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## **Influencing policy and practice for young people in foster care: Learning from a model of collective participation**

Rebecca Jackson, Bernadine Brady, Cormac Forkan, Edel Tierney, Danielle Kennan

### ***Abstract***

A strong rationale for the collective participation of young people in care regarding decisions related to their care experience is evident in literature and statutory reports. However international research demonstrates challenges relating to participation in the childcare system. This includes context specific factors relating to issues in the field of child protection and welfare, along with more universal challenges such as access and diversity of representation, the imposition of adult formats and agendas and limits to the level of influence achieved. This paper reflects on the collective participation of young people in care in a rights-based initiative intended to facilitate input into service and policy development. This model, initiated by Tusla, Irelands Child and Family Agency, in partnership with EPIC an independent advocacy agency, provided an opportunity for young people in care to share direct experiences in order to identify and address challenges within the care system through meaningful collaborative processes. The perspectives of twenty-eight young participants were sought through five focus groups. In addition, twenty practitioners took part in semi-structured interviews. The design and analysis of these methods utilised a framework derived from Lundy's (2007) articulation of rights-based practice through the 'Voice Model'. Key lessons emerging suggest that a strong policy and legislative frame for practice underpinned by a model that articulates the practice requirements for effective participation is promising as evidenced by the outputs of the collective model. However, evidence of influence on policy and the service delivery experienced by children in care remains to be seen, as this process requires further time and organisational resources to embed and assess. Moreover, there is a need for the further development of communicative structures and feedback mechanisms if it is to be experienced as meaningful by all young people who engage with the model. Despite challenges in practice and the time required to achieve transformative influence, the personal benefits of direct participation in the fora for young people are arguably a worthy outcome of participatory practice

### ***1. Introduction***

Ireland's Child and Family Agency, Tusla has an obligation stated in its founding legislation, the *Child and Family Agency Act* (Government of Ireland, 2013), to ensure that in planning and reviewing the provision of services, the views of children and young people will be ascertained and given due weight. To achieve this obligation, Tusla has initiated a model of collective participation for children and young people in care in partnership with an independent advocacy organisation, EPIC (Empowering People in Care), known as the Tusla & EPIC Fora. This paper reflects on learning from an evaluation of this initiative that aimed to explore the extent to which the fora facilitated the collective participation of young people and young people in care to influence Tusla policy and practice.

#### ***1.1. The Rationale for the Participation of Young People in Care***

The need for effective structures and processes to support the participation of children in care in order to ensure their protection, well-being, and the relevance of services provided to them has been well documented in Ireland and internationally (Martin, Forde, Dunn Galvin, O'Connell, & O'Gráda, 2015;

Sinclair, 2004; Tisdall, Davis & Gallagher, 2008). In the Irish context, the importance given to youth participation in the care system as crucial to protection is underscored by the findings of a number of reports spanning decades, from the Kennedy Report in 1969 to the more recent Ryan Report (Dept. of Children and Youth Affairs, 2009). These reports highlighted the serious failings of the state to protect children in care as a consequence of not listening to them, leaving them at risk of continuing maltreatment and abuse (Martin et al., 2015). In addition to this concern, the discussion in international literature has shown that the experience of care processes has implications for wellbeing, in the short and long term. Whilst in care, many children and young people feel that they do not have a say in decisions that affect them, nor sufficient information and support to understand and cope with what can be a very stressful experience (Cashmore, 2002; McEvoy & Smith, 2011; Mitchell, Kuczynski, Tubbs, & Ross, 2010; Pölkki, Vornanen, Pursiainen, & Riikonen, 2012; Mitchell, & Kuczynski, 2010). Furthermore research with care leavers indicates that the experience of the care process, along with factors arising from prior life experiences, may lead to adverse longitudinal outcomes in adulthood, such as poor mental health, lower educational attainment, and welfare dependency (Daly, 2012; Moran McGregor & Devaney, 2017; Mullan, McAlister, Rollock, & Fitzsimons, 2007; Munro, 2001; Stein, Pinkerton, & Kelleher, 2000). For these reasons, to develop an effective child protection system, and to improve the lives of children and young people in care in the short and long-term, it is considered necessary to listen to and respond to the views of children in care (Daly, 2012; Kennan, Brady, & Forkan, 2019; Moran, McGregor, & Devaney, 2017; Mullan et al., 2007; Munro, 2001; Shannon, 2016; Stein et al., 2000).

### *1.2 Challenges to Collective Participation*

Despite a well-developed rationale for young people in care to participate in policy and service development, challenges to meaningful collective participation have been identified in literature. Firstly, the structure, scope, and operation of participatory initiatives has been criticised (Lansdown, 2010 in Percy-Smith & Thomas eds.). The structure of participatory opportunities has been found to mimic adult formats with implications for the effective engagement of young people of given their variable capacities for engagement with formal models of participation (Forde & Martin, 2016; McGinley & Grieve, 2010 in Percy-Smith & Thomas eds; Perry-Hazan, 2016; Tisdall et al., 2008). In addition to structural challenges, the top-down initiation and operation of opportunities, combined with the dispositions of adults within these structures towards young people's participation may constrain agenda setting. This, in turn, influences process and outcomes (Larkins, Kiili, & Palsanen, 2014; Perry-Hazan, 2016; Seim & Slettebø, 2011; Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012).

The engagement of young people in care in participatory initiatives has proved challenging. This is an issue as the representativeness of young participants has implications for the effect of influence on service and policy development that affects a diverse base of service users (Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012; Tisdall, 2017). On one hand, the collective consideration of shared experiences within the care system may result in valid demands because certain experiences generated by the care context in which the young people live their lives may be widely experienced (Tisdall, 2008). However, failure to engage 'hard to reach' groups may result in inappropriate practice and policy responses that do not meet the needs of the unrepresented, through reliance on those that are already motivated to participate (Dixon, Ward, & Blower, 2019). For this reason, attention to recruitment is crucial if diversity is to be achieved. This poses challenges in that certain cohorts of young people may not be amenable to participation opportunities, while others may require additional supports with implications for resourcing (McLeod, 2007; Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012).

The attainment of influence as a result of participation is difficult to achieve as evidenced in the variable outcomes of collective participation for young people in care, ranging from input into service

development and practice based education at a local level, to awarenessraising at a policy level (Damiani-Taraba et al., 2018; Dixon et al., 2019; Larkins et al., 2014; Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012). It is argued that collective participation is more likely to lead to changes in the young people involved than have a transformative impact at a policy level (Forde & Martin, 2016; Larkins et al., 2014; Percy-Smith, 2006; Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012; Tisdall, 2008).

It is also important to note that participatory practice interacts with the systemic contexts in which young people participate with implications for the attainment of meaningful or effective participation (Percy-Smith, 2006). The complexity of protectionist practice and legislative responsibilities concerning child welfare can affect participation processes through as mediators of young people's demands. In addition to this conceptualisations of young people within this arena as vulnerable and a perceived lack of knowledge or skills can limit participation or access, which may interact with the representation of needs in a policy development context (Kennan et al., 2019; McCafferty, 2017p.11; van Bijleveld et al., 2015; Vis et al., 2012).

### 1.3 Requirements for Effective Participation

Given the challenges encountered in participatory practice it is important to consider what practice requirements might support effective participation. Young people require support to develop the understanding, capacity and confidence required to have meaningful engagement with participative processes (Cockburn, 2005; Lundy, 2007). For this reason, if participation is to be effective, a commitment to participation practice as an ongoing supported process that utilises youth-friendly methods to facilitate young people's engagement is key (Archard & Skiveness, 2009; Cockburn, 2005; Vis et al., 2012). This enables young people to understand what is being asked of them and develop their views on the matter through the generation of shared meaning (Archard & Skiveness, 2009; Cockburn, 2005; Gallagher, Smith, Hardy, & Wilkinson, 2012; Ruiz-Casares, Tisdall, & Grover, 2017).

A key learning from literature is that intergenerational relationships may enable or constrain the agency and influence of young people as a result of ongoing dependence on adult facilitators for information, guidance and support (eg. Cossar et al., 2016; Horwath et al., 2012; Larkins et al., 2014; Nybell, 2013; van Bijleveld et al., 2015). Therefore attention must be paid to the development of supportive relationships that can encourage the expression of their views in a childcare system where young people must feel free to express themselves without fear of rebuke or affect to services as a result of voicing opinions on the service they receive (Lundy, 2007; Lundy, McEvoy, & Byrne, 2011; McCafferty, 2017).

The engagement of decision-makers is crucial to effective participation which can be evidenced through changes in services, policies, and institutions (Larkins et al., 2014; Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012; Lundy, 2007). Therefore, practice structures that facilitate the communication of youth views to a relevant audience of decision makers that are responsive to the views of young participants are required to ensure accountability to the process (Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012; Percy-Smith, 2006).

Finally, participation is embedded within particular organisational contexts. If reaching an understanding of the viewpoint of a marginalised young person is a time consuming business requiring a sustained relationship, this means that the role of service resources, both as an influence on decision-making and a constraint to practice must be considered (Brady et al., 2018; Daly, 2014; Larkins et al., 2014; McLeod, 2007; Pölkki et al., 2012; Vis et al., 2012).

## 2. The Lundy (2007) Model

Participation practices within Tusla are conceptualised using the Lundy model (2007), a checklist for participatory practice, which has been adopted as a framework for practice. The Lundy model provides a rights-based framework that prescribes a four point checklist that enables a thorough interpretation of the implications of Article 12 for practice (UNCRC, 1989) which states that:

*States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.*

*For this purpose, the child shall, in particular, be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child (Lundy, 2007).*

The first requirement of the Lundy model checklist is *Space*, which means that children must be given an opportunity to express a view. The second requirement is *Voice*, which articulates the need that children have for information, facilitation, and guidance in expressing their views. Both elements are closely linked to the first part of Article 12 and there is significant overlap between them. Concerning the second part of Article 12, Lundy (2007) third practice requirement is *Audience*: that the views of children must be listened to by someone with the capacity to make decisions. This requirement is linked to the concept of *Influence*: that the view must be acted upon if appropriate. This final practice requirement involves feedback on the decision regarding the due weight given to their input to avoid tokenistic participation (Lundy, 2007).

These requirements, which impact on the level of participation achieved, are all interrelated. It is argued that they must all be realised in practice if the legal obligation to ensure the appropriate implementation of Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989) is to be achieved, enhancing the possibility of transformative practice (Lundy, 2007). McCafferty (2017) argues that the Lundy Model, with its clarification of Article 12 can be of utility in improving participatory practice in social work through the articulation of practices and processes required to fully realise young people's rights to participate in the complex context of protection and welfare.

### 3. The Tusla & EPIC fora

In October 2014 a pilot phase of three local youth groups were set up by Tusla in conjunction with EPIC (Daly, 2016). The key aim of these groups, known as the Tusla and EPIC Fora, were to consult with young people in foster care and to seek their views on care related issues through a participatory mechanism. Within these fora the young people were facilitated to engage directly on the reform and monitoring of care locally with the management of Tusla and nationally with senior policymakers through idea exchange and fun collaborative processes with ongoing support from adult facilitators. Following the pilot phase, a further six fora were established by January 2016. This number expanded to a total of fifteen fora nationwide (Kennan et al., 2017).

The development of this network of fora was driven at a national level by EPIC's Participation Coordinator, who worked in partnership with Tusla to build capacity within the organisation to develop and sustain participation structures for young people, to ensure their views and concerns are heard, and could contribute to policy and practice development. The fora were overseen by regional working groups consisting of diverse practitioners within a local area, who reported back to a National Oversight Group and Regional Directors of Services. These working groups convened a diverse range of actors depending on the locale. These could include area managers, principal social workers, social workers, social care leaders, participation officers, a children's rights officer, advocates, and voluntary and community sector partners. These working groups were coordinated on a national basis by the EPIC Participation Development Officer. A key component of each group is access to a decision-maker

in that locale, such as a principal social worker or an area manager. Key members of the local working groups, along with EPIC's Participation Coordinator facilitated the local fora to which they were attached.

#### 4. Methods

##### 4.1. *Objectives*

This evaluation aimed to explore the extent to which the Tusla and EPIC Fora facilitated the collective participation of young people in care in order to influence Tusla policy and practice. The objectives required to achieve this aim were to ascertain if the fora provided a safe space in which young people could be facilitated to express their views and whether the resulting opinions reach the correct audience and achieved meaningful influence. The evaluations design was deductive, derived from Lundy (2007) conceptual model of participation as required by Article 12 (UNCRC, 1989).

##### 4.2. *Methodology*

It was considered important to enable and promote youth participation in both the design of the research instruments and data analysis and dissemination given the rights-based initiative under evaluation. This was to ensure that young participants were represented as authentically as possible while maximising participation through appropriate research activities and minimising the potential for distress (Clark, 2005; Leeson, 2007). For this reason, there was an attempt to recruit a youth advisory group to inform the research design and dissemination. However, convening a group proved challenging due to constraints on the young people's schedules within the research time frame. Only two young advisors from the local fora could attend a research design meeting to advise on the clarity of questions and language used during the focus group discussions, along with the accessibility of the wording and information in the consent packs.

##### 4.3. *Sampling*

An initial eight fora areas were purposively sampled to allow for the greatest breadth of participant demographics, from rural to urban areas, from youngest to oldest, from the longest in operation to the shortest. However, it was only possible to convene a focus group in five of the eight fora areas sampled. It was reported by the research facilitator that the youngest group had not identified with the being in care and so had only met for one social outing. A residential group had failed to initiate due to problems managing the staff support required to facilitate young people's attendance. It was also reported as impossible to convene the oldest group within the research timeframe as most were aging out of the care process and had busy schedules. The sample achieved included nine males and nineteen females, over five different for areas, ranging in age from twelve to eighteen, however the majority of participants were over fourteen (Table 1).

Stakeholders attached to the sampled local fora were also invited to interview. A final sample of twenty adults agreed to participate. Fifteen Tusla staff including Area Managers (n.3), Principal Social Workers (n.3), Social Workers (n.3), Social Care Leaders (n.4), a Business Manager and a Participation Officer. Five staff from EPIC took part including Advocate Management (n.2) and Advocates (n. 3) (see Table 1 for distribution by area).

Table 1. Sample of Participants by Area

Area	Young Participants	Stakeholders
Cork	0	3
Dublin North City	5	1
Dublin South	5	1
Mid-West	7	3
Galway	4	6
Donegal	7	2
Cavan/Monaghan	0	2
National	0	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>20</b>

#### 4.4. Recruitment

With regard to stakeholders, information and consent packs were distributed to potential participants via email directly from the research team. Information and consent packs for both the relevant guardians for the young people and potential young participants tailored to varying age ranges were distributed through the principal social worker via the EPIC Participation Coordinator (Kendrick, Steckley & Lerpiniere, 2008). Direct recruitment was not possible for data protection reasons. In order to ensure guardian consent was obtained prior to seeking the consent of the young person, the principal social worker for each area had to identify the type of care order a young person was subject to under the *Childcare Act* (1991). If the young person was under an Emergency Order, then the principal social worker was the guardian and had to consider the issue of informed consent for the young person. If the young person was under a Voluntary Order, then the principal social worker must dispatch the required information and consent document to the relevant guardian through their assigned social worker. This process of consent was reported as challenging and had potential implications for access and representation within the research for the young people.

#### 4.5. Data collection

The data was gathered through focus groups for the young participants as it was decided that this form of group discussion and reflection was similar to the fora meetings, so this would mimic familiar forms of communication for the young people. Furthermore, the format of the focus group is adaptable to the characteristics of the group in line with their emerging capacities (Horgan, Forde, Parkes, & Martin, 2015). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the sampled stakeholders to allow for rich qualitative explorations within the research topic given the variable locations and professional roles of the sample (Horgan et al., 2015).

As this evaluation explored the attainment of rights under the Lundy (2007) voice model, the questions for the focus group were derived from the concepts of space, voice, audience and influence. In order to maximise youth engagement through interaction with these questions, visual frames were used in the focus groups to support understanding of the concepts (Horgan et al., 2015). With regard to space, the questions focused on the perception of the fora as an appropriate space to discuss the sensitive topic of care experiences. A graffiti wall was used to provide young participants with a way to express themselves and their feelings around participation in this space. With regard to voice, the questions focused on all those activities or practices that supported the young people to give voice to their

experience. A frieze for the graffiti wall was developed to explore the activities that took place within the fora operations and helping hands could be placed on the frieze to show how adults helped young people raise their voices. The idea of the perceived audience and appropriate audience was explored through questions concerning their perceptions of who is, and who should be listening to the young people using visual scales that explored the extent to which the young people felt heard. This then prompted discussion on influence evidenced through feedback and perceived actions or changes that resulted from their participation.

The semi structured interviews explored stakeholders' perspectives on the structure and processes of the fora, and their perception of the benefits and challenges of its operations for both the commissioning organisation and the young people involved. This enabled an exploration of adult support for participation in terms of the provision of space, the facilitation of voice, access to audience and response to the young participants voices.

Ethical approval was granted by the authors' university and Tusla, the Child and Family Agency before fieldwork began. In line with the ethical requirement of informed consent, activities were built into the structure of the focus groups to allow for queries and clarification on the research process to ensure ongoing informed consent (Kendrick, Steckley & Lerpiniere et al., 2008). An outline of the limits of confidentiality in line with the *Children First Act* (2015) was also provided. Furthermore, an assessment of participants' well-being and perceptions of research participation both before and after the focus group was conducted through a reflective exercise using an energy graph to ensure the any arising needs for support were addressed in a timely manner. This was supplemented by an information pack with links to support services in their local areas.

#### 4.6. *Data analysis*

The resulting data from the focus groups and interviews were analysed using framework analysis, a five step qualitative thematic method developed for use in the applied policy arena by Ritchie and Spencer (1994 cited in Ward, Furber, Tierney, & Swallow, 2013). This is a five- step process that involves, familiarisation, identification of themes, indexing data, charting the data into an analytical frame, and analysing the resulting data (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994 cited in Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). The first step, familiarisation occurred through the reading and rereading of transcripts. Following this, themes were identified from apriori knowledge gathered from literature reviews and transcripts. The third step included the indexing of data into an initial thematic catalogue using nVivo. The fourth step was to organise the thematic results onto an analytic frame derived from the Lundy (2007) model prior to analysis when the combined narrative of youth and adult participants was analysed using a combination of existing literature and the voice model. Documentary analysis of the initial reports and material outputs of each fora was examined for evidence of structure, process and influence (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009).

Trustworthiness within this evaluation is demonstrated through consideration of the following validity criteria: credibility, dependability, transferability, reliability and congruence (Lincoln & Guba, 1985 cited in Horgan et al., 2015 p.244; Whitemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). Firstly, the criteria of credibility in terms of the effectiveness of the data collection and analysis process can be evaluated through consideration of the data collection and analysis methods. It is argued that the methods used were appropriate to the needs of the young participants and stakeholders, providing young participants with support to express their views. Digital audio-recording was used to facilitate accurate verbatim transcription for thematic analysis. The findings are evidenced by verbatim quotes taken from this professionally transcribed data (Horgan et al., 2015 pp.44–5; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Thematic analysis was rigorously anchored in the project's aims and objectives, and drew on the Lundy

(2007) voice model, as a defining frame for both questions and analysis (Horgan et al., 2015). Moreover, the use of the Lundy (2007) voice model as a frame for the development of data collection tools and data analysis enhances the dependability of researcher judgements within analysis through its clear articulation of the requirements of participative practice (Horgan et al., 2015; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Another strength of the research frame derived from the Lundy (2007) model is that it promotes the criteria of transferability, that is the ability to transfer the methods and questions from one group to another, in differing contexts through its clear articulation of the requirements of participative practice (McCafferty, 2017; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Reliability regarding the stability of the findings is affirmed by the congruence of the findings in relation to existing literature (Whittemore et al., 2001).

## 5. Findings

In this section the findings of the evaluation as framed will be outlined utilising the four practice requirements of the Lundy (2007) Model. As there is a significant overlap between Space and Voice, and between Audience and Influence, this section is divided into two parts reflecting this link within the Lundy Model. This is followed by a third section relating to the benefits and challenges relating to collective participation in the development of service delivery and policy implementation in the childcare arena in Ireland.

### 5.1. Space & voice

The concepts of space and voice are chronologically first in the process of participatory practice and interlinked in practice. Lundy (2007) asserts that the space for participation must be a safe space, free from fear of recrimination and with no discrimination regarding access, be that on the grounds of disability or perceived capacity to participate. The safe space is a prerequisite for the facilitation of voice, which interacts with the right to guidance and information provided for in the UNCRC (1989)

Supportive relationships between members of a community of shared experience were perceived to promote a safe space for the young people in care to express their views. This shared experience as a foundation for speaking about personal experience was important given the potential stigma that young people in care fear will arise if they disclose their unique experience as looked after children in their communities.

*“No, [...] it’s much easier to talk to someone who is in the same scenario as you, and then you don’t have the awkward silence and saying, ‘Is that because, do you see your Dad or see your Mum?’ That whole awkwardness of it, awkwardness about being in care.” (Young Person Case Area 1)*

*“We’re all in care so like we don’t judge each other.” (Young Person Case Area 2)*

*“What came up at that agenda day was that children in care didn’t want to talk in that sort of an open forum (an opportunity for young service users across a wide range of services to feedback on experiences) about their experiences because they’re giving information to other people that they didn’t want to give out which is fair enough.” (Area Manager) “They spend so much time hiding their care identity in school, with friends, explaining it away because other young people don’t understand; kids would say oh they think I’m adopted, or my parents are drug addicts or whatever. So, they don’t get into it [...] we asked them how many of you have told your friends that you’re in care and of the ten of them one young person [had]. That’s a big, big secret to tell.” (EPIC Management)*

The development of these supportive relationships both with peers and trusted adults through team building activities, as part of the general operation of the fora and through one-off events was an important part of fora activities. These activities varied by location, and included trips to adventure centres, day trips, overnight stays facilitated by partner organisations at retreat locations, games and cinema nights or meals out.

*“I’d say what really brought us together was the adventure day out. We went on this day out, it was so cool, to,*

*like, an adventure centre. It was the day poor [participant] over here lost his shoe in a bog! It was so funny.” (Young Person, Case Area 3)*

*“They have the craic with us, the last few days with us. But like you know they don’t have an iron bar up their backsides with us like. You know?” (Young Person Case Area 1)*

*“Like we started the day with these exercises out in climbing walls and different things like that which we all participated in with the children so again that level, a bit of fun, a bit of camaraderie, a bit of slagging, bit of banter and then that translated back into the room then when the ice was broken a bit you know?” (Area Manager)*

These supportive relationships developed over time as an evolving process, in a youth-led, informal format which differed significantly from other participatory opportunities such as care reviews which are more formal in nature. This relaxed, informal environment actively promoted by adult facilitators, increased the feeling of security.

*“No one is going, ‘How’s it going for you?’ and your foster carer is sitting beside them, ‘Yes, grand!’ But it gives them a chance to think about, well, what’s that like for you?” (EPIC Management)*

*“The grownups? well we love them, how they all go on” ... “Like they don’t act like they are minding you, they act like, they treat you like their friend.” (Young Person Case Area 4)*

*“The adults, they’re not very adult, are they?” (Young Person Case Area 1).*

*“It is about relationship and trust building as well. If you can build a group where trust and respect are paramount within the group, well then you are going to get more honesty. And you get young people to engage a lot more too in something they enjoy doing. So, we played the games with them, we didn’t just stand back and let them play by themselves or direct them how to play. [We] try and make them feel as comfortable as possible and you don’t want to look like too official.” (Tusla Staff)*

The concept of a safe space and the expression of views are seen to be overlapped in the accounts of some young participants who gave examples of feeling safe to express their views without fear of recrimination through the nonjudgmental and supportive stance of the adult facilitators committed to the wellbeing of the young participants.

*“Oh my God, no seriously, I need to leave, no word of a lie, I went on a rampage for about fifteen minutes and I was just like, ‘I hate social workers, I hate everything’, but the thing was like they understood.” (Young Person Case Area 3)*

*“It’s like whenever we ever we open up to anything they like distract us to kind of coping mechanisms [...] I really want to come to here because I’m like really close to people in this group ..... and like they don’t judge you.” (Young Person Case Area 4)*

*“There was staff there, so if any young person was finding it difficult, whatever was the issue, or you know? They had somebody to talk to and we had actually organised that amongst ourselves as well as a team; that if there was anybody who needed to have a time out or any of the young people that we would you know? Make a space available for them to talk one on one with somebody, just to check that they were ok [...] I hope that they felt it was a safe space.” (Social Worker)*

Some young participants discussed how they felt supported in the expression of their views by their relationships with their peers and facilitators, demonstrating a further overlap between the factors of space and voice.

*“You don’t just have like the support of EPIC. Other young people like us are here; we support each other and sort of help each other through it. Like, say for me, for example: when I first came to the Fora group I was kind of like, I was kind of nervous about talking in front of people, and then being part of the fora group helped me talk in conferences as well [...] Like, that helped me hugely.” (Young Person Case Area 3)*

*“They are really caring.” (Young Person Case Area 2)*

*“So, I think it gives them that space and it gives them that permission to actually say what they think because once they voice it and they know they can voice it there because they know everybody else there knows what*

*they're talking about, that kind of sparks a big conversation and you know? They're all aw that happened to me [...] and then to get them to say ok you've had that now could you funnel that down to something that we're telling the system this is what we'd like to see change and they've done it you know?" (Area Manager).*

Each forum sampled focused on an issue of importance to them identified during a consultation and agenda setting day facilitated by the EPIC Participation Coordinator in order to facilitate the expression of views on matters important to the young participants. This commitment to promoting the voice of the young people through agenda setting is evidence of participatory principles in action and was considered an important part of fora operations by stakeholders at both an operational and oversight level.

*"This is a decision we make in the beginning. You can either direct those fora to look at things you want them to look at, or you can have an open agenda where the young people decide what it is they do." (Area Manager)*

*"The young people set the agenda in the fact that they identify their topic you know and then each time we come back we work on their topic [...] then they'll decide that, 'I want to ask about a review, I want to ask what this means or I want to ask what that means or I just want to play games or I just want to sit around and chat or listen to some music or play with these fidget spinners now that everyone is on.'" (EPIC Management)*

*"At the start I suppose we felt if we led but then as time went on, we kind of put it back on them you know? And said you know? We're not here for us, we're here for you do you know. [...], we're not telling you what to say, we're not telling you any ideas, you know? [...]. So, they were very good in terms of taking that responsibility and that ownership over [...], what they wanted to do and how they wanted to express their wishes and views in different formats" (Social Worker)*

*"They're not bossy like..... they don't say you have to do this or you have to do that, they just.....it's not like they would let us do whatever they want, but they're not like...they're not bossy...they feed ye.... And they let you have fun." (Young Person Case Area 2)*

Young people also needed ongoing information and support over time to help them in the expression of their views in line with the Lundy (2007) model.

*"Most importantly that they know their rights; I think that's always key you know, I think a lot of the time, sometimes young people aren't clear themselves on what they can ask for and or what they can't ask for." (Tusla Staff)*

*"Yeah. [EPIC Management] wrote down the questions that the people said, and she brought it to the big boss I think it was." (Young Person Case Area 3)*

*"It doesn't just take once or twice for people to meet up. [...] For people to be able to talk about I suppose their own experiences and you know? Their own wishes and views. That would take much longer than that [...] That space that wasn't rushed and there was no kind of motive, [...] it takes people a while to come out of their shell and it takes people a long time to come up with ideas." (Social Worker)*

The facilitation of voice through enabling activities and methods that support the expression of young people's views varied by area depending on the availability of resources, access to activities and events, and the young people's preference for working methods. For example, one forum chose to focus on social activities. Others worked principally through group discussion to produce outputs that they hoped would influence practice or improve the experience of care. Some of the fora worked in tandem with creative professionals to reflect on their identified concerns and produce artwork and raps. Another forum used overnight stays facilitated by an external partner organisation in their area as an opportunity to immerse themselves in their project. Some young members had the opportunity to travel to international knowledge sharing events for young people in care, bringing back learning that they could share with their forum.

*".... Discussion mostly. Sitting down taking, making decisions as a group" ... "Listening to each other" ..... "Well it's sort of helps us with other ideas so like if someone says something, what they think then we add on to it" ...." We'll see what comes out of it" ... "That makes more sense." (Young People Case Area 1)*

*“It was basically just like a load of young people having fun like camping but like; and at night time there’d be like a camp fire and if you wanted to talk about your experience in care you could; if you didn’t want to you didn’t have to. You could listen to other people; it was just learning about the care system in Scotland and how it differs to Ireland. And like it was like, it was interesting; you’d be sitting there and like oh if you could take this from the Scottish one and give you this from the Irish one you know.” (Young Person Case Area 3)*

*“So that was always a challenge trying to agree the dates and I think that’s why a couple of times the overnights worked really well for us. We were able to get a good group of the guys together and have that additional time with them that you wouldn’t have maybe within a group setting where you’re coming in for a few hours and you’re anxious; you’ve to get them out, you’ve to get them back, fed etc. where the times we had the overnights, we were under less pressure.” (Tusla Staff)*

*“Little projects, like we are doing here, little brainstorming sheets. Like, we are doing a book, [...] so I think everyone is given a little project to do saying write down what they think foster means and what they feel about fostering, like that little thing. We brainstormed keywords and then we came up with the definition, and then we just kind of put it together in an easier form for everyone to understand.” (Young Person Case Area 5)*

The outputs of the fora sampled included a video and a rap to promote awareness of young people’s experiences and perception of being in care. There were also outputs that could be utilised in practice such as a leaflet to advise on file access, and a placement information booklet intended to help young people adjust to their new foster home. Young people also advised on improvements to care review forms and environments.

## 5.2. Audience and influence

Access to an audience with key decision-makers as part of Lundy (2007) voice model is evidenced in direct (face to face and direct communication) and indirect (secondary reporting on behalf of young people) access opportunities inbuilt or arising from the fora processes. Decision-makers relevant to the fora include Principal Social Workers, Area Managers and a National Oversight Committee that includes Directors of Service and the National Policy Officer. Indirect access was provided to these audiences through inbuilt reporting structures of the general operation of the fora. Opportunities for a direct audience with decision-makers and social work practitioners also occurred as part of the fora operations, as a response to requests for information, or through networking events such as attendance at national conferences or international events.

*“The first group there went on to present at national Fora, they presented their rap at different national meetings, they’ve you know? They’ve done a lot of presentations around that and they’ve also had a number of open days that we did just to invite other children in.” (Area Manager) “They are working on their slideshow that they are going to present at the Epic conference [...] There is good information in it and I suppose the one major outcome is that going into care is a very traumatic experience for a young person or a child.” (Social Care Leader)*

*“With the older age group, it’s you know. Very clear, look, we’re bringing this back [...] They’re happy enough for it to be brought back and then things like they would have done you know the national children in care day, so they stood up and did their presentation on the forum so that’s, you know? There would be a variety of not just managers; there would be a variety of services there as well.” (Social Worker)*

*“They talked to us a little bit about their involvement in you know their reviews etc. So, any information that we got we fed back to our wider teams with their permission.” (Tusla Staff)*

However, while all adult stakeholders were aware of reporting and feedback activities, it was not always clear to some young participants as to who was listening.

*“It’s not really gone to other people though.” (Young Person Case Area 4)*

*Interviewer: “Ok, and do you ever hear from those guys like do they ever send messages to the forum?” “No.... “They send vouchers to get a hot chocolate.” (Young People Case Area 2)*

*“Interviewer: “Do you ever get feedback on the information that you give Tusla?” ... “No” .... Interviewer: “So the booklet you did, did you get any feedback? ... “Oh, we get feedback on that.” (Young Person Case Area 5)*

Some areas that had direct access to decision-makers relevant to the childcare system through consultation benefited from the experiences of recognition that resulted from this. These young participants reported feelings of empowerment resulting from the perception of being heard.

*“They thought we were brilliant. There was a lawyer there.” (Young Person Case Area 1)*

*“Yeah. Literally like I feel like a Superhero when I come in here because people listen to us, like Epic listens to us and we have; we feel like we can actually; we’re getting somewhere like. One day we’ll make a change.” (Young Person Case Area 3)*

With regard to the practice requirement of Influence, there were accounts given of indirect influence on social work practice at a local level, primarily concerning small tweaks to practice prompted by practitioner reflection and response as a result of listening to direct experiences. These included changes to introductory meetings with young people, to the childcare review forms and environment.

*“They have changed the access rooms. I was actually talking to the child care reviewer, and we are looking at foods for the child and care review] [...] calming foods, so lollipops, sucky bottles, crunchy foods if you are feeling angry, popcorn.” (Social Care Leader)*

*“They don’t feel as disaffected because they identified the review forms not having the information of the social worker and something changed. There was cause and effect.” (EPIC Management)*

*“One of the things that we did discuss that was fed back to my team was how certain patterns kept coming over, like the change of social worker was a big one for them, on allocation,[...], oh here’s another person now to ask my background to why I came into care, how I’m feeling [...]How would you feel [social workers name] if someone came into your house and was like right? Tell me everything about you. Do you know? And tell me how you’re feeling [...]? They felt it was maybe a little bit rushed sometimes about how they would get to know them and get to understand them and so I certainly brought that back to the team and said you know? I think, for myself as well, for all of us just to take it a bit slower, that when we go out and see them for the first time maybe we don’t ask a lot of questions.” (Social Worker)*

It is important to note that there may be limits to the influence on service delivery and policy that a forum can exert on service and policy development, particularly in the arena of child protection and welfare, where legislation and organisational resources can constrain responses to the young participants views.

*“But I think there are obviously going to be situations sometimes where we can’t do; particularly maybe where we’re bound by law where it’s just not negotiable and we’re going to have to say to the kids no actually we can’t do that one...then we’re going to have to manage if they’re very angry about that, just manage that piece. It’s not something we can change necessarily. But also; that won’t necessarily be a negative experience for them because that will be about; that’s a bit like life. Some stuff you can’t, do you know what I mean?” (Principal Social Worker) “And [I]empathise with them because I said look, if I was going on holidays, I wouldn’t like to have to have a letter received (consent to travel) before I go. [...] And you know? I could really see how they feel you know. But there were just some things that I suppose we, kind of an inability to do anything about. Other things we could certainly do things about, if it’s about practice from social work.” (Social Worker)*

Crucially, six outputs from the fora were published on the Tusla website, with the intention being that they would inform future practice on a nationwide basis. These included the production of two awareness videos relating to care experiences and a top tips poster intended to prompt reflective practice in addition to the outputs related to needs for information and support around care processes including the placement information booklet, the information leaflet regarding file access and a dictionary of care words explaining the jargon used by professionals. The route to national dissemination was a slow process due to the time required at a management level to reflect on the recommendations and ensure that they do not interact with legislative or policy-based requirements of practice in a child protection and welfare setting. This means that the young participants who contributed to the outputs may not benefit from their implementation or have a chance to experience

recognition for their inputs during their time taking part on the fora.

### 5.3. Benefits for young people

The fora provided emotional and social support for some young people in foster care through a community of shared experience where young people felt comfortable being open about their looked after status in a supportive space without fear of stigmatisation.

*"I can't talk to anyone in my school about my foster care, because there's only one or two people in foster care in my school, and like I can't go around saying stuff about my Ma and Da, like if it makes me upset a bit, [...] I've been in foster care since I was three, and I've been in care like thirteen years now, and like I felt like everyone else is like different to me." (Young Person Case Area 3)*

*"They understand you like and it's really nice, cos like, I only have one person to talk to outside of this group and I feel really bad if I open up too much, in case I scare them away or something, and then but like it's nice to have a load of people to open up to that like you trust to open up to, sometimes they are going through the same thing as you are." (Young Person Case Area 4)*

*"The fact that they made friendships with each other was really key; I think that's a big thing. And I think what; you know obviously they're young people and they're going to connect anyway with all the normal things but I think some of the friendships are really built on the fact that we've had similar experiences and I don't have many people maybe in my network that have a similar experience." (Tusla Staff)*

Furthermore, participation in this initiative provided an opportunity for some young people to get information, support and guidance that helped them to understand the care process and challenges that they may be facing in their uniquely structured lives within the child protection and welfare context.

*"But when he came to the group he met another young boy who had moved here from the [another country] under horrible circumstances and is now in care and would be very grateful to be in care. So when that little boy told his story in the group, not all of it but part of his story, it actually supported the man [...] to realise that okay sometimes young people need to go into care for reasons that their social workers are right and it is not the case that everybody hates being in care." (Social Care Leader) "One of the young people was talking about; she thought her social worker; her social worker had been changed or that the social worker might be on leave or sick leave or something because she couldn't get hold of her. [The facilitator] said well did you get on to her team leader; [...] and she said well who is a team leader. And well your social worker has a team leader who is your social worker's boss and your social worker's boss has a boss. And if you don't get hold of your social worker you can go to your social worker's boss and they were all like, what?" (EPIC) "If you were fighting with your parents or something and you didn't know if you were right or they were wrong and stuff like that and we come here and then you ask them because they are actual social workers so they can help." (Young Person Case Area 5)*

The discovery of shared challenges experienced in care processes through collective participation was perceived to have fostered a sense of validation for some young people. As it also provided the basis of actionable projects undertaken by the fora, this is potentially supportive for the development of personal capacity arising from group processes.

*"You feel alone before the group kind of thing. So, like, say if I felt I wanted to see my father, but I wasn't in a group, like I can't do anything about it. We've done something about it as a group." (Young Person Case Area 3)*

*"It's very, very, it's very difficult to say to a young person, if you've a problem, speak to your social worker on a one-to-one basis, especially about kind of like, okay, apart from the fact that like about stuff like I haven't seen my brothers and sisters, I'm not happy that I didn't get invited to my last review. As a group, as a collective, it is more, it's a more supportive environment." (EPIC Management)*

*"[...]and a power to influence change and I think that's having an impact on their self-esteem which sometimes for children in care is as you can imagine a big issue." (Principal Social Worker)*

*Involvement in the fora activities and the development of positive supportive relationships with their peers and*

*facilitators was perceived to have fostered a sense of positive identity for some young participants.*

*“On the day of the conference, they all wore the hoodies, you know, and it was like going, it was their identity. It was like, ‘This is our group’, you know. You think they’d be dying for opportunities to not look the same, but they actually kind of really, you know, felt sort of relief in being part of a little club, you know [...] There was no uniform requirement, but the meaning was essentially identity; it was their group, their club, you know.”(EPIC)*

*“That group has actually supported them to be proud to be in care, which was extremely... When we were trying to find a name to name the group fostered and proud was the name that they had come up with.” (Social Care Leader)*

*“It gives them a sense of identity and feeling that they’re not alone, that they’re not the odd one out so to speak and I think that’s extremely important for children to have that sense of identity and if they can’t have it in their family or community where do they get it? And in this instance this group seem to have given them a big element of that you know?” (Area Manager)*

#### 5.4. Challenges to implementation

Despite positive feedback on the operations of the fora, and the potential for influence on practice arising from the outputs of the fora, challenges to implementation are evident. Firstly, engagement from practitioners and decision-makers differed among fora areas.

*“In some working groups we don’t have social workers or we don’t have principals or area managers involved and they’re the groups I feel are least effective in terms of; they’re effective in terms of the young people coming together and there’s all of that really important work like feeling part of that care community, really being acknowledged and valued as young people, having the opportunity to have your say, but there’s no influencing audience.” (EPIC Management)*

In one area a lack of social worker involvement may have had implications for the perception of actionable challenges identified by the young people, due to a lack of personnel with specific knowledge of social work practices, legislative and policy requirements. An issue that the young people had identified as something worthy of consideration that had been addressed in other areas was not considered actionable by their facilitators. This lack of engagement was perceived to be linked to the high caseload of social workers.

*“Reviews came up, the whole system, reviewing of care plans and that whole process and filling up these stupid forms that they had to fill up. And then going to a meeting where it was already decided before you went in anyway, you know. They seemed fairly okay about accepting that reviews are things that need to happen, they have never been nice things, there is no way of making them nice, they are what they are.” (Tusla Staff)*

*“There’s only two of us that have been there from the beginning and there’s been a mixture of social workers. So I think that’s a bit unnerving, I think that’s a gap that needs to be addressed within our group so that the kids know; they know who they’re working with and it’s not new faces all the time” ..... “Yeah. And it’s hard for social workers to do that because their caseload is huge.” (Social Care Leader)*

Recruitment for the initiative was low across all fora sampled despite concerted efforts to invite all young people within the identified target ages of the local fora.

*“There’s a big cohort in [Urban Area] we sent out hundreds of invitations. We sent out an individual invitation to every young child in care in the age group 13 to 17, we sent out a letter to their foster carer and we sent out a letter to their social worker. Now we got 17 people turned up on the day.” (Principal Social Worker)*

For both young people and facilitators, time to attend with the pressures of school, social, and familial life and extracurricular activity was seen to be a potential barrier to participation.

*“Now a lot of the reasons was that people had athletics on a Saturday and some people lived very far away and foster carers are commuting them in and out of [town in rural area] for access maybe twice a week and then to come again on a Saturday was, oh hello, really! [...] We rang every one of them to see if there was any difficulties with transport and different people had different things on on a Saturday, some of the kids had family access on a Saturday, some went home at weekends so they weren’t actually in care on a Saturday or Sunday and some of them didn’t want to join a group [...]. A lot of them didn’t want to be known that they were in care but I would*

*say after doing this group once [...] I think for those young kids, having got them to that first meeting they probably would have continued to come. But maybe that young person needed a worker to go out and meet them in the house beforehand on the day of the group, pick them up, go for a nice coffee on the way and then drive up [...]. But I did think foster parents as well sometimes are travelling all week, Monday to Friday, and then on a Saturday it is like the day that you just want to get your washing on [...] It was hard.” (Social Care Leader)*

*“It’s kinda hard with school and everything, though. It’s a bit, if like they put it on a certain day, you know like if you have football you have training every, nearly every Saturday, and people make themselves dedicated to going to it.” (Young Person Case Area 2)*

*“It was on a Saturday too, so it meant staff had to forfeit their Saturdays. So you had a six day week..... we did get allowed for it but at the same time you know? It can and did involve either cancelling personal stuff or you know? Being creative with your diary too.” (Social Care Leader)*

There were also challenges to implementing a universalist rights-based approach in this model of collective participation. Offering universal access to the fora as required by the Lundy (2007) Model was not always possible. In this study, accounts were offered as to why some children and young people must be excluded for reasons relating to their own well-being or the welfare of others.

*“For example, if there were children in this list and some of them had been sexually abused and then there was other children on this list who were perpetrators. Or if there were two children, siblings maybe who can’t have access for whatever reasons. [...] there wasn’t a lot of young people that we couldn’t invite.” (Tusla Staff)*

From a practitioner standpoint, issues of sustainability were of importance, given the implications for time and staff resources in a context of high workloads.

## 6. Discussion

The application of the Lundy (2007) model in this evaluation reveals structures and practices that are in line with international thinking on the effective facilitation of participation. The participatory space offered the perceived freedom for young people to voice experiences and identify common challenges within the care system facilitated through peer support within a community of shared interests and trusted adults (Cockburn, 2005). Voice was supported through a commitment to youth-led agenda setting in youth-friendly settings and processes that were facilitated at appropriate times with appropriate methods. This was further bolstered by the provision of information and support (Archard & Skiveness, 2009; Cashmore, 2002; Lundy, 2007; Wright, Turner, Clay, & Mills, 2006). The engagement of knowledgeable adult practitioners, including independent advocates and practitioners from within Tusla, was of importance in building the capacity of young people to raise their voices through the facilitation of agenda setting and knowledge of services and regulations (Horwath et al., 2012; Larkins et al., 2014).

Attention needs to be given to the engagement of appropriate facilitators as one forum’s lack of project-based activity is possibly attributable to limited practice knowledge due to a lack of social work involvement. This is the only difference between this forum and the other fora areas who had addressed locally particular issues with child care review processes as a result of young people’s participation, ranging from the development of welcome packs, changes in environment and refreshments and adjustments to the review form (Horwath et al., 2012; Larkins et al., 2014). For this reason, developing the organisational capacity to support participation through appropriate facilitation would be required if effective participation is to be consistently achieved (Brady et al., 2018; McCafferty, 2017).

Engagement with this space was voluntary and there was no discrimination evident concerning capacity to participate, with three out of five fora sampled having at least one member with special needs (Lundy, 2007). The age bracket for young participants was the primary recruitment standard, and all children and young people in the bracket age group were invited to attend unless there were concerns for safety or wellbeing. It has been recommended that in the deliberative processes in which children and young people participate, there should be no significant differences between the participants and their ability to express a point of view (Archard & Skivenness, 2009). Therefore, it can be argued that restricting access to particular age groups with special consideration given to the best interests and protection of potential participants is an effective way to enabling effective participation whilst realising Lundy's (2007) conception of a participative space.

However, consideration still needs to be given to the issue of representation given the low rates of recruitment and the potential influence leveraged on the universal care experience (Tisdall, 2008). Recruitment rates remained low and unexplained, although some practitioners feel this may be due to the daily requirements of life schedules and logistics evidencing the external factors that enable or constrain participation. Furthermore the 'hard to reach' groups, for example, youth in residential care, may not have had their interests represented by the conduct of these fora (McLeod, 2007; Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012). This has potential implications for any future effects arising from the influence of the fora's outputs on policy and service development for young people in care.

Crucial to the attainment of participatory rights is access to an appropriate audience of key decision-makers (Lundy, 2007). There is evidence in planning documents, stakeholder accounts, and attendance at national events of the fora providing opportunities to convey their views to key decision-makers, although the level of engagement was not universal across all fora sampled (Larkins et al., 2014; Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012). However, EPIC's Participation Coordinator functioned as an important facilitator of audience engagement through the co-ordination of the fora operations on a nationwide basis providing feedback from a local level to national decision-makers. Additionally, a secondary audience of social work practitioners not directly involved in the fora were reached through the engagement of social workers and Tusla staff on the fora who carried back messages to their local childcare team.

The perception of an engaged audience of decision-makers both within Tusla, and other professionals who recognised the efforts of the young people and the reality of their experiences was an important part of the fora journey for some young participants. However, regional differences in terms of direct access to decision-makers and feedback from a governance level, meant that some young participants did not experience participation as meaningful in terms of recognition. This indicates a need to reflect on opportunities to enhance the young people's perception of meaningful participation through formalised recognition processes, feedback, and increased access to direct audiences, particularly for those in more decentralised rural areas. This has implications for organisational resources and capacities, which would need to be enhanced in order to achieve this end (Brady et al., 2018; Daly, 2014; Larkins et al., 2014).

The publication of the outputs generated by the fora have the potential to influence policy and practice due to their nationwide dissemination. However, for these outputs to have a meaningful national impact on policy and service development, they would require

incorporation into policy and widespread implementation. Any evidence of influence achieved remains localised, and limited to tweaks in social work processes, and the promotion of reflective practice on the part of social work practitioners.

An issue here is that the slow response from a national level means that young participants may not benefit from the experience of influence or recognition that their projects may prompt and this could have further implications for their perception of participation as meaningful. Further attention needs to be paid to the development of responsive communication structures if the achievement of effective participation evidenced by transformative influence on service and policy that achieves improvements in young people's wellbeing is to be supported in a timely manner (Percy-Smith, 2006; Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012). It is important to note that achieving influence on service development and policy from fora participation was not necessarily the most vital component of fora participation for some young participants. The relationships developed were as important to the young participants as the recognition of their legal rights (Warming, 2006). The support available in this community of shared experience, and the supportive relationships developed with adult facilitators enabled some young participants to navigate and process challenging experiences (Mitchell et al., 2010). For this reason, the opportunity to access help, guidance and support concerning challenging aspects of the care experience in a safe space was perceived to be of value by some young people and practitioners. Furthermore, participation in the fora had the potential to support the development of skills, a sense of personal capacity and positive identity through a process of community engagement with shared challenges (Cashmore, 2002; Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012). This is an important consideration, given the evidence in research of poor social, emotional, and welfare outcomes for care leavers (Daly, 2012; Moran et al., 2017; Mullan et al., 2007; Munro, 2001; Stein et al., 2000).

### *7. Limitations*

A major limitation within this research is related to the representativeness of youth voices due to the difficulties experienced in scheduling the youth advisory group, obtaining consent and the low numbers participating in the fora (Daley, 2015; Holland, 2009; Horgan ). This limitation is an issue that persists within research with young people in care in Ireland (Mc Evoy & Smith, 2011p.13). Out of over six thousand children in the care of the state at the time of this study approximately one hundred and fifty young people participated in the fora (Tusla, 2018). Out of this number only twenty-eight young people took part in the focus groups. Furthermore, the time limited nature of the study with only one hour-long meeting for the conduct of the focus group also limited the depth of exploration achieved with the young people in contrast to the adult interviews (Horgan et al., 2015). It may be of utility in future practice to consider the use of a logic model to record the activities, outputs and outcomes of participation for young people in a systematic manner in order to bolster qualitative findings given the difficulties encountered in ensuring the representation of young people in research interacting with the time limited nature of an external evaluation (Brady, Canavan, & Landy, 2011).

### *8. Implications for Practice*

The contextual factors of policy, legislation and the use of the Lundy (2007) model that influence participatory practice within the Child and Family Agency prove promising for the

implementation of effective participation for young people in care. Whilst not yet achieving measurable changes in practice, there is evidence of potentially transformative influence emerging at a national level supported through the application of this model.

It should be acknowledged that the desired outputs of participative models have the potential to interact with regulatory requirements and organisational capacity in the context of child welfare and protection that may unavoidably limit any influence achieved despite the development of structures and processes. However, despite the potential limits and challenges acknowledged in achieving influence, it is important to note that the access to information, social, and emotional support, along with personal development, was perceived to be of utility to the young participants. For this reason, the provision of an ongoing supportive space that can improve circumstances for this community of shared experience under corporate parenting may be worthy of consideration regardless of the outcome.

### *9. Conclusion*

This paper has discussed a model of collective participation in the Irish context. In doing so it has illuminated how participatory practice underpinned by a rights-based frame may be useful in pursuing the goal of effective participation, that produces a change in circumstances, services, policies or institutions for those who participate (Kennan et al., 2019; Larkins et al., 2014; Lundy, 2007). The Tusla & EPIC Fora have supported young people to produce informative and helpful outputs that may improve the experience of care processes for young people if they are mainstreamed into practice. Despite the limits to the attainment of national influence service, engagement with the fora prompted reflection on practice for some professionals as a result to listening to direct experience that lead to localised tweaks in practice. However, recruitment, and representation is an issue that persists in this example of collective participation with implications for future practice in this area that may produce outputs that do not meet the needs of all children and young people in care.

The as yet limited achievement of influence on policy and service at a national level show a need to further develop organisational capacities to respond to the outputs given the potential for truly effective participation to be achieved in terms of changes to services and policies that produce improvements in young people's lives. Furthermore, some participants perception of a lack of engagement or recognition demonstrates a need to further develop communication structures if young people are to experience their participation as meaningful in terms of being heard by decision-makers and achieving influence.

Despite limitations to the timely attainment of influence, the Tusla & EPIC Fora were perceived to have produced benefits for the young participants that warrant consideration in terms of whether participation was meaningful. These included an opportunity to develop positive supportive relationships, a sense of positive identity and capacity, and the opportunity to process their care experiences through exploration of common challenges which were perceived to be valuable for some of the young people who participated.

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