, child-centred, relational, and developmentally appropriate response from adults. Participatory processes that are underpinned by specific principles are required so that the process is enabling and empowering.

Several other attitudes, approaches and behaviours were identified as enablers to integrating participatory processes into practice so that young children are afforded participatory opportunities, including fun-filled and playful approaches, accessible language, and built-in opportunities for practice reflections by adults on their attitudes and beliefs. Inhibiting or constraining factors for young children's participation were identified. While in some cases, these are related to the absence of the enablers listed here, other inhibiting factors related to deficits in the participatory structures and systems within which young children exist more generally, such as home, early learning contexts and in the wider society in which they live, which results in a lack of interest in taking their views seriously.

Observations were identified in the study as a tool that supports EYPs to reach conclusions about young children's perspectives during participatory processes. Yet EYPs are faced with a practice dilemma in relation to the ethical dimensions of conducting observations where children's participatory rights may not be fully upheld. At the same time, observations are an important element guiding young children's participatory experiences and act as a support for their own decision-making processes.

Objective Three: *To understand the perspectives of local policymakers on the participation of young children in consultation processes and the impact of the views of young children on their decision-making processes.*

The study revealed that young children's active and autonomous participation was understood by CYPSC participants as a developmental process that is significantly linked to the child's age, stage of development and verbal abilities. Like their EYP counterparts in this study, CYPSC participants had limited experiences of engaging with the views of young children in their decision-making processes, and their previous professional experiences of child participation mostly included older children and teenagers. While accepting that it is 'right'

that young children should participate in these decision-making processes, the absence of young children's voices from policy development processes was attributed by policymakers largely to methodological concerns and language and consent issues.

Concerns and unresolved tensions between the protective responsibilities of adults towards young children in participatory processes combined with epistemological issues related to the most appropriate methods of accessing young children's views appear to have had the effect of inhibiting decision-makers from pushing for young children's participation at strategic levels of policy development. The study found that CYPSC participants were generally unsure if there were appropriate methodologies that could support young children's meaningful participation, particularly when there may be other ways of engaging with their viewpoints such as consultations with their parents or adult carers. CYPSC participants reported that they considered indirect participation where parents act as proxies, to be a viable option in the absence of appropriate methodologies that were both participatory and protective of the young child's perceived vulnerabilities.

The findings showed that the participation of young children in strategic policy development requires a principled approach that responds to the ethical, moral, and emotional dimensions of the process. In this respect, CYPSC participants in this study sought out reassurances that a safe, fair, ethically sound, child-centred, and developmentally appropriate participatory process took place, to support their engagement with young children's contributions in decision-making processes.

Objective Four: *To develop a model of consultation and participation that can be employed by decision-makers when seeking the views of young children.*

This objective is addressed by the presentation of a proposed model to support the participation of young children in strategic policy development, which was set out in Section 8.6 of Chapter Eight.

9.3 Conclusions on the methodological approach to this study

9.3.1 Introduction

In this section, I reflect on the methodological approach employed to conduct this research project and consider the extent to which the methodology and research design were effective in answering the research question.

9.3.2 Was the methodology effective in answering the research question?

Regarding the research design and methodology as set out in Chapter Four and the findings as presented in Chapters Five, Six and Seven, I want to now consider whether the methodology employed was an effective approach to answering the research question. To do so, I reviewed the field notes and reflective journal entries for evidence of its effectiveness or otherwise. The effectiveness of my methodology can be seen in the robustness and validity of the data collection and analysis processes and in the following three characteristics of the fieldwork process: the low rate of attrition, the successful application of PAR at appropriate phases of the research design, and the quality of the outputs generated by the fieldwork.

By taking a considered and sequential approach to designing the data collection activities, I ensured that no one group of participants dominated the process. The PAR methodology facilitated EYPs to contribute in a meaningful way to the data collection process, and these contributions were significant to the successful management of the consultation sessions. PAR allowed me to track the progress in thinking and understandings of adult participants as the process unfolded. By following a sequential research design, influenced by the Lundy model, I was able to present a coherent account of the process, and to record and analyse the impacts of the process across all participants groups. In terms of answering the research question, my design allowed me to bring together all the dimensions of young children's participation. For example, my observations on children's participation were a rich data source and added to the other data sources to create a picture or mosaic of the nature of their participation, which was complimented by the adult-generated data sources.

9.3.3 Overall reflections on the methodological approach

This study was concerned with the perspectives of a range of actors in a participatory policy-development process for Roscommon CYPSC. The research tracked and studied participants' experiences, perspectives, practices, and interactions over the course of a participatory process involving young children, EYP facilitators and CYPSC local policy-developers. A constructionist approach guided the research, and this was represented in the development of a multi-method, qualitative methodology. This section reflects on the experiences of employing the chosen methodological approach in the field.

My field diaries and reflective journals were useful data sources but also a way of recording the chronology of the process and the main events and occurrences. Thus, they provided me

with a means of revisiting and reviewing the methodology employed, for articulating my experiences in the field and for commenting on the effectiveness of the research process. My methodology operated across several levels and with three participant cohorts. It moved between research and practice paradigms at times. One of the main issues that arose in my field notes is the extent to which this affected my experience in the field. While this methodology needed to be responsive to the context, it needed to be articulated and explained in an accessible way to both adult and child participants. There are numerous references in my notes to reviewing and reflecting on how I narrated the aim, objectives and study process to adult and child participants. The field-notes highlight the various iterations and developments of the narrative used throughout the process. My field-notes refer to the refinement of language and discourse as I moved between research sites. For example, language that was well-received and accessible to children in one site was repeated in other sites.

My collaboration with the EYP participants was crucial in co-creating a child-friendly narrative account of the study and there are many reflections on the significance of the expertise and professionalism of the EYPs in helping me to manage this. I reflected on the added value of their contributions in my diary and speculated on how different the experience in the field may have been without this expert input by EYPs. Another reflection that is linked to the role of the EYPs within the process is the language they used when introducing me to the children. Many of the EYPs referred to me as *'our friend'*, and this appeared to offer reassurance to the children that this newcomer was trusted by the EYPs, and therefore their engagement with me was universally positive from the beginning of the process. I observed and recorded that the child participants took their cues on how to approach me from the attitudes and responses of EYPs. I reflected on the issue of scientific robustness in the data collection process in this respect and if there was concern that because I was presented as a *'friend'* of the gatekeepers, the participants were more likely to respond in a particular way. Overall, I realised that in a participatory process such as was undertaken for this study, it was natural that participation would generate positive attitudes towards the process, and that participants would express this during the consultation activities.

There are references in my reflective journal to a continuum of understandings that participant cohorts had of the research process. CYPSC participants, partly because of their position in the chronology appeared to me to have a clearer perspective on the full data collection process then EYPs. The children's apparent understandings on the research element varied, and it is impossible to be fully accurate about the extent of each child participant's full understandings

of the research process. The field notes indicated that some children were curious about the research element, asking questions such as *'who will you tell about what we said?'* Unpacking the research and practice components was most challenging for me with the child participants, and I was impressed by the support offered by EYPs in ensuring that children were informed about the study and its purpose in a developmentally appropriate and accessible manner.

I recorded reflections on the increasing levels of enjoyment and fun and decreasing levels of stress and anxiety that I experienced during the consultations. Sessions were short but busy, with multiple interactions and conversations, singing, children telling stories and anecdotes, distractions, sounds of laughter and arguments, children moving about the room, and coming and going from the session. Listening back to the recordings of the sessions and reflecting on the fieldwork notes it was clear that the sessions were enjoyable to children and EYPs, even if when they appeared to me to be frantic and chaotic at times. As the sessions progressed, I became more relaxed with the high levels of activity as it became obvious that the children were demonstrably engaging with the data collection activities. By session two in each site, I had developed a strategy for managing my anxieties around the activity levels and was having fun and enjoying the process. Again, this is due in no small part to the reassurance offered by the EYPs. A reflection for future research with young children is that young children will engage in their own way and pace, rather than in any predictable or expected manner. Certainly, I did not sufficiently allow for this in my research design, to the extent in which it unfolded over the process. I did not recognise soon enough that what I initially perceived to be 'chaos' was an observation on how young children participate in these types of processes.

Linked to this point is the concern that the status of the children's data may be limited, in comparison to the adult data. The children's data was collected in a different format to the adult data; it took the form of audio recordings and transcripts of consultation sessions and child conferencing, field artefacts and observational notes. There was substantially less qualitative data to transcribe from child participants then from the adult cohorts, and this required a more flexible and inclusive approach during data analysis. To ensure that the children's data set was given equal status to the other data types, I employed a considered approach to analysis, drawing on a hybrid approach as set out in Chapter Four.

9.4 Reflecting on my role within the study

9.4.1 Introduction

This reflection considers my dual role as researcher and practitioner in the conduct of this study. It considers the nature of the facilitated process that is at the centre of this study, and considers my own contribution to, and influence on, that process. This includes the idea of the co-creation of the process and the reciprocal contributions of researcher and participants to the process, and to the experiences of the young child participants.

9.4.2 The dual role of researcher and practitioner

These consultations had the dual function of being a 'real-world' facilitation of young children's participation in a decision-making process, and a data-source for this study. In other words, the consultations would likely have taken place even if the study did not. A researcher's positionality describes both their world view and their position within study and its social and political contexts (Holmes, 2020). This position influences how the research is conducted and impacts on its findings (Rowe, 2014). As I built a research study around a collaborative consultation process in practice contexts in which I was not a member of, but was familiar with, this type of positionality cannot be accurately described as 'insider' (Bonner and Tolhurst, 2002), or as an 'outsider (Bridges, 2017); perhaps more as 'associate' or *'somewhere in between'* (Breen 2007: 164). At various points in the process, I assumed the role of non-participant observer, participant-observer, and practitioner-participant, while maintaining a research role across all phases. The interactions between the role of researcher and practitioner were more noticeable and challenging at several points in the process. These included:

- The recruitment process: There were different and at times competing aims and objectives arising from the practice component that I had embedded within my study. This was challenging during recruitment of EYP participants, who needed additional clarity on the precise elements of the process that were study related, and those concerned only with the practice-based project. An example of this is that the confidentially conferred on EYP sites as part of my study differed from that normally expected within a similar (non-research) practice project.

-The planning phases: The extent to which EYP and child participants engaged in planning in my study would not be a normal feature of a practice-based project. That the planning phase was part of the research design meant I needed to ensure that EYPs felt supported and that their

participation in planning was recognised by me as enhancing the data collection processes with children. The co-creation of the consultation sessions with participants is a distinguishing feature of this methodology and reflects the level of collaboration that is required for this type of process to be meaningful and productive for all parties.

-Managing the outputs of the consultation process: The expectations of my employer were that I would capture the views of young children on their health and well-being needs during a consultation process, and then report back to the CYPSC working group. As such, I moved between researcher and practitioner roles when managing the children's contributions as a data source for my study as well as being an output of the consultation process. I needed to account for the dual function of the children's contributions and recognised that this had the potential to cause confusion to child participants if not handled carefully and appropriately. As with the other role related issues, I recorded all occurrences where there was the potential for role confusion in my field diary and reflected on any potential conflicts that arose. Most of the issues related to this point were resolved with the support of EYPs who advised me on the language and form of wording that I could use to ensure the children were clear about what was going to happen with the outputs of the consultation activities.

9.4.3 My influence on data collection

During the recruitment phase of this study, I informed EYP participants that I was inviting their contributions to the planning as well as the facilitation of the consultation process with young child participants. This request drew on a PAR approach to research and was central to idea of a co-created process. This was welcomed by EYP participants whose contributions were significant in supporting the design and implementation of the consultation sessions. My own contributions were recognisable within the PAR approach, in terms of providing the initial invitation to EYPs to become participants, and in guiding their contributions through the capacity development process at the beginning of the planning process. This supported EYPs to engage with children's participation as a theoretical concept, and to explore their attitudes and beliefs before the planning got underway. It also allowed me to review the prevailing beliefs towards children's participation and to get a sense of the areas which may need further discussion or consideration. In turn, EYPs guided me towards the pedagogical priorities and insights that were instrumental in shaping the design of the consultation process. Additionally, I was able to provide the platform for the children's contributions to reach the decision-makers, which was significant to the process. Therefore, it is difficult to speak to the exact dimensions

of my own influence on the process without acknowledging the reciprocal nature of the interactions, learnings, and relationships between researcher and EYP participants in this study.

9.5 Research Limitations

In this section I set out and discuss the identified limitations in my study.

As set out in Chapter Four, I sampled research sites from a publicly available list of services in Co. Roscommon. Managers of ECCE services self-identified as interested, which may indicate that that they already were positively disposed to the concept of child participation in decision-making. They may already have had confidence in the capacity of their staff to support a consultation process. Therefore, they may not be typical of all early years' services in Ireland in relation to their participation practices and understandings.

EYP participants who self-identified as research participants were not fully representative of the sector in respect of their academic qualifications. More than half (7 of the 13) of participants were educated to a level 8 degree, which is higher than the average number of degree holders (25%) across the ECCE sector (Pobal, 2019). These EYPs may have been more motivated to participate and may have had deeper theoretical understanding of how to support child participation processes, due to their higher levels of qualifications.

There was a gender imbalance across both EYP and CYPSC participant cohorts. The EYP cohort is predominantly female, which is in line with the profile of the sector in Ireland (Pobal, 2019). One male participant took part in the study, which is a higher representation of male EYPs than would be expected in the general EYP population[14]. Having one male EYP participant is not presented as a limitation, however, the predominance of female EYP participants suggests that the data collected may have been highly gendered. Additionally, the CYPSC participant cohort were predominantly female. Of the seven CYPSC participants, one was male. This is to be expected as health and social services staff tends to be predominantly female (Callaghan et al., 2018) but leads to the possibility of more gendered data being collected and analysed. The gender balance of the children who took part in the research process is broadly in line with the gender distribution of the broader population (CSO, 2016). Slightly more girls than boys received parental consent to take part in the process (62 girls and 58 boys participated in the study).

[14] 1% of EYPs in Ireland are male (Pobal 2019).

I employed a multi-method qualitative approach as my study was concerned with experiences, understandings, and interactions. These are areas that are best suited to a qualitative methodology, and best investigated using a mix of traditional and innovative qualitative methods. However, this may represent somewhat of a limitation to the generalisability of the findings.

I identified my positionality as a practitioner or associate-researcher as both a strength and a limitation. I was able to observe decision-making processes at a strategic level and this allowed the study to occur within a strategic policy process context, rather than a generating a process for the purposes of a research project. It is highly unlikely this study could have been conducted outside of such a professional practice context. However, as the data collection activities were an aspect of my professional practice, there were times when my role as researcher and practitioner overlapped as discussed in Section 9.4.2. This was challenging as there was always a risk of over-identifying as practitioner or researcher. As an early career researcher, it was extremely important that I recorded my reflections on the interchangeability of the role to ensure a robust research process. This was achieved through reflective notes and memos, however the risk of cross-over between roles was a constant challenge and this may have distracted me at some critical points in the data collection process. Similarly, there may be a perception of bias on my behalf, as I was so professionally integrated into the process and had a reputational interest in the successful conclusion of the child consultations, as well as the direct research elements. In articulating the research aim, I was clear to participants that the study was interested in the consultation process itself, rather than the quality of the outputs of the processes, even though producing useful information for the CYPSC working group was important to me as practitioner. By employing multiple data sources, I hoped to validate the study design by acknowledging that the potential for the perception of researcher bias exists but was accounted for within the design. However, I do not claim that the data analysis process undertaken was entirely objective or value-free, and in many ways the data analysis overlapped with my perspectives and positionality in the same way as the data collection.

9.6 Recommendations for policy and practice

This study has demonstrated a clearly expressed emphasis on the significance of relationships and interactions as contributing factors in the development of autonomy in the young child, and as enablers for their participatory capacities. As a result, the following recommendations

are offered to policymakers and practitioners concerned with young children's participation in strategic policy development.

1. The development of a national participatory policy framework and toolkit that responds to the unique dimensions of young children's participation across the spectrum of decision-making processes.

2. Consideration of the ethical aspects of participation in future Codes of Ethics for EYPs and in ethical guidance for decision makers.

3. Acknowledging the tensions and contradictions inherent in participatory processes with young children and offering support for practitioners though the early years' frameworks and guidance for decision-makers.

4. Explicitly recognising young children as stakeholders, where appropriate, in CYPSC guidance documents and in the broader strategic policy development infrastructure.

5. Integrating capacity development processes for adult actors in participatory structures to support and enhance young children's participatory experiences.

6. Focussing on the complexities of facilitating young children's participation in future EYP training and education programmes.

9.7 Programme of future research

This study has revealed several areas and concepts that could be further explored and investigated in future research projects. These projects could clarify and further develop our understandings of the role of children who empower and support their peers in participatory process. They could foster a developed understanding of the ethical dimensions of child participation with a particular focus on the ethical issues of employing observations in decision-making and planning processes, including whether they are problematic in terms of children's participation rights. Further, while the concept of power was beyond the scope of this study, the findings of this study present an opportunity to further develop a research project that considers how adults manage power, and how young children and adults can share power in participatory processes. Understanding more about the way in which power is an aspect of young children's participation would add another dimension to the findings presented here. Therefore, further study of this topic from the lens of rights, power and ethics is recommended to build on the findings of this research project.

9.8 Concluding Reflections

In this study my overarching question was whether it is possible for young children to participate autonomously in a strategic policy development process. The study has revealed that young children can engage autonomously in such a process, once their emerging autonomy is supported in a relational and ethical process. The findings show that young children have the capacity to become stakeholders in decisions that will affect their lives, and they should be consulted in participatory processes to support policy development. The process must be an ethical one, but even still we will face tensions and contradictions in working towards such a process. Participatory processes need to scaffold and buttress young children's emerging autonomy and participation capacities, so that children are protected as well as empowered. Scaffolding facilitates their engagement with complex concepts and supports them to contribute meaningfully to policy development. Unique to this study is the revelation that young children with well-developed autonomy and language skills can support their peers in these processes, but the potential for some children to dominate proceedings must be recognised and handled carefully by facilitators of participatory processes. These findings contribute to our understanding of both the relational and ethical aspects of young children's participation, as well as the value of collaboration for facilitators of these processes.

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Appendices

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Appendix 1

Research Design aligned with objectives

Aim	Objectives	Literature	Methods	Data	Analysis 3 chapters;	Findings /discussion
To research if it is possible for young children to participate autonomously in policy development processes	1. To study the participation of young children in a policy-development process, examining how young children autonomously construct and express their views when involved in such a process. 2. To research the experiences and understandings of Early Years' Practitioners who facilitated a consultation process with young children, and to explore how it affected their understandings, values and practices towards participation	(1) Children's rights, children's agency and autonomy, young children's participation. (2) Literature on decision making practices involving young children and EY practitioners at a number of conceptual levels.	(1) Observations, consultation sessions and group interviews with children. (2) Reflective journals and reflective meetings with staff; capacity building sessions; Observations; semi structured interviews.	(1) Reflective and observational material, children's art, transcripts of interviews. (2) Transcripts of reflective meetings and journal entries; Researcher's observational notes and reflective journal; Transcripts of qualitative interviews	(1) Transcripts etc- thematic analysis/ hybrid approach. Interpretation of children's data will be informed by the literature. (2) EYPs data- hybrid approach-participation and relational autonomy theories. Analyse using thematic analysis.	(1) Discussion on what the data tells us about how young children autonomously construct and express their views on their health and well-being, when involved in participatory consultation processes. (2) Discussion on the perspectives Early Years' Practitioners who engaged in the process and to explore the impact on their learning, understandings, values and practices arising from these experiences.

	3. To understand the perspectives of local policymakers on the participation of young children in policy development processes and to examine the impact of the views of young children on their decisions.	(3) Literature on collaborative and interagency working; decision making in public policymaking. Impact of young children's participation on decision making.	(3) Capacity building session; observation at meetings; semi structured interviews.	(3) Observational notes, minutes of meetings. Transcripts of qualitative interviews; Final draft of Early Years' Strategy	3) CYPSC data- hybrid approach drawing on participation and relational autonomy theories. Analyse using thematic analysis	3) Discussion of the perspectives of decision makers on the participation of young children in consultation processes and the impact on their decision-making processes
	4. To develop a model of consultation and participation that can be employed by decision-makers when seeking the views of young children.					(4) model developed from findings and discussion and informed by the literature

Appendix 2
Information Pack and Consent Form for Managers of Early Years Services

The Early Years' service you manage is being invited to take part in a research study carried out as part of a PhD degree at NUI Galway. The title of the research study is: *'A study of young children's participation in policy development processes in the context of Roscommon CYPSC'*

This is an Information Sheet that aims to address any concerns you may have about the study and your services involvement in the study. Please feel free to ask further questions if you wish.

Who am I?

Marie Gibbons is a Ph.D. student from the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, at the National University Ireland, Galway. This research centre works with children, young people and the people involved in their lives to reveal the things that matter to children, and what can be done to improve their childhood. Marie works with Tusla as a researcher supporting the work of the Children and Young People's Services Committee (CYPSC) in Roscommon. This committee is made up of representatives from agencies and services who deliver services to children and families, and who work in a collaborative interagency manner to deliver more effective services in the county. There is an early years' representative on this committee from Roscommon Child Care Committee. Roscommon CYPSC is in the process of consulting stakeholders as part of the development of an Early Years' Health and Well-being Strategy for the county and the consultation sessions with young children held in your service will be part of that process.

What is this research study about?

This study intends to explore how young children, Early Years' Practitioners and policymakers experience the process of participating in consultation process on their health and well-being needs. Therefore, the participation of each group in this research is important to the success of this study. This is why you are being invited to take part in this study.

As part of the study Marie will:

- Invite you and/or two of your staff to attend a focus group at a time and place that suits the service.
- Deliver a capacity development workshop in your service to all interested staff
- Work with two of your staff to plan and facilitate a consultation session with children about their health and well-being needs in the service.
- Work with the children in planning the consultation process
- Co-facilitate the consultation sessions in your service
- Ask two of your staff to complete reflective journals.
- Interview two of your staff members about their experiences of taking part in the consultations.

If you decide to take part, you will be asked to:

Sign a consent form indicating your agreement that staff and children in your service can participate in the study; that you understand what is expected of you; that you will host a capacity development session in your service; that two of your staff members can keep reflective diaries, take part in a focus group and a semi structured interview that may last up to 1 hour; that staff will distribute information packs to the parent/guardian/carer of all the children in the participating room (s). Marie will conduct the interviews and audio record them to help her remember what has been said for analysis purposes.

Will the information be confidential?
Marie will be the only researcher who will collect data and analyse the information for this study. The findings will be published as a thesis and may appear in research journals or in other publications. To ensure that your participation remains confidential, real names will not be used. People and places involved in the study will be assigned an identification number and a pseudonym to be used in the research. In addition to this, direct identifiers such as the name of the local area will not be used. The only exception in relation to confidentiality will occur if any child protection concerns arise, or if a child states that they wish to harm themselves or others. This information will be reported to the Designated Person in the service and in the Child and Family Research Centre. Where a report is made, the child's parent/guardian/carer must be informed.

Will other staff and practices in my service in other areas be monitored during this process?
The researcher is primarily interested in the experiences of those staff in your service who are participating in the research activities, and any impact on their own practice that may arise from these experiences, going forward. She will not be concerned with the normal day to day practices of staff, daily interactions between other staff and children, or practices in other areas in the service. However, should the researcher become concerned that she is observing poor or dangerous practice in any of these areas, or practice that breaches the Preschool Regulations (2006) she is obliged to make a report to you as the manager of the service, and the Early Years' Inspection Team in Tusla. In the unlikely event that this occurs, the researcher will advise the practitioner of her intentions and any action she will be taking before making a report to you, the manager. You can be assured that your staff's normal practice with the children will not be commented on by the researcher unless it falls into the category of poor or dangerous practice or breaches the Preschool Regulations.

Does your service have to take part?
Your service does not have to take part in this research however, by taking part in this study you have an opportunity to contribute to the understandings of how young children, early years' practitioners, and policymakers experience the process of participating in a community consultation. This may impact on future practices in the area and potentially inform government policy regarding early childhood care and education. If you agree to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. You will receive a copy of this information sheet and a consent form to keep for your records. Please remember that if you agree to take part in this study, you can change your mind without participating, at any point without needing to give a reason.

What if you have further questions or want to talk more about this?

Marie will gladly answer any of your questions or talk you through the study. If you would like her to do so, please contact her.

Marie Gibbons
Doctoral Researcher,
Child and Family Research Centre,
School of Political Science and Sociology,
National University of Ireland, Galway Email: marie.gibbons@nuigalway.ie

Tusla Child and Family Agency
Dublin Road, Tuam Co Galway
Email: marie.gibbons@Tusla.ie

If you have any reservations or complaints about this study and wish to contact someone independent and in confidence, you may contact the Chairperson of the NUI Galway: Research Ethics Committee.
Chairperson,
Research Ethics Committee,
C/o Office of the Vice President for Research,
National University Ireland, Galway Email: ethics@nuigalway.ie

Consent form

Name and Address of Participating Early Years' Service:
Name of Manager:

____
Please initial box if in agreement with statement

1. I confirm that I have read the Information Sheet provided to me regarding the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. ☐

2. I am satisfied that I understand the information provided and have had enough time to consider the information. ☐

3. I agree that the service will host a capacity building session for all interested staff. ☐

4. I agree that staff members in the service can take part in an interview with the researcher and I agree to the interview being recorded, or otherwise transcribed. ☐

5. I agree that the researcher can spend time in the service when the research activities are being planned and conducted. ☐

6. I understand that my service's participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw consent at any time without giving any reason, without my legal rights being affected. ☐

7. I understand that any input from staff or children in my service will be anonymous and that the findings will be published as a thesis by the researcher and may appear in research journals or in other publications. ☐

Name:
Signature:
Date:
For researcher's use only
Study site Identity Number: ________

Appendix 3

Information Pack and Consent Form for Early Years' Practitioners

You are being invited to take part in a research study entitled *'A study of young children's participation in policy development processes in the context of* Roscommon *CYPSC'.* This Information Pack aims to address any questions or concerns you may have about the study. Please feel free to ask further questions if you wish.

Who am I?
Marie Gibbons is a Ph.D. student from the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, at the National University Ireland, Galway. This research centre works with children, young people and the people involved in their lives to reveal the things that matter to children, and what can be done to improve their childhood. Marie works with Tusla, The Child and Family Agency, as a researcher supporting the work of the Children and Young Peoples' Services Committee in Roscommon. This committee is made up of representatives from agencies and services who deliver services to children and families, and who work in a collaborative interagency manner to deliver more effective services in the county. There is an early years' representative on this committee from Roscommon Child Care Committee. Roscommon CYPSC is in the process of consulting stakeholders as part of the development of an Early Years' Health and Well-being Strategy for the county and the consultation sessions with young children held in your service will be part of that process.

What is this research study about?
This study intends to explore how young children, early years' practitioners and policymakers experience the process of participating in a collaborative community consultation about their health and well-being needs. Therefore, the participation of each group in this research is important to the success of this study. This is why you are being invited to take part in this study.

As Part of the study, Marie will:

- Arrange a focus group for participants
- Deliver a capacity development workshop in the service to all interested staff
- Work with you and other staff members to set up consultation sessions with children about their health and well-being needs
- Ask you to complete reflective journals
- Interview you about your experiences of taking part in the activities and consultations.

If you decide to take part, you will be expected to:

- Sign a consent form indicating that you understand what is expected of you and that agree to take part.
- Pass on in person, pre-prepared information packs to a parent/ caregiver of each of the children in your room.
- Attend a focus group at a time and location that is suitable, and that will last approximately 1 to 1 ½ hours.

- Attend a capacity building session in your service that will last approximately 45 mins to an hour.
- Work with Marie to set up the consultation session with the children in your room
- Agree that Marie can be present in the room during the sessions
- Always remain in the room when Marie is there
- Keep reflective diaries on the activities that take place during the consultation session and share them with Marie at the end of the process.
- Take part in an interview that will last approx. one hour, at a time and venue that suits you. Marie will conduct this interview and audio record it to help her remember what has been said for analysis purposes.

Do you have to take part?

You do not have to take part in this research however, by taking part in this study you have an opportunity to contribute to the understandings of how young children, early years' practitioners, and policymakers experience the process of participating in a consultation process. This may impact on future practices in the area and potentially inform government policy. If you agree to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. You will receive a copy of this information sheet and a consent form to keep for your records. Please remember that if you agree to take part in this study, you can change your mind without participating, at any point without needing to give a reason.

Will the information be confidential?

Marie will be the only researcher who will collect data and analyse this information for this study. The findings will be published as a thesis and may appear in research journals or in other publications. To ensure that your participation remains confidential, real names will not be used. People and places involved in the study will be assigned an identification number and a pseudonym will be used in the research. In addition to this, direct identifiers such as the name of the local area, etc, will not be reported. The only exception in relation to confidentiality will occur if any child protection concerns arise, or if a child states that they wish to harm themselves or others. This information will be reported to the Designated Person in the service and in the Child and Family Research Centre. Where a report is made, the child's parent/guardian/carer must be informed.

Will my practice in other areas be observed during this process? The researcher is interested in your experiences during the research activities, and any impact on practice that may arise from these experiences, going forward, and will not be concerned with your normal day-to-day practice or interactions with children. However, should the researcher become concerned that she is observing poor or dangerous practice, or practice that breaches the Preschool Regulations (2016) she is obliged to make a report to the manager of the services, and the Early Years' Inspection Team in Tusla. In the unlikely event that this occurs, the researcher will advise the practitioner of her intentions and any action she will be taking. You can be assured that your normal practice with the children will not be commented on, to you, your manager or the Early Years' Inspection Team, by the researcher unless it falls into the category of poor or dangerous practice or breaches the Preschool Regulations (2016).

What if you have further questions or want to talk more about this?

Marie will gladly answer any of your questions or talk you through the study. If you would like her to do so, please contact her.

(See appendix 2 for how contact details were presented).

Consent Form

Name of Early Years' Practitioner:

____

Please initial box if in agreement with statement.

1. I confirm that I have read the Information Sheet provided to me regarding the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. ☐

2. I am satisfied that I understand the information provided and have had enough time to consider the information. ☐

3. I agree to take part in a focus group, and a semi structured one to one interview with the researcher, and I agree to both interviews being audio recorded. ☐

4. I agree that the researcher can spend time in the room I work in during the sessions. ☐

5. I agree to contribute to the design of the research activities and child consultation session that will take place in the service and to act as a co-researcher during the data collection phase. ☐

6. I agree to attend a capacity building session ☐

7. I agree to complete a short reflective diary after the daily sessions and to share this diary with the researcher. ☐

8. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. ☐

9. I understand that my input will be anonymous and that the findings will be published as a thesis by the researcher and may appear in research journals or in other publications. ☐

Name:
Signature:
Date:

For researcher's use only Participant Identity Number: ________

Appendix 4

Information pack and consent form for CYPSC participants

As a committee member of Roscommon CYPSC Early Years Health and Well-being working group, you are being you work in are being invited to take part in a research study carried out as part of a Ph.D. degree at NUI Galway. The title of the research is: *'A study of young children's participation in policy development processes in the context of Roscommon CYPSC'.*

This Information Sheet aims to address any questions or concerns you may have about the study. Please feel free to ask further questions if you wish.

Who am I?
Marie Gibbons is a Ph.D. student from the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, at the National University Ireland, Galway. This research centre works with children, young people and the people involved in their lives to reveal the things that matter to children, and what can be done to improve their childhood. Marie works with Tusla as a researcher supporting the work of Roscommon Children and Young People Services Committee (CYPSC). As a member of a CYPSC working group, you will be familiar with the core purpose of the committee which to oversee the delivery of more effective and appropriate services to children and young people in the city and county, within a collaborative interagency format. You are aware that the working group is currently overseeing the development of an Early Years' Health and Well-being Strategy for Roscommon, and are planning to conduct consultation with stakeholders, including young children.

What is this research study about?
This study intends to explore how young children, early years' practitioners and policymakers experience the process of participating in this consultation process. Therefore, the participation of each group in this research is important to the success of this study. This is why you are being invited to take part in this study.

As part of the study Marie will:

- Invite you to attend a focus group with other working group members at a time and location that is suitable and acceptable to you and the researcher
- Deliver a capacity development workshop on the participation of children in decision making during one of the working group's meetings
- Work with the children and early years' practitioners who are taking part in the study to conduct a consultation with young children on their health and well-being needs and present the children's contributions to the CYPSC working group at one of the meetings
- Interview you at a time and location that is suitable and acceptable to you and the researcher, to explore your views on child participation in decision making more generally, and your views on the children's contribution to the development of the strategy, the process undertaken to develop the plan and your responses to the plan.

If you decide to take part, you will be expected to:

- Discuss and agree your involvement in the study with your line manager, if appropriate and/ or if required to do so by your organisation's research policies and protocols.

- Sign a consent form indicating that you agree to participate in the study; that you understand what is expected of you, have been provided with information on the study, and that agree that you will attend a focus group, a capacity building session, review the children's contributions, and take part in a semi structured interview with the researcher that will be audio- recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

Will the information be confidential?

Marie will be the only researcher who will collect data and analyse this information for this study. The findings will be published as a thesis and may appear in research journals or in other publications. To ensure that that your participation remains confidential, real names will not be used. People and places involved in the study will be assigned an identification number and a pseudonym to be used in the research. In addition to this, direct identifiers such job titles, the name of your organisation, as the name of the geographical area you work in will not be reported. The only exception in relation to confidentiality will occur if any child protection concerns arose during the research. This information will be reported to the Designated Person in the service and in the Child and Family Research Centre. Where a report is made, the child's parent/guardian/carer must be informed.

Do you have to take part?

You do not have to take part in this research however, by taking part in this study you have an opportunity to contribute to the understandings of how young children, early years' practitioners, and policymakers experience the process of participating in a community consultation. This may impact on future practices in the area and potentially inform government policy regarding the participation of young children in decision making at strategic policy level. If you agree to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. You will receive a copy of this information sheet and a consent form to keep for your records. Please remember that if you agree to take part in this study, you can change your mind without participating, at any point without needing to give a reason.

What if you have further questions or want to talk more about this study?

Marie will gladly answer any of your questions or talk you through the study. If you would like her to do so, please contact her.

Contact details provided as per Appendix 2.

Consent Form

Name of CYPSC Committee Member
Name of Organisation:

____

Please initial box if in agreement with statement.

1. I confirm that I have read the Information Sheet provided to me regarding the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. ☐

2. I am satisfied that I understand the information provided and have had enough time to consider the information. ☐

3. I agree to take part in a focus group and a one-to-one interview with the researcher and I agree to both interviews being audio recorded. ☐

4. I agree to attend a capacity building session ☐

5. I agree to review the children's plan as presented by the researcher to the CYPSC ☐

6. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. ☐

8. I understand that my input will be anonymous and that the findings will be published as a thesis by the researcher and may appear in research journals or in other publications. ☐

Name:
Signature:
Date:
For researcher's use only
Participant Identity Number: ________

Appendix 5
Information pack and consent form for parents/ caregivers

Your child has been invited to take part in a study carried out as part of a Ph.D. degree at NUI Galway. The title of the research study is *'A study of young children's participation in policy development processes in the context of Roscommon CYPSC'.*

This is a participant information sheet that aims to address any questions concerns you may have, should you agree to your child's participation in this study.

Who am I?
Marie Gibbons is a Ph.D. student from the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, at the National University Ireland, Galway. This research centre works with children, young people and the people involved in their lives to reveal the things that matter to children, and what can be done to improve their childhood. Marie works with Tusla as a researcher supporting the work of the Children and Young People's Services Committee in Roscommon. This committee is made up of representatives from agencies and services who deliver services to children and families, and who work in together to plan and deliver more effective services in the county.

What is the study about?

In this study, we are trying to find out what participation in a consultation process is like for young children, early years' practitioners, and policymakers. We are trying to find out how the views of young children on their health and well-being impact on policymakers' decisions. Finding out how children experience a consultation session may make it easier for children to express their views and help decision makers take their views into account. There will be no questions asked of the children about their home or family life. Your child's participation in this research is very important to the success of this study. This is why your child is being invited to take part in this study.

Does your child have to take part?

Your child does not have to take part in this research. If your child does not want to take part, or if you do not agree to their participation, there will be another activity organised for your child so they will not feel they are missing out. Marie will check with your child when she is in the service to make sure they are still happy to take part in that day's activities. If they are not happy to take part on the day, they will be able to join in another activity in the service.

If you decide that your child can take part, they will be given the opportunity to:

- Take part in health and well-being focused group activities, including perhaps art, photography, or stories for a short period of time on one or two days. These group activities will be integrated into the normal pre-school programme and will not interfere in any way with the learning your child is receiving in the service. Your child will be used to taking part in themed activities so having a theme of health and well-being should not cause any disruption to your child's normal enjoyment of going to preschool. The Early

Years' staff will always stay with children, and normal ratios of adult to children will be observed.

- Take part in a group interview (like a conversation in a circle time).

What your child has to say is extremely important. If you agree that they can take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. You will receive a copy of this information sheet and a signed consent form to keep for your records. Please remember that if you agree that your child can take part in this study, you can change your mind about their participation at any point without needing to give a reason. However, by taking part they have an opportunity to participate in a consultation about their health and well-being needs and preferences and tell decision makers what they think. This may improve services in the area and may help inform policy on listening to children's views.

Will the information be confidential?

Marie will be the only person who will collect data and analyse this information for this study. The findings will be published as a thesis and may appear in research journals or in other publications. To ensure that what your child says remains confidential, your child's real name will not be used in any written report. Everyone involved in the study will be assigned an identification number and a false name to be used when reporting anything they have said. Also, the name of the area in which your child lives, and the name of the preschool will be removed from the data. The only exception in relation to confidentiality will occur if any child protection concerns arise. This information will be reported to the Designated Person in the pre-school and in the Child and Family Research Centre. Where a report is made the child's parent/guardian/carer must be informed.

What if you have more questions or want to talk more about this?
Marie will gladly answer any of your questions or talk you through the study. If you would like her to do so, please contact her.

Contact details provided as per Appendix 2.

Consent Form Parents/ Caretakers

Name of Child _________________________________
Name of Parent/ Caregiver_________________________

If you agree to your child's participation in this study, your child will be invited by the researcher to participate in a series of health and well-being themed consultations in their preschool. These consultations may involve activities such as photography, art, stories, or games depending on the decisions made by children, in conjunction with the researcher and the Early Years' Practitioners in your child's service. Finally, with your agreement your child may be invited to take part in a circle-time discussion with the researcher about their experiences of participating in the consultations. If you do not want your child to be invited to take part in any aspect of the research, you do not need to return the form.

Please initial the relevant boxes- You may opt to include your child in some, or all aspects of the research. I<u>t would be very helpful if you could return the form to the centre within one week.</u>

1. I confirm that I have read the information sheet and I am satisfied that I have had enough time to consider the information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. ☐

2. I agree that my child can take part in the consultation activities and can be observed by the researcher whilst doing so. ☐

3. I agree that my child can be invited by the researcher to take part in a short group 'circle time' interview with other children in the service, about their experiences of taking part in the consultation session. ☐

4. I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time without giving any reason, without my legal rights being affected ☐

Your Name: ___________________________ Your Signature: ___________________

Date:

For researcher's use only

Participant Identity Number: ________

Appendix 6

Email Recruitment Script- CYPSC

Dear (insert name)

As you may already know, I am a Ph.D. student in N.U.I. Galway, as well as working with Roscommon CYPSC who oversee the Early Years' Health and Well-being working group of which you are a member. I am getting in touch today to invite you to participate in my study. This study is about the participation of young children in a consultation process on young children's health and well-being as part of the development of the Roscommon Early Years Health and Well-being strategy.

If you decide to participate in the study, I will invite you to attend a focus group with other participants from the working group. I will facilitate a capacity development session during a scheduled working group meeting. Once the consultations with children have been completed, I will present their contributions to the working group. I would like to then invite you to take part in an interview after this happens.

Please remember that your participation is completely voluntary. You can choose to be in the study or not. If you would like to find out more about this study and discuss your possible involvement, I would appreciate if you would indicate this by reply. Once I receive a response indicating your interest in the study, I will arrange to phone you to discuss this further.

If you have any further questions before this conversation here are my contact details

Kind regards

Appendix 7

Focus Group Interview Schedule CYPSC and EYP

Date:	**Participants (initials)**
Topic Area	**Details**
Preamble to focus group	Opens with a welcome, an acknowledgement of their attendance and an introduction. Participants are told of the time frame, and that the session will be recorded. Confidentiality is emphasised. The purpose of the sessions is set out as obtaining the perspectives of study participants on child consultation and participation in decision making.
Q.1 What is your awareness of Article 12 of the UNCRC on the child's right to participate in decision-making on matters that affect their lives?	A copy of the text of Article 12 is provided as a prompt.
Q.2 If you are aware, what do you think about this right?	Probes: Your understandings of participatory rights as part of broader child rights agenda
3. How does this respecting this right affect policy and practice in your organisations/services?	Probes: what is the general approach to child participation? Is this right fully respected? Examples?
4. Have you experiences of the participation of children on in decision making processes to date?	If no/ few examples, why might this be?
5. What are your thoughts and experiences of practice to date in relation to consulting with, and listening to the views of, young children?	Focus discussion on young children. If few/no examples why? What are the differences between experiences of child participation of young children when compared with older children/ teenagers
6. What are the barriers to the participation of young children in decision making?	Probes: lack of capacity, age, verbal abilities, adult attitudes, deficits in the environment, training. Anything else?
7. What are the enablers for this?	Probes; as above, environment, resources.
8. What is the role of adults in supporting young children to form and express a viewpoint?	Probes: your role as decision-maker or facilitator? What should happen when their views are expressed?
9. What are your views on the capacities of young children to express a viewpoint on issues that might affect them?	Probes; autonomy, agency, development, age, verbal abilities?
10. How can children who cannot express a view verbally be facilitated to participate?	Probes: voice of the child, young children, children with disabilities, children with ESL.
11. What is the impact of views of children (specifically young children) on decision-making processes to date?	Probes: does not have to be own experiences or examples can be anecdotal or from practice rather than strategic/policy development
12. How important is it that EYPs are helping me to design the upcoming	Probes: Does it reassure you? Are you neutral? Will it help? How?

consultation with young children on their health and well-being needs?	
13. How likely do you think it is that the consultations with young children will be successful?	Probes: productive? Provide information that can support decision-making? Could it be successful as a participatory process but perhaps not productive?
14. How will you know if it has been successful?	Probes: quality of outputs? Coherence of children's contributions? New information? Novelty of ideas?
15. What areas of your planning and decision-making do you think the views of young children likely to impact on?	Probes: Supporting decision making? Showing that we are participatory? Improving services generally? Providing evidence of young children's autonomy? Supporting other participatory processes? Strengthening our participatory approaches? Anything else?

Appendix 8

Sample from Capacity Development Session

CONSULTING WITH AND LISTENING TO YOUNG CHILDREN

Capacity building session

Content

Listening to Children

Why and how we listen and include children in decision-making

The UNCRC and Children's Participation Rights

Challenges for Adults

Benefits for children

Principles of participation

The Lundy model

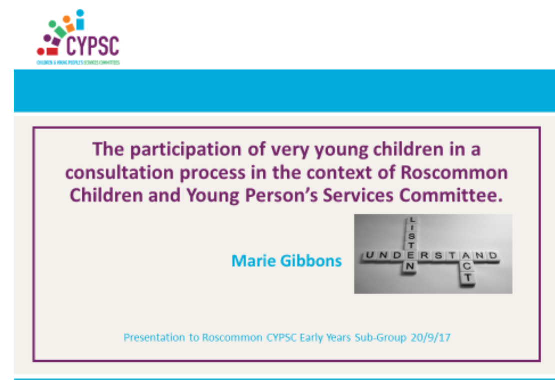
The focus of this consultation

Theme of consultation

Practical matters

Appendix 9

Sample of slides from presentation to CYPSC



Consultation Process

- Information Sharing and relationship building
- Capacity Building sessions
- Meeting the children
- Planning the consultations
- Consent and assent
- The consultation sessions
- The children's contribution

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The Activities

- Initial Health and Welling Game/ Activity Designed by EYPs and CYPSC

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Messages from young children to inform health and well-being strategy

Young children recognise that there are some basics that they need to be healthy and feel happy. They told us that they need us adults to make sure that EVERYDAY (and very often during the day)

- They get hugs and cuddles from grownups who care about them,
- they spend time with mammy and/or daddy having fun,
- they have lots of laughter
- they get enough sleep,
- they get lots of water to drink,
- they are reminded and helped to brush their teeth,
- they are reminded and helped to wash their hands after using the toilet and before they eat their meals,
- they get lots of fresh air,
- they eat lots of fresh fruit and vegetables and healthy food,
- that they get story time during the day and especially at night before bed.

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Appendix 10

Observation Recording Tool

Site	Start time	Stop time	No of adults present	No of children present
Context- what is happening				
Interactions Who is involved?				
Behaviours Adult and child				
Communication- verbal				
Communication- non-verbal				
Summary of observations				

Appendix 11

Participants Reflective Diary: **Date of activity: ____________________**

Description of activity:

Observations during activity:

My understanding of what happened during activity:

Learning from activity:

Personal-

Practice based-

Comment on your skills

(e.g) I really like the way I …… It would have been good if I had …….

Key challenges arising for you during/ from activity:

Overall reflections on activity:

Next steps:

Appendix 12

Interview Schedule EYP and CYPSC

Date:	**Participant ref no.**
Topic Area	**Details**
Introduction	The interview opens with a welcome, an acknowledgement of their attendance and an introduction. Participants are told of the time frame, and that the session will be recorded. Check in re consent. The purpose of the interview is explained.
What are your experiences of the participation of young children in planning and decision making in your professional practice to date	Probes: Begin with children and young people of all ages, and then focus on children under 5. Look for examples if possible. If there are no examples, query why this is the case.
What are the benefits of child participation for children, services, wider society	Probes: as before, begin broadly and then focus response on young children.
What are the specific benefits to the participation of young children in decision-making in your own service/ organisation?	Probes: as above
What are the barriers/ challenges?	-break into categories for further discussion: systemic, societal or structural barriers: organisational barriers; personal barriers.
Are children involved in decision making in your service/organisation?	-look for examples
What other areas do children participate in, in your service/ organisation?	-planning, evaluation, feedback, policy development?
What enables or facilitates their participation?	Focus discussion on young children. If few/no examples why? What are the differences between experiences of child participation of young children when compared with older children/ teenagers
Do children know the process of Decision Making?	Look for example of children knowing the process and who they speak to.
How do you support children's learning and development when planning and when making decisions?	Linking participation to learning and development
What is your understanding of young children's autonomy as it relates to their participation?	Probes: lack of capacity, age, verbal abilities, adult attitudes, deficits in the environment, training. Anything else?

How important is autonomy for their participation?	Probes; as above, also environment, resources.
How does your service/ organisation ensure that children's participation rights are being respected?	Any examples of this?
How does your service ensure that they are providing the space for children to express their view, and participate in decision making?	Probes: your role as decision-maker or facilitator? What should happen when their views are expressed?
How does your service/ organisation ensure that these views are responded to?	Probes; autonomy, agency, development, age, verbal abilities?
Are children asked for their input into decision making when their views cannot be considered?	Give a scenario if necessary
How are rules explained, discussed, negotiated so that children understand how the rules came about?	The process of rule development; the role of children? EYP only
Are children's opinion and solutions sought when there is a problem?	Give a scenario if needed.
How are children's choices supported and preferences responded to when plans are being developed?	EYP only
Has your participation in this research process led to any practice changes in this area?	Probes: voice of the child, young children, children with disabilities, children with ESL.
Can you talk about how their participation reflects children's rhythms and interests? (EYP only)	Probes; does not have to be own experiences or examples can be anecdotal or from practice rather than strategic/policy development
How relevant are observations to child participation? (EYP only)	Focus on child participation once discussion on links to learning and development are covered.
What happens during observations? (EYP only)	Focus on adult's responses Probes: Does it reassure you? Are you neutral? Does it help? How?
What happens at circle time? (EYP only)	
How do you think parent's feel about their children being included in decision making and participatory activities in the service? (EYP only)	Probes: productive? Provide information that can support decision-making? Could it be successful as a participatory process but perhaps not productive?
What core values are demonstrated by listening to and consulting with young children?	Probes: quality of outputs? Coherence of children's contributions? New information? Novelty of ideas?
How has your value base been impacted on during this process?	Probes: Supporting decision making? Showing that we are participatory? Improving services generally? Providing evidence of young children's autonomy? Supporting other

	participatory processes? Strengthening our participatory approaches? Anything else?
Has your Understanding of children changed and developed over time?	Encourage discussion on early understandings/practices and comparison with current
Has your participation in this study had any impact on your understanding of children and childhood?	Look for examples.
What impact has the presentation of the children's submission had on your own practice?	
Follow up: What impact has it has on your understandings of children's capacity to participate in decision making processes?	
What impacts has it had on you personally?	
What are your views on the process followed?	
What are your views on the children's submission?	CYPSC only; can any of it or parts it be considered for implementation? Which parts? Which parts can't?
Non- verbal children: How are children who are non-verbal or have some difficulty verbalising or those who have additional needs listened to and included in decision making?	Give a scenario
What feedback would you like to give to the child participants?	CYPSC only

Appendix 13

Script for Circle Time Interviews with Children

Introduction

Thank you for coming along to chat to me for a few minutes. Remember when I was here and you helped me to figure out what young children in Roscommon have to say about being happy and healthy? Remember we made the Volcano? Well today I want to chat to you a bit about what that was like. First, is everyone happy to talk to me? If anyone wants to leave, that is fine, you can just go back to the others and to your teachers.

Q1. Ok, let's start talking about what it was like when you were telling me and your teachers about what young children need to be happy and healthy?

Q2. What did you like when you were telling us about being happy and healthy?

Q3. What did you not like?

Q4. Who helped you when you were telling us about being happy and healthy? How did they help you tell?

Q5. Who listened?

Q6. What was it like to be listened to?

Q7. Who else listens to you?

Q8. Do you think it is good that the grown-ups in charge in Roscommon know what you told us in the volcano?

Q9. Are there any other times, when grownups are deciding things that you would like to have a say?

Appendix 14

Data Types linked to Research Objectives

Type of Data	Status	R/Obj*	Data Analysis Approach
21 Researcher Observation Sheets	Loose sheets. Sorted by date. Read and memos created. (mix of handwritten and typed)	1 2 3 4	Thematic Analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006) Hybrid Approach
12 reflective journal entries (researcher)	Diary of research activities. Entries listed by date. Read and summaries created, early themes noted.	1 2 3 4	TA- Hybrid Approach
3 reflective journal entries (EYPs) and 6 summaries of reflective meetings.	Loose sheets. 3 from 1 service. Reflective meetings written into template of reflective journal templates	1 2 4	TA- Hybrid approach recognising exploratory nature of data.
Photographs from consultation sessions	35 Photographs taken by researcher- on usb. Some have been printed. Output of research process.	1 2 4	Develop a narrative for photographs. Supports analysis of observational notes and reflective diary.
12 Audio recordings from sessions	Condensed transcription and audio files extracted and stored.	1 2 4	TA. Hybrid approach to audio and transcriptions
60 Children's drawings scanned/ photographed	60 children's drawings 51 with EYP notations	1 2 4	TA of EYP narrations on drawings and of summary of in the field analysis of drawings,

12 Interview Transcripts EYP	Transcribed and passages coded	1 2 4	TA Hybrid approach
1 Transcript of CYPSC focus group meeting	Transcribed and passages coded	1 3 4	TA Hybrid Approach
7 Interview Transcripts CYPSC	Transcribed and passages coded	1 3 4	TA Hybrid Approach
6 child conference transcripts	Transcribed and passages coded. Audio files extracted and stored	1 4	TA Hybrid Approach
Minutes of meetings, emails, plans, poster, newspaper articles etc related to CYPSC.	Stored on usb and in hard copy.	1 2 3 4	TA Hybrid Approach

Appendix 15
a priori codes

Lundy Model Domains			
SPACE- *children must be facilitated to express their views*	**VOICE-** *safe inclusive opportunities to form and express their views*	**AUDIENCE-** *the views must be listened to*	**INFLUENCE-** *views must be acted up appropriate)*
Rights	Verbal/ Vocal capacity	Reactions of audience	Receiving
The system/ structure	Rights and agency	Rights and agency	Responding
The ethos/ leadership	Voice of the child in a collective	Multiple perspectives	Acting
The environment	Interpretation	A moral perspective	Values and beliefs
Play and participation	Non/ Preverbal/ EASL	Outputs and impacts	Sense, emotion, and in
Creativity	Relationships	Age	Age
Preparation and preparedness	Listening	Child centred process	Validation and influenc
Child centredness	Age	Values and beliefs	Ethics
Emotions	Expression	Listening	A moral perspective
Relationships	Autonomy/ relational autonomy	Validating	Feedback
Autonomy/ relational autonomy	Child development/ DAP	Challenges for adults	Leadership
Principles	Child Centred approach	Leadership	Collective
Tensions/ Contradictions	Emerging perspectives	Roles of adults	Relationships
Time and flexibility/ resources	Children's awareness of social roles	Interpretation	Autonomy
Vulnerabilities	Children's frame of reference		
Collective participation	Language (EYP/ child)		
Trust	Use of visual references		
Observations	Trust		
	Observations		

Appendix 16

Codes into Themes (sample)

Theme	Objective	Data
1. **Play, fun and creativity** as medium for enhancing meaningful participation in young children. Developmentally appropriate strategies are more effective for engaging young children with complex concepts.	1,2, 3	Observational notes, reflective diaries, EYP reflections, baseline transcripts, EYP interview transcripts, child conference transcripts, audio, art-work, photographs.
2. **Children's capacity-** Growing awareness of social roles (children) and growing awareness (EYP) of different types of responses and support needed within groups; child leaders emerging, increasing development of organisation of self and the group as they work through complex concepts; children participating at different levels- all need to be catered for; importance of the invitation; responsiveness to guided instruction; operating within child's space- bringing participation into child's world, active response from adults essential.	1.2, 3	Observational notes, reflective diaries, EYP reflections, EYP interview transcripts, child conference transcripts, audio. CYPSC minutes and material.
3. **Autonomy-** relationships should support autonomy, freedom within a supportive framework, working with groups and respecting consensus, young children noted to be organising themselves, listening to others, decision making.	1,2	Observational notes, reflective diaries, EYP reflections, EYP interview transcripts, child conference transcripts, audio, artwork, photographs.
4. **Values and beliefs:** viewing child as 'an expert in own lives' or 'respect for child's authentic perspective at point in time'? Individualism v needs of the group; Values of respect, inclusion and generosity articulated and demonstrated.	2,3,4	Observational notes, reflective diaries, EYP reflections, EYP interview transcripts, CYPSC interview transcripts.
5. **Role of the adult;** enhancer, facilitator, supporter and/ or mentor? How are these different and how do they influence the process and the child's experience?	1,2,3,4	Observational notes, reflective diaries, EYP reflections, EYP baseline and interview transcripts, child conference transcripts, audio, artwork, photographs, CYPSC baseline and interview transcripts.
6. **Vulnerabilities v rights:** respecting the young child's right to participate / not participate on own terms and processes should align with age and stage of development as well as	2,3,4	Observational notes, reflective diaries, EYP reflections, baseline transcripts, EYP interview transcripts, child conference transcripts, audio, artwork, photographs.

choices of child. The theme of consultation is relevant, the more it can be related to child's own lived experience the more meaningful the participation. The process is an important as the outcome. Other principles which may be in conflict.		
7. **Relationships-** connectivity, multiple levels and layers of relationships characterised by trust. Relationships need development and nurturing.	1,2,3,4	Observational notes, reflective diaries, EYP reflections, baseline transcripts, EYP interview transcripts, child conference transcripts, audio, artwork, photographs. CYPSC baseline and interview transcripts.
8. **Emotional evocative connection:** evoking the inner child, responding with own children/ own childhood in mind; strongly connecting with children's views.	2,3	Observational notes, reflective diaries, EYP reflections, baseline transcripts, EYP interview transcripts, child conference transcripts, audio, artwork, photographs. CYPSC baseline and interview transcripts.
9. **Influence:** policy makers openness to being influenced child's views but seek to confirm appropriateness and robustness of processes	3,4	CYPSC baseline and interview transcripts.

Appendix 17

Merging codes/ themes

Group 1 (Space)	Group 2 (Voice)	Group 3 (Audience/Influence)
1.1 Towards Participation-	**2.1**Autonomy or relational autonomy?	**3.1** The role of sense, emotion in decision making
1.2 Play, fun and creativity as enabler.	**2.2** New ways of working	**3.2** Values and beliefs and their impact on decision making
1.3 Growing awareness of social roles	**2.3** Value of capacity building	**3.3** Different starting points within a group of decision makers on young children's capacities to contribute to decision making processes
1.4 Listening to young children takes time and a flexible approach	**2.4** The development of trusting relationships in participatory processes	**3.4** Links to community well-being
1.5 Relatively limited frame of reference/ scaffolding	**2.5** Multiple perspectives enhance rather than take away from children's perspectives:	**3.5** Validation and influence
1.6 Children's emerging perspectives on health and wellbeing	**2.6** Vulnerabilities v rights	**3.6** Keen to act and respond
1.7 Preparation and preparedness	**2.7** Values and beliefs impact on participation processes	**3.7** Relationships between young children and decision makers
1.8 Child-centredness	**2.8** A moral perspective on participation	**3.8** Rights and Agency
1.9 Language supports participation	**2.9** Role of the adult	**3.9** A moral perspective on rights-based processes
1.10 Use of visual references	**2.10** Challenges for adults	**3.10** Value of relationships
1.11 An emotional connection	**2.11** Relationships	**3.11** Leadership
1.12 Relationships enhance participation	**2.12** Certain principles may be in conflict	
1.13 Child centred processes= high impacts	**2.13** Children's emerging capacities	
1.14 The Power of the Group	**2.14** Emotional evocative connection	
1.15 Handing the agenda to children	**2.15** Child participation is seen as beneficial to child, service and society	
	2.16 Leadership	

Appendix 18 Generation of Overarching themes

Theme 1: **Child-centric participatory practices and discourse.**	**Theme 2:** **Relational-Autonomy, interdependence and relationship- based participatory and decision-making processes involving young children.**	**Theme 3:** **Active and empathic engagement with the 'voice' of the young child in participatory and decision-making processes.**	**Theme 4:** **Moral and ethical perspectives on decision making involving young children.**
Merging codes into themes	.		
Child-centred practice ***(1.8)***	Towards Participation ***(1.1)***	Play, fun and creativity as mediators ***(1.2)***	Values and beliefs impact on participation processes ***(2.7)***
Growing awareness of social roles ***(1.3)***	Relationships enhance participation ***(1.12) (2.11) (3.10)***	Children's emerging capacities ***(2.13)***	Values and beliefs impact on decision making processes ***(3.2)***
Preparation and preparedness **(1.7)**	The Power of the Group ***(1.14)***	Validation and influence ***(3.5)***	A moral perspective on children's participation in decision making ***(2.8)***
Play, fun and creativity as mediators (***1.2)***	Growing awareness of social roles ***(1.3)***	Listening to young children takes time and a flexible approach ***(1.4)***	A moral perspective on rights-based processes ***(3.9)***
Child centred processes= high impacts ***(1.13)***	Autonomy or relational autonomy? ***(2.1)***	Relatively limited frame of reference ***(1.5)***	Certain principles may be in conflict ***(2.12)***
An emotional connection exists between adults and young children in participatory processes ***(1.11) (2.14)***	The emergence of child leaders ***(2.13)***	Use of visual references ***(1.10)***	Acknowledging power relationships between young children and decision makers ***(3.7)***
New ways of working ***(2.2)***	The development of trust in participatory processes ***(2.4)***	Language supports participation ***(1.9)***	The role of sense, emotion in decision making ***(2.14) (3.1)***

Leadership ***(2.17) (3.11)***	Multiple perspectives enhance rather than take away from children's perspectives ***(2.5)***	Handing the agenda to children ***(1.15)***	Rights and Agency ***(3.8)***
Value of capacity building ***(2.3)***	Role of the adult ***(2.9)***	Children's emerging perspectives on health and well-being ***(1.6)***	Child participation is beneficial to child, service and society ***(2.15)***
Vulnerabilities v rights ***(2.6)***	Challenges for adults ***(2.10)***	Different starting points on young children's capacities to contribute to decision making processes ***(3.3)***	Keen to act and respond ***(3.6)***
	Links to community ***(3.4)***	Surprising outputs impact ***(2.16)***	