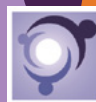




United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
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UNESCO Chair in  
Children, Youth and Civic Engagement  
Ireland



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## Conceptualising Participation in Practice in YAP Ireland:

### **A CASE STUDY**

#### Executive Summary

Dr Rebecca Jackson,  
Dr Carmel Devaney,  
Dr Bernadine Brady

UNESCO Child & Family Research Centre, NUI Galway

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Youth **Advocate**  
PROGRAMMES IRELAND



YAP Ireland provides integrated community-based support services for young people and their families who typically experience a range of adversities. Previous studies have found significant positive outcomes for the young people participating in YAP services (Devlin et al., 2014:9). A recent study found that the participation of young people and parents was an important and valued component of the YAP Ireland's practice (Brady et al, 2020). As a result of this finding, a qualitative case study of participatory practice was conducted to explore this aspect of practice further. This brief report outlines the key findings emerging from this case study.

## Youth and parental participation in child welfare services; research and policy context

In child and youth policy and legislation, Ireland has continually evolved towards greater respect for the participation of children and young people in decisions that affect them, underpinned by a respect for their rights under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and towards working in partnership with parents in the context of early intervention, prevention and family support (Canavan, Devaney, McGregor and Shaw, 2021). The academic literature clearly shows that supporting the participation of youth and their parents who are engaged with welfare services has numerous benefits for the service user, for the organisation and for the community (Devaney, Crosse, Connolly, O'Donohue, Jordan and Buckley, 2021). It can make decision making more relevant to the needs of the young person or service users, and so advance the goals of organisations seeking to drive improvements in people's lives. It can support personal development and a sense of self efficacy for the service user, while improving their personal identities as they take action on issues that affect them. It can also drive the generation of knowledge that can improve organisational policies or processes, or professionals' practice. In supporting service users collectively, it can develop the personal and social capital that can be of benefit to the

community at large through the reduction of social harms (Brady et al. 2020).

However, supporting the participation of marginalised and disadvantaged young people and their parents can be difficult, and this requires attention to be given to the barriers that may arise in practice, and the appropriate strategies needed to ensure successful, meaningful participation. There may be cultural barriers to participation within organisations that may result in a lack of responsiveness, or indeed support for participation, due to the dispositions of professionals. A supportive organisational environment of participation should address this issue through well-developed policies and a philosophy or framework for practice that can ensure professionals implement participation in a way that is meaningful. Barriers may arise due to the circumstances of marginalised young people and their parents, and organisations need strategies to overcome these, including practical support and inclusive practices. In particular, participation is an inherently relational practice, involving interactions between organisations and service users. Attention needs to be paid to the circumstances in which these relationships are formed, particularly as those young people involved in welfare services may have prior experiences with services that make them ambivalent towards participation. Furthermore, the formats and supportive practices within such initiatives should be mindful of the needs of participants to support their meaningful participation.

## Methodology

A review of the academic literature focused on youth and service user participation was undertaken, together with an analysis of Irish policy relevant to participatory practice. This was followed by an analysis of YAP Ireland policies, procedures and reports. Secondary data analysis was conducted on the findings of the preceding report on practice in YAP Ireland (Brady et al., 2020) in order to mine the data for information regarding participation. A total of 13 one to one semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 stakeholders in YAP including the CEO (n-1), Director of Services (n-1), Service Managers (n-3) Team Leaders (n-3) and Advocates(n-3) and Parent (n-1) in order to explore their perspectives of participation within YAP Ireland. These interviews were semi-structured in format. A further two focus groups were conducted with young people (n-9) and parents (n-3). Following an initial round of data analysis, two further focus groups with Key Informants (n-6) and Advocates (n-6) were conducted in order to explore in depth the scope and level of participation achieved.

Fieldwork was conducted online due to public health restrictions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. Participatory methods suited to the age group were used. Efforts were made to ensure that the research was age friendly and accessible for the young people, and included the use of visual feedback mechanisms such as polls and emojis within the online conferencing application to facilitate ongoing consent, nonverbal agreement/ disagreement and engagement with the research questions.

All primary and secondary data from interviews and focus groups were processed using NVivo analytical software to conduct a thematic analysis, which entails identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within respondent accounts in order to provide a rich description of a social phenomenon (Braun & Clark,2006).

## Findings

**The key findings of the study are as follows:**

### **Key Finding 1: A commitment to participation is woven through policy, culture and practice in YAP Ireland**

The review of organisational structures and policies undertaken as part of this study found that a robust infrastructure is in place to support participation within YAP Ireland. Participation and voice are highlighted as key practice values in YAP Ireland's Strategic Plan (2020-2023), a Participation Strategy is in place to advance this goal in practice and a suite of practice documents map where and how young people in YAP Ireland are to have their voices heard. Data relating to participation is captured by YAP in a range of quality and monitoring processes. The translation of policy into participatory group practices are supported by well-developed communication and oversight structures within the organisation.

The research found that participation is central to everything that YAP Ireland does, from the focus on voice and choice at the level of the young person's Integrated Service Plan (ISP) to the inclusion of young people in organisational processes such as policy, interview boards, and service evaluation, to the provision of social support for young people and their parents which provides them with an opportunity to have their voice heard on matters that affect them in collective formats. These practices are underpinned by an understanding of participation based upon the Lundy (2007) model, which emphasises the provision of safe spaces in which young people can be supported to express a view to a relevant audience of decision-makers so that they can exert influence on matters that affect them.

The following are the key structures through which participation is facilitated in practice:

### **A. Integrated Service Plans**

Voice and choice in planning, decision-making and feedback processes are central to the individual targeted programme of supports that a young person receives from YAP Ireland. This is crucial to the success of the programme as it ensures that the goals are relevant to the young person's needs and supports engagement in the programme. Advocates and Team Leaders reinforce this aspect of participation throughout the programme, and endeavour to amplify the voice of the young person in other organisational or service contexts relevant to their circumstances where necessary.

### **B. Organisational Processes**

YAP Ireland endeavours to include young people in organisational processes, consulting with them to make policy accessible and relevant and reflect on the strategic plan and training them to sit on interview panels where they are treated as full partners in the decision-making process.

### **C. Collective participation structures**

YAP Ireland operates a number of fora for both young people and their parents, ranging from local initiatives which provide an opportunity for social activities, in addition to having a voice on social matters that affect them, to more focused centralised National Fora in which young people and their parents focus on projects related to social issues. These fora projects are geared towards presentation at a yearly National Conference in which the young people and parents of YAP Ireland have an opportunity to present to, and meet an audience of decision makers from government, relevant welfare organisations and NGO's. These collective formats also provide an opportunity for Tusla, Irelands Child and Family Agency, to engage the young people and their parents in supported feedback processes and participatory projects as a means to developing practice.

The opportunities for young people and their parents to access a wider audience of relevant decision-makers has the potential to make participation meaningful for them given their circumstances. For example, they can access an audience of welfare professionals and decision makers, as well as decision makers from a governance level, all of whom have potential authority to make decisions that can impact their lives.

### **Key finding 2: Participation is beneficial for young people, parents and service providers.**

Whether projects were initiated by young people, parents or practitioners, participation in collective formats were valued by young people, providing them with an opportunity to access social support, develop a sense of capacity, esteem and wellbeing as they are exposed to new ideas, and get involved in projects that aim to address a social issue.

Parents are also often isolated in their circumstances and feel a sense of stigma as they experience parenting as challenging. The local initiatives offer the parents a place to access peer support and seek advice for the problems that they are facing, while putting them in perspective in a way that is healthy for their sense of self. They also have an opportunity to get involved in training and activities that will bolster their parenting skills as part of this group.

Participation practices in YAP are also beneficial for the organisation itself as they are a way to keep informed as to the issues that are affecting young people and their parents so that they can respond by implementing targeted responses in the collective formats. It also improves hiring processes with YAP Ireland and makes sure that policy is accessible to the people that are affected by it.

Participatory practice within YAP Ireland also benefits partner organisations such as Tusla as it provides a ready-made format in which this organisation can access feedback from the very people who use its services.

### **Key Finding 3: Relationships are critical in participatory practice**

Practitioners noted that participation is often a 'trust piece' and this takes time to develop as staff and the advocates work to ensure that young people and their parents know that they respect them and will take their views seriously. This is an important aspect of participation given the position of dependency the young service users and their families on professionals who support them, where there is a potential that they have prior experiences of disempowerment in welfare related decision making. The format of collective participation that YAP Ireland provides is also an informal, relaxed environment, particularly at a local level, and is valued as a space for socialising and making friendships for the young people and their parents. Participants valued the non-judgmental space where they could give voice to experience amongst peers and supportive advocates, which could then facilitate the identification of needs for support, as well as the production of participatory projects.

### **Key Finding 4: Scaffolding practices are of crucial importance in ensuring meaningful participation**

In the collective formats, young people and their parents often wish to raise their voice on a particular issue but lack the planning and project management skills to make this happen. YAP Ireland scaffolds their participation by providing structure and support that will enable the project to achieve its aims. In this case, the project may be youth led in its inception, but collaborative in its implementation. However, sometimes young people and their parents are more invested in participation in group processes rather than having a say on issues that affect them. In these cases, projects can be practitioner initiated, as they respond to issues affecting service users, moving towards collaboration.

### **Key finding 5: Participation can present challenges**

There are challenges arising in participatory practice that are integral to the context of participation and requires ongoing management due to the nature of the programme and the cohort of service users supported. Some of the challenges highlighted by respondents included the following:

- Sometimes the personal attributes or challenges facing a young person or parent could present a barrier to their participation. In this case, scaffolding practices by staff were very important to support their participation.
- Managing group participation and dynamics can be challenging. However, YAP Ireland devotes significant attention to the wellbeing of participants in group work guidance.
- Staff and advocates' capacity to promote participation or provide logistical support for attendance at groups can be challenging as it is dependent on advocate support, and the collective participation opportunity may not be local to the young person's area.
- Even though group participation often provides an opportunity for young people and their parents to be heard on matters that affect them, one respondent spoke of having to manage expectations of what participation can achieve.
- Finally, measuring or capturing the results of participation can be difficult in practice.

### **Key Finding 6: There are opportunities to further enhance and develop participatory practice within YAP Ireland and beyond**

As participation practice is so well integrated into the culture and practices of YAP Ireland, it is in a strong position to build on this solid foundation and further integrate participatory opportunities into its organisational processes. YAP Ireland provides support for other organisations to improve their participatory practice, and this is something that can be developed further given their extensive practice knowledge. YAP Ireland trains all full-time staff and lead staff in rights-based participation, however embedding rights-based participation training in the advocates core module training would enrich practice in the ISP and local groups. The organisation could utilise research and assessment tools and exercises to explore the extent to which young people felt they participated, and the benefits they gained from participation as part of the collective opportunities' implementation (see main report for further details).

## **Conclusion**

Participation is very well embedded in YAP Irelands' infrastructure and is evidently beneficial for young people, their parents, YAP Ireland and external services who partner with them. Access to the participatory space and the scaffolding activities of YAP Ireland practitioners produce benefits for the young people and their parents. Supporting the participation of young people and their parents are also beneficial for YAP Ireland and other organisations. While the depth of participation that the young people experience may vary, this is respectful participation that is responsive to their needs and interests and supports their personal development and the development of capacities.





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### UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre

Institute for Lifecourse and Society  
Upper Newcastle Road  
National University of Ireland Galway  
Galway, Ireland

T: +353 91 495 398

E: [cfrc@nuigalway.ie](mailto:cfrc@nuigalway.ie)

W: [www.nuigalway.ie/childandfamilyresearch](http://www.nuigalway.ie/childandfamilyresearch)

Twitter: @UNESCO\_CFRC

Facebook: [ucfrc.nuig](https://www.facebook.com/ucfrc.nuig)

# Youth Advocate

PROGRAMMES IRELAND

### YAP Ireland CLG Head Office

Lower Ground Floor  
Park House  
191-193a North Circular Road  
Dublin 7  
D07 EWV4

T: +353 (0)1 868 9180

E: [info@yapireland.ie](mailto:info@yapireland.ie)

W: [www.yapireland.ie](http://www.yapireland.ie)

Twitter: @YAPIreland

Facebook: [@youthadvocateprogramme](https://www.facebook.com/youthadvocateprogramme)

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