

Book and media reviews

Appraising youth participation in Ireland

Horgan, D. and Kennan, D. (Eds.) (2022). *Child and Youth Participation in Policy, Practice and Research*. Abingdon: Routledge. 220pp., £36.99 (Paperback) ISBN: 978-0-3676-8232-3; £130.00 (Hardback) ISBN: 978-0-3673-5870-9; £27.29 (eBook) ISBN: 978-0-4293-4594-4.

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Legal and policy commitment to children's rights

If, as Nelson Mandela proclaims, there can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children, then there can, perhaps, be no sharper an indication of a government's commitment to children's rights than a strong legal and policy framework. This edited collection takes on the challenge of showcasing rights-based participatory approaches across the domains of policy making, practice and research with children and young people, and probes the complexities of transforming such approaches into children's everyday lives.

Overview of the Collection

Divided into three parts, the collection begins by setting out the policy framework in Ireland that supports youth participation; the National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making (2021), which is built upon the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020. The first part of the book goes on to present this policy implementation in a range of governmental and NGO organisations, including, amongst others: the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (Chapter 1); Foróige (Ireland's largest youth organisation) (Chapter 2), Tusla (the child and

family agency) (Chapter 2); the ARK (Ireland's cultural centre for children) (Chapter 3); and Comhairle Na nÓg (Ireland's nationwide system of youth councils, attached to local county councils) (see Chapters 4 & 5).

Part II of the book presents multi-disciplinary practitioner case studies of rights-based participation in practice with organisations. These include Barnardo's (chapter 6), Jigsaw – the national centre for youth mental health (chapter 8), Tusla (chapter 9), and the National Gallery of Ireland (chapter 10). The collection concludes in Part III with a focus on methodological research on participation, emphasising the need for researcher reflexivity in the research process (chapters 11 & 12) and recognition of forms of power such as race, gender and sexuality which need further examination (chapter 13). Other childhood experiences such as parental separation and divorce feature in chapter 14. The section closes with youth co-researcher accounts of designing a survey for a cross-national research project on health (Chapter 15).

This edited collection is a welcome and refreshing exposition of how the social worlds of children and the young are characterised by networks and intergenerational dependence. Horgan and Kennan's approach takes an 'and/both' lens which views children as rights-holders whilst acknowledging the frequently individualist approach to understanding children's rights. Whilst Horgan and Kennan identify seven themes in enabling and embedding rights-based participatory approaches, I will comment upon three themes that I find particularly striking in this collection: allyship; marginalised youth; and feedback.

Participation Allies

Chapter 1 emphasises the role of policy in getting 'buy-in' for children's participation, highlighting a shift away from the 'begging letter' to government agencies towards the strategic selection of people who want to work in this area, individuals who will set the bar high for participation and carry others along with them. Allyship is one of the crucial components in the relational dimension of children's participation, and it is one that recognises Horgan and Kennan's 'and/both' lens. Chapter 5 focuses on the importance of intergenerational allies, including parents, to bridge the youth and adult worlds. This is especially the case for seldom-heard and marginalised young people, such as those who identify as LGBTI+. The collection makes a welcome argument that such allyship must be about 'issues' and intersections, instead of about 'individuals'.

The potential for institutional allyship in driving social change is essential, as is the role of adult allies, in ensuring children and young people's access to youth-friendly information (see also chapters 4 and 8); a clear challenge highlighted in chapter 7. This chapter astutely points out that the way in which much information is shared is sometimes based on whether a child is

seen as uninterested or unable to cope with information, highlighting that this is problematic because if young people do not have access to youth-friendly information, they may not indicate interest. In this sense, adults can operate as ‘gatekeepers’, instead of allies for youth participation.

Seldom Heard and Silent

One of the many things this collection does exceptionally well is to prioritise debates about how particular groups of children face significant barriers to participation, including cultural participation (chapter 3). Chapter 6 highlights the critical role of adults in facilitating young people’s participation when existing structures of participation do not take a holistic approach—a state of affairs that can explain the absence of marginalised children’s voices. Seldom-heard young people have intersecting identities and therefore the inclusion and non-discriminatory principles of rights-based practice are essential: this is elucidated by the collection.

This more nuanced aspect of participation is further developed in chapter 13, which highlights that there are other axes of intersectional power aside from age—such as race, gender and sexuality—with which to evaluate broader social and structural barriers to participation. It is these barriers that maintain the silences of marginalised children from ethnic minorities and marginalised groups.

The Feedback Loop

Feedback (Lundy, 2018) is identified in this collection as essential in embedding institutional allyships within policy-making processes (chapter 5); youth participation can only be realised when the young understand the outcomes of sharing their views and opinions. Notably, this is a crucial component of Lundy’s (2007) model that is not traditionally done well, and this receives sustained attention in this edited collection. Youth advisory panels have often moved on before feedback can be given at the end of a project and young advisors do not witness the influence of their input; a challenge also highlighted in chapter 4 where young people are ‘aged out’ (p. 68) of research settings, or where there is no long-term structure for this (chapter 10). Planning for closure is therefore an essential part of project design (chapter 6). In a research setting, advisory groups often end abruptly when the project concludes, occluding the possibility of using feedback to enable further dissemination and impact activities. High quality feedback (Lundy, 2018) helps to secure influence, and this also demands the partnership and allyship highlighted throughout the text.

Conclusion

This edited collection showcases both right-based participatory guidance, whilst acknowledging the complexities and challenges of youth participation across the domains of policy making, practice and research. A strong emphasis on lesser-heard voices is a welcome contribution to the issue of children's participation, and the volume highlights how change and transformation in youth participation lies not only in adult allyship, but in legal and policy commitment to children's right to participate. This is an important and welcome addition to the literature because it provokes a nuanced consideration of the intricacies of participation in children's lives and asks how we move beyond 'voice' to meaningfully involve children in decision-making.

References

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