

## **Participation in practice in child welfare: Processes, benefits and challenges**

Internationally, there has been a significant focus in policy and practice on the participation of children and young people in decisions that affect them, underpinned by a respect for their rights under Article 12 of the UNCRC. While children's participation has become a core focus for practice improvement in child welfare services, there is a dearth of practical examples of how participation is implemented in organisations. In this paper, we provide a reflective case study of participation in practice in the Youth Advocate Programme (YAP) in Ireland, a large non-profit child welfare organisation. YAP Ireland works with young people who are considered 'high risk' using a strength-based approach in a wraparound service that is family-driven and youth-guided. Drawing on qualitative interviews and focus groups with young people, parents, advocates, and staff and management, we describe and critically analyse YAP's approach to participation. Critical factors in practice include a commitment to participation in policy, practice and culture at all levels of the organisation and scaffolding of participation by staff. Challenges include ensuring that participation principles are upheld consistently across the organisation and resourcing participation.

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## **Introduction**

The UNCRC (1990) provides an internationally accepted standard to be applied to basic human rights affecting children, requiring that children be respected as persons in their own right. To comply with Article 12 of the UNCRC, child welfare services must ensure that children and young people have a right to participate in decision-making. Over the past three decades, significant advances have been made in implementing the principles of Article 12 in child welfare services. Participatory practice has been shown to support organisations to become more responsive to need, to improve outcomes and promote the social and personal development of children and young people (Lansdown, 2019; Slettebø, 2013). There is broad agreement that organisations must be committed to meaningful, rather than tokenistic, participation if the intent of Article 12 of the UNCRC is to be realised (Lundy, 2007; Muench et al., 2017:50). While participation usually occurs within organisational and institutional contexts, there is a dearth of practical examples of how participation principles are implemented at organisational level. In this paper, we provide a reflective case study of participation in practice in the Youth Advocate Programme (YAP) in Ireland, a large non-profit child welfare organisation. The aim of the paper is to deepen understanding of what participation entails in practice when working with marginalised youth. We also identify benefits and challenges associated with participation in practice and consider the critical aspects of practice that emerge as important in this context.

## **Child and youth participation in child welfare**

Participation can occur at an individual or collective level depending on the whether it is participation in decisions relating to individual welfare, input into policy and service development or action on an issue of common concern (Lansdown, 2019). Involving service users in decision-making can lead to improved outcomes by drawing upon their experiential knowledge to ensure that welfare services provide appropriate relevant responses to their often-complex needs (e.g. Muench et al., 2017). Young people develop skills and capacities such as communication and decision-making, as they take on new roles and responsibilities (Evans & Prilleltensky, 2007; Ramey et al., 2017; Tisdall et al, 2017). Youth participation has also been linked to greater self-efficacy, empowerment, agency and resilience (Schoenfeld et

al., 2019). Collective participation has also been shown to create positive social and political identities among young people by raising the level of consciousness beyond a purely individually oriented analysis of problems, while access to friendships and supportive relationships that meet individual and collective needs can play a central role in supporting wellbeing (Cockburn, 2005; Evans & Prilleltensky, 2007). Professionals who engage with participatory initiatives often report a renewed sense of purpose in their work, a more holistic view of youth's interests and abilities, increased confidence in their ability to effectively work with youth and a greater clarity of purpose for their programmes and services (Schoenfeld et al., 2019).

However, supporting the participation of young people requires attention to the barriers that may arise in practice. Organisations may be open to participatory practice but face conflicting agendas, varying mandates, and resource challenges (Carr, 2004; Byrne & Lundy, 2015). Professionals may be reluctant to support the participation of young people if they feel that they are inherently vulnerable or lacking in competency (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018; Hill et al., 2004). In welfare contexts the participation of marginalised service users may be challenging as this cohort may previously have had difficult interactions with professionals, resulting in a lack of trust and reluctance to engage (Gal, 2017; Schoenfeld et al., 2019). Even if young people are afforded the opportunity to participate, they may be given limited control over the agenda or processes due to the assumption that adults "know better" in decision-making processes (Perry-Hazan, 2016). There is a risk that participatory initiatives may become mechanisms to lend legitimacy to decision-making processes while failing to address problematic structural issues (Forbes Hodge, 2005:164).

Organisational culture and beliefs around participation are important to consider as this influences the likelihood that participation will be experienced as meaningful (Havelick et al., 2016; Ramey et al., 2017). The way an organisation frames participation in policy can help professionals have a shared understanding of the principles of practice, and what it entails, from the management to practitioner level, and this can be reinforced by a support system for professionals underpinned by established processes and experiences (Gal, 2017; Havelick et al. 2016; Kennan et al., 2016; Ramey et al., 2017). It is argued that a welcoming and friendly space where young people can develop trusting relationships over time is an essential ingredient for their participation (Havelick et al, 2016; Lundy, 2007; Muench et al., 2017).

Practitioners are encouraged to adopt varied and flexible approaches including informal creative methods that enable young people and adults to collaborate on a variety of projects of social, cultural and political significance (Gazit & Perry Hazan, 2020; Moss and Petrie 2002). This moves away from formal, adult-defined structures of participation to a more open and creative practice which can foster the development of young people's agendas (Moss & Petrie, 2002). It has been suggested that in rights respecting practice 'scaffolding', which entails the supportive practices that enhance children and young people's capacity to participate, can be gradually withdrawn as the child's competence and independence increase (Cashmore, 2011; Gal, 2017). These scaffolding practices can include the use of appropriate child and youth friendly methodologies, along with training and skill-building opportunities (Archard & Skiveness, 2009; Schoenfeld et al., 2019).

Finally, the structures of communication to key decision-makers and how young people's voices are responded to must also be considered if effective participation, characterised as changes in services, policies, and institutions, is to be achieved (Larkins et al., 2014; Ramey et al., 2017). The Lundy (2007) model outlines four practice variables – space, voice, audience and influence - that must be evident in practice if participatory rights are to be achieved as per the requirements of Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989).

### **Context for the study**

In legislation and policy, Ireland has a strong commitment to the participation of children and young people in decisions that affect them, underpinned by a respect for their rights under Article 12. The *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making (2015–2020)* prioritised the participation of children and young people in relation to the social services delivered to them, the development of policy and legislation, and research (DCYA, 2019:5). The current national policy framework 2023-2028 is guided by a vision 'of an Ireland which fully respects and realises the rights of children and young people, supporting them to lead fulfilling lives' (DCEDIY, 2023, p.1).

Youth Advocate Programme (YAP) Ireland is an intervention for young people and their families who typically experience a range of adversities, including family dysfunction and fragmentation; poverty, neglect, and abuse; and mental and behavioural health concerns (Silva et al., 2020). The model provides young people with intensive, focused wraparound

support from a trained Advocate from their local community. An individual service plan (ISP) is developed and offers a wraparound approach to address the needs of the young person within their family and local community. Advocates and staff work from a strengths-based approach that is based on the belief that each young person and family have the capacity to overcome challenges by mobilising protective factors including social supports and the development of skills and abilities (Devaney et al, 2022; Silva et al., 2020:2). The Advocate works with the young person for up to 15 hours a week over a period of six months. YAP's goal is to empower young people and their families and to put in place supports that will remain after programme involvement has ended. Findings from previous studies indicate significant positive outcomes with improvements in factors which enhanced the wellbeing of the young people participating (Devlin et al., 2014:9; Brady et al, 2020).

YAP Ireland is a registered charity managed by a voluntary board of directors; it employs 35 permanent staff and approximately 140 Advocates on a fixed-purpose basis. It provides services to young people and families across 22 counties in Ireland. In 2021, YAP Ireland provided services to 548 young people and their families. Tusla, (Ireland's child and family agency) social work teams primarily refer these young people. In 2021, 88% of children and young people who YAP worked with remained at home at the end of the programme and 7% returned home from an alternative placement (YAP Ireland, 2021).

## **Methodology**

This paper addresses two main questions:

- What processes and practices are in place to support youth participation in YAP Ireland?
- What are the benefits and challenges associated with participation in this context?

A qualitative multi-method approach was adopted in this study. The initial phase consisted of desk research, including an analysis of organisational documentation to review structural indicators that support participation in YAP Ireland.

In terms of primary research, the views of stakeholder groups were elicited using one to one semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Respondents were sampled using a purposive

approach to ensure that respondents with a variety of relationships to participation in YAP were selected. Interviews were conducted with 12 stakeholders in YAP including the CEO, Director of Services, Service Managers, Team Leaders, Advocates and a Parent. Focus groups were conducted with young people (n-9), parents (n-3), staff (n-6) and Advocates (n-6). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, interviews and focus groups were conducted online to adhere to public health guidelines. For young people's focus groups, participatory methods and visual feedback mechanisms such as polls and emojis were used to facilitate ongoing consent, nonverbal agreement/ disagreement and engagement with the research questions.

Data from interviews and focus groups was processed using NVivo software to conduct a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis involves identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within respondent accounts to provide a rich description of a social phenomenon (Braun & Clark, 2006, 2017). This process entails a process of familiarisation, followed by the generation of initial codes, which identifies a feature of the data that is interesting. In this case the initial coding was data driven, rather than theoretically driven. From this coded set of information, broader themes could then be identified, for example, the social aspect of participation (a code) and personal development (code) could be grouped under the broad theme of the benefits of participation. These themes were then reviewed for coherence, and then mapped into a final narrative intended to capture the data set (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the authors institutional Research Ethics Committee and by the Tusla Research Ethics Committee. Ethical safeguards implemented included participant consent, right to withdraw without consequence, anonymity and duty of care. Attention was paid to the care and support needs of the young people and family members participating in the study.

## **Findings:**

### ***What processes and practices are in place to support youth participation?***

Participation is supported in YAP Ireland is a range of ways, including organisational structures, individual participation and collective participation.

*Organisational policy and procedures:* As part of YAP Ireland's Strategic Plan (2020-2023) participation and voice are highlighted in strategic goal 2: 'the views of children, young people

and families make an impact in YAP Ireland and wider society'. A Participation Strategy (YAP Ireland, 2020), underpinned by the Lundy model (2007) was developed to promote opportunities for participation in all aspects of service delivery. The principles that underpin these practices include a strengths-based approach to participation empowering young people and their families to set their own goals and equality and diversity, affirming that all young people and their families should have equal access to participation, with a particular emphasis on including those who may be hard to reach. The organisation also commits to safe practice to ensure the safety and wellbeing of participants (YAP Ireland, 2020).

The translation of policy into practice is supported by communication and management structures within the organisation. Participatory practices are monitored and reviewed by a steering group that includes the CEO, Director of Services and regional Service Managers. External review processes such as the Investing in Children Award further ensure accountability through the assessment of young people's engagement in dialogue within the organisation. Young people are asked to feed back on organisational policy and strategy. Targeted training is provided to Lead Advocates to ensure that they have a clear understanding of participation and can lead participation groups in their area. YAP Ireland captures data, including the voice of service users, to track progress in relation to their participation plan. Young people are also provided with training and support to participate in interview panels for staff at all levels of the organisation.

A range of practice documents map where and how young people voices are heard at individual and group levels, with associated guidelines for practice. These documents support participation in a manner that is congruent with quality practice as outlined in the UN General Comment on Article 12 (2009). These include provisions for accountable, transparent practice that is relevant to the young people's strengths and interests and respectful of their views. Child friendly methods and inclusive supports are indicated, as is the training of staff to support the attainment of the organisation's participatory goals. Significant attention is paid to the wellbeing of participants; the need to be prepared to respond to disclosures or needs for supports and intervention is highlighted, while practitioners are advised to be flexible regarding the needs of participants.

Respondents' accounts highlighted that participation is an essential part of the culture of the organisation. Practitioners ensure that they actively promote participation, finding different ways to support voice, and build trust with the young people to assure the young people of their rights in order to create a sense of safety in the expression of their views.

“Participation is the ribbon that runs through the programme in YAP so from the very beginning of any kind of work that we undertake participation is key, it is at the forefront. It is the voice, it is the engagement, it is ensuring that the work that we do with the young people is guided by them. They lead it, they participate, and they engage.” (Respondent 4).

*Individual Participation:* YAP Ireland involves young people in decision-making from their initial engagement in the service to assess their needs and plan their goals, through to feedback and evaluation. This is intended to empower young people and families to express their needs and identify what resources and capacities they have that can assist them.

“It would be impossible to not get a young person's voice because it is woven into the needs assessment, the ISP, the three reviews and the final meeting.” (Respondent 5)

The commitment to voice and choice in the ISP (Individual Service Plan) programme described by practitioners is affirmed in the experiences of young respondents, who felt that they had a say in planning their ISP and setting goals. One young person reflected on how choosing their ISP activities was important as it enabled them to pick activities that they would enjoy doing in order to build a relationship with their advocate.

Within respondent accounts, there were examples of YAP practitioners actively supporting and amplifying the voices of young people, and their parents, beyond the ISP to services relevant to their circumstances. Examples included providing feedback to organisations on the young person's behalf or supporting the young person to advocate for themselves in other institutional contexts. Within the ISP, both the advocate and team leader seek ongoing feedback, and this is bolstered by formal review processes with a member of staff not attached to the team via telephone.

**Collective Participation:** YAP Ireland offers different forms of group participation as outlined below.

- *Regional youth participation groups* provide opportunities for young people to socialise with other YAP service users in their region. Each group works on a project, learns a

skill, does a sporting activity or just has fun. Participants get to choose what activities they would like to do in collaboration with practitioners.

- *National Youth Forum* - young people from around Ireland come together to work on projects of their choosing.
- *Youth CEO Group* - young people work closely with the CEO, pick a topic that they want to work on and subsequently publish a report. The Youth CEO Group also co-host the National Event and the Annual Report Launch with the CEO.
- *National Events* – An annual National Conference is held, with up to 300 young people, families, funders, partners and staff showcasing the work carried out by groups throughout the year.

In addition to the social aspects, a primary aim of collective participation structures is to enable young people to express a view on issues that affect them as a group. Some of the thematic areas addressed through group participation extend beyond the confines of YAP Ireland's practice into the broader social milieu, thus amplifying youth voices on issues that affect them. For example, the CEO group produced a report on the experience of social work support, based on research they conducted with YAP service users, along with input from social work professionals.

As part of collective participatory practices, YAP provides opportunities for young people to access a wider audience of relevant decision-makers. For example, they can access an audience of welfare professionals and managers, who have authority to make decisions that potentially impact on their lives. This is achieved through a national event at which the young people showcase their participatory projects. The outputs from group projects are also disseminated through the organisation's website and newsletters. One young person argued that it is important that the service and staff are responsive as this is evidence that they are heard.

"I think being heard is very important for participation because there is no point engaging in a conversation or participating if your opinion isn't going to be heard or discussed in more detail. Even .. if you gave your opinion on something and if it was discussed a bit that would be fine, at least you were heard about it." (Young Person Group B)

## **Perceived Benefits of Participation**

A range of benefits were identified arising from YAP Ireland's participatory practice. These are now described.

### *For Young People*

*Promotes engagement:* Supporting the young person's participation in programme decisions was seen to promote their engagement with the helping relationship. Advocates felt that a particular value of participation is that the young people are being listened to in the context of a support service, which might not be the usual experience for them.

"The majority of the young people that I have been signed up to, they have come from very troubled backgrounds, so they are not listened to at home, even the Guards on the street, the social workers coming in, they don't listen. ... I have been told you are the first person that has actually listened to me and took note of what I am saying." (Respondent 8)

Some parents also reflected on how participation supports the buy-in of the young person with the programme.

"People in [social services have] authority over them, they would feel they would have no voice but when they are heard or when they are asked for their opinion or they are asked what they would like to do they feel they are included in the decision making which I think is very important.[...] Ah yeah because if you are being told what to do all the time you kind of half listen, okay you might be made do it, but if you are the one who is deciding what to do you will do it willingly." (Parent FG)

*Personal and skills development:* According to practitioners, young people are supported to recognise their own innate ability to problem solve through engagement in the practices and the safe space of the group. The interpersonal skills gained can translate into their own lives, helping them to overcome challenges they may be facing. Young people also felt that participation in group processes promoted a sense of confidence as a result of the opportunity to contribute to group projects, and enhanced wellbeing as they developed social skills.

"Yeah, it is building up my confidence as well" ... "I think we will enjoy it more" ... "I think it is good as well because it is our own independence." (Young Person FG 2).

"So they let you speak, not like most adults; they go on with what other adults say. You won't be able to get to speak. But at YAP you will, you're able to say your good ideas and all. You're able to show your artistic work and it's in a small group so it doesn't have to be around everyone. So then you can

send letters to a lot of different places; you can have fun in a lot of different places and basically it gives your imagination a boost and your confidence a boost.” (Young Person FG 1)

*Enhanced sense of agency:* Participation was seen to be empowering, repositioning the service user as collaborator rather than a passive recipient of services. This was considered all the more important given the potential impact of structurally generated difficulties in the lives of service users. This sense of agency is evident in the account of one young person.

“Well we try to change something, think the team is like a community so we’re trying to change something within the community at the moment.” (Young Person FG 1)

Young people’s capacity to present at the national conference was held to be evidence of the development of confidence and capacity by practitioners. Group participation has supported their capacity to speak about that experience in front of large audiences to raise awareness about social issues that affect them. In this way, potentially disempowering circumstances are channelled into meaningful projects, that are then recognised by practitioners, with implications for the young person’s self-esteem.

*Social connectedness:* Collective participation was particularly valued by the young people as a place to make friends and access social support. Practitioners noted that group participation can be especially valuable for young people who don’t have a well-developed social network or who may feel isolated due to the circumstances that they are facing. Through meeting others experiencing challenges that require the intervention of welfare services, the young people had a chance to depersonalise and destigmatise their own experience to a certain extent in the context of group support while being able to give voice to experience in a safe space amongst peers they could relate to.

“We have found when we bring them together and they realise, I am not the only one going through this, I am not the only one in foster care, I am not the only one who lives with some stranger. ...it just makes it more bearable... there are other people going through that. So participation is so valuable for that.” (Respondent 9)

### *For the Organisation*

*More effective services:* Participation in the ISP planning and decision-making processes support YAP Ireland to achieve positive outcomes for service users. For example, getting the young person to set their own goals in their ISP increases the likelihood that these goals will

be met as they will be more realistic and relevant to their needs. Collective participation is also of value for the organisation as it provides feedback on services, and a window into young people's lives and concerns which allows for a more responsive approach to meeting needs. The youth-centred, fun activities that form the basis of participation groups are viewed as key in that they promote young people's engagement with the group.

"If it is fun based.... What do young people want? What are young people interested in? What is the vibe with young people these days? ...The feedback we can get so we can improve our service, as service providers, is invaluable, completely invaluable." (Respondent 13).

Furthermore, it was noted that involving young people in recruitment can ensure that any hiring done is a good fit for the organisation as the young person can relate to them and this helps YAP Ireland find staff that can work best with the young people it supports.

"It works so well, and they are so intuitive... And at the end of the interview the young person is like, no, no. They know straight away and you are like, oh my God I was thinking the same thing. ..."  
(Respondent 4)

### **Challenges to Participation**

Respondents referred to a number of challenges arising in participatory practice in the organisation, which are now discussed.

*Barriers to participation:* The personal attributes or challenges facing young people can present barriers to their participation. Managing group participation and dynamics can be difficult given the often-fraught histories that young people have, and the potential impact of disclosure on other members of the group (Muurinen, 2019). The translation of participation principles into group practice was sometimes difficult to achieve, with the result that practitioners had to take the lead in terms of suggesting activities. While this could be viewed as 'framed participation', it could also be interpreted as reflecting the varying priorities and capacities of participants and still resulted in benefits in terms of skills acquisitions and a sense of self-efficacy.

*Limits to influence:* Although group participation often provides an opportunity for young people to be heard on matters that affect them, one respondent spoke of having to manage expectations of what participation can achieve, suggesting limits to influence in practice. This is an important consideration as there are many variables that affect service users'

circumstances that are beyond the reach of the organisation's influence. Other respondents felt that attaining influence on matters that affect them at the level of group participation was not easily achieved, and there was room to further reflect on the notion of audience and influence with the young people in order to make participation more meaningful to the young people in terms of their rights.

*Resourcing:* Participation is costly in terms of human resources and funding, placing a considerable demand on budgets. However, the participation of disadvantaged young people and their families in group processes would not be achieved without these resources.

“there are staffing costs that are big and obviously all the planning that goes into it for it to work and to be safe and to be supportive to the kids rather than something that we are just doing because we want to do it. Team leaders and advocates have to plan what is going to happen, we have to have the resources available, a lot of art work .. or whatever it might be. And we have to have food, because that is very important, it is the key ingredient with young people, and parents actually, but particularly with the young people.” (Respondent 6)

*Deepening the commitment to participation across the organisation:* Some respondents expressed a concern that the principles of participation may not be understood by all the advocates, and that this could be addressed by integrating rights-based participation into the core training module for all advocates. Some practitioners felt that greater breadth of participation in organisational processes could be achieved if young people and their parents were trained and supported to sit at group planning meetings and on the Board of Directors. This would ensure that the young people could achieve more influence, with direct access to decision-makers. It was acknowledged that the feasibility of the extension of participatory practice at this level should include consideration of the risks and benefits to the young people and their parents, as well as the organisation, to ensure that any opportunities would be ethical and meaningful.

## **Discussion**

While the benefits of child and youth participation in child welfare contexts are well documented, appropriate strategies are needed to ensure successful, meaningful participation. The aim of this paper is to provide a reflective example of how participation principles are implemented at organisational level in a large child welfare organisation, the Youth Advocate Programme (YAP) in Ireland. The operating policies, structures and practices

adopted in the organisation were outlined, as were the benefits and challenges associated with participation in practice. We now move on to reflect on the critical factors in practice identified in this study.

*Commitment to voice at all levels of the organisation:* It is widely accepted that the 'building blocks' to progress the implementation of children's participation rights in organisational contexts include a policy framework that mandates staff to take children's views into account and processes and procedures to support children to exercise their right to participate safely (Council of Europe, 2016; Kennan et al, 2021). We saw in this study that the organisational culture and philosophy of YAP Ireland positions participation as a key goal for practice (Havelick et al., 2016; Ramey et al., 2017). Strategic internal documents promote the voice of young people as integral to organisational processes and frame participation with a rights-orientated model (Muench et al., 2017). This rights-based approach requires that young people are given space, support to voice their views, and access to a decision-makers to exert influence in matters that affect them, and thereby avoiding tokenistic participation (Lundy, 2007). The intention to ensure quality in practice is supported by training, ensuring that a rights-based understanding of participatory practice is percolated from a structural level to a process level. These communication structures also function as systems of accountability (Carr,2007; Forbes Hodge, 2005).

*Individual and collective participation as mutually reinforcing:* Participation can relate to decisions relating to individual welfare or involve a collective input into policy and service development or action on a commonly experienced issue (Lansdown, 2019). In the case of YAP Ireland, individual and collective participation were seen to be mutually enriching and beneficial. The organisation listens attentively to young people as part of the case planning and review and also operates a range of participation groups to provide social outlets and hear the voices of young people on their experiences of the services provided and other issues affecting their lives. Collective participation was seen to support young people to develop social competencies and self-confidence and helped to validate their experience and identity as young people involved with welfare services. Furthermore, through these processes, young people are positioned not as passive recipients of services but as actors who have the capacity and right to identify solutions for commonly experienced issues. These findings provide

further evidence that both individual and collective participation can play a central role in supporting personal development and wellbeing for marginalised young people (Cockburn, 2005; Forde & Martin, 2016). Furthermore, these activities can help to build life skills that will be of use to the service users when the programme of support ends (Evans & Prilleltensky, 2007; Slettebø, 2013; Tisdall et al, 2017).

*Scaffolding and capacity building:* It is acknowledged that marginalised young people need significant support on a personal, and practical level if they are to participate successfully in collective formats (Gal, 2017; Gazit & Perry Hazan, 2020). The organisation demonstrated a strategic awareness of the need for practical support and resourcing in its practice documents. It was clear from this study that practitioners were attuned to the personal variables that may affect participation, such as low confidence and self-esteem, and adapted to the needs of the young person in various ways. This scaffolding of practice was felt to be essential in building young people's capacity to contribute to group projects (Ney et al., 2013).

*Commitment to audience and influence:* While giving space and voice to young people is important, audience and influence must also be upheld in practice if participatory rights are to be achieved (Lundy, 2007). YAP Ireland's communication structures provide access to audiences of relevant decision-makers, including internal staff and advocates, as well as external decision-makers in organisational and political contexts. These efforts to ensure that young people's voices and concerns reach relevant audiences enhances the likelihood of achieving meaningful impact (Carr, 2004; Gazit & Perry Hazan, 2020; Schoenfeld et al., 2019). Advocates also support parents and young people to communicate with child welfare services or the education system as needed (Kennan et al., 2016; Kirby & Laws, 2009). The value of the young person's contribution to group processes is acknowledged in conferences showcasing projects, or the publication of contributions online and in print. This is important as many young people involved in public decisions aspire to make a difference, and recognition of their contribution can avoid the perception of tokenism (Gal, 2017).

*More effective practice:* This study provides further evidence that supporting the participation of service users is beneficial on an organisational level. It has enhanced the hiring of suitable staff, organisational planning and helped to make policies accessible to service users. The personal benefits experienced by young people and their families as a result of participation have a particular relevance for the cohort that are supported by YAP Ireland as they

experience multiple chronic stressors, including poverty, marginality, family problems, housing instability and social isolation (Slettebø, 2013:580). Supporting young people and their families to participate as experts by experience can also promote ethical practice by avoiding structurally generated harm as a result of services and policies that fail to meet needs (Forde & Martin, 2016; Lansdown, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

In terms of culture, participation is viewed as a 'ribbon' that runs through YAP Ireland's programme, derived in part from the essential role of staff as mediators and supporters of young people's voices. It is evident from respondent's accounts that it is occurring at multiple points on both an individual and collective level. In individual opportunities, the young person's voice is central to all aspects of practice from situational analysis to goal setting and review, while individuals and groups also have an opportunity to participate in organisational processes. In addition to individual opportunities to exercise voice and choice, collective participation is embedded in practice with ongoing local participation groups, national fora contributing to cyclically occurring national events where projects that are produced are showcased to an audience of relevant decision-makers.

There are numerous advantages to this approach. On an individual level it supports the engagement of young people, ensuring improved outcomes as a result of service that better meets their needs. On a collective level it provides access to forms of social support that are highly valued by the young people, and it provides opportunities to feedback to service providers, and to have a say on social issues that affect them at a wider societal level. It also supports service users to build the skills, confidence and sense of self-efficacy supporting improved outcomes. This is in line with Slettebø's (2013) assertion that participation in group processes can be a vital supplement to individual service provision.

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