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Author(s)	Kennan, Danielle; Dolan, Pat
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# **Justifying children and young people's involvement in social research: assessing harm and benefit**

## **Abstract**

At a time when children and young people's involvement in research is increasingly the norm, this article reflects on the importance of a well-reasoned and transparent justification for their inclusion or exclusion. It explores the dilemma of a researcher's ethical obligation to protect children and young people from harm and at the same time respect their autonomy as social actors and independent rights holders to participate in research of relevance to their lives. A researcher's ethical obligation to conduct a rigorous but balanced assessment of harm and benefit is reiterated. The article takes the debate beyond a call for assessing harm and benefit to providing a strategy for conducting such an assessment at the point of research design. Reflecting on two research projects the authors were involved in, three critical considerations are identified. These are: the purpose and the theoretical context of the research; the preferences of the children and young people and their parents; and the available time and resources. The article draws on the research examples to illustrate the assessment process in practice.

Keywords: Risk/benefit analysis; protection; participation; research ethics; participatory research.

## **Introduction**

To better understand the lives of children and young people, sociologists commonly involve them in research as a methodological approach. There has been an evolving trend from children and young people being subjects, as opposed to objects of research, to their active participation in the research process towards child and youth-led research. In the literature reflecting on children and young people's involvement in research two opposing critiques emerge. On the one hand, there is a concern that significant obstacles continue to stand in the way of their involvement. An over-emphasis on minimising risk and protecting children and young people from harm can unjustifiably inhibit their participation in research (Daley, 2013; Dentith et al., 2009; Gorin et al., 2008). A cautious approach can lead to their exclusion and the use of adult proxies; thereby omitting their first hand perspectives (Schelbe et al., 2014). Failure to be inclusive is silencing the voices of children most in need of being heard (Carter, 2009).

On the other hand, there is a concern that as the movement to involve children and young people in research gathers momentum their participation is coming under less scrutiny. Carter (2009) observes that, as a result of developments in the social study of childhood and children's rights, their active participation in research is now considered politically correct and so sacrosanct that it is rarely questioned. While McCarry (2012: 26)

notes, 'there has been a paradigmatic shift whereby social scientists no longer need to justify why CYP (children and young people) should be consulted but instead focus on how best to achieve this'. The move to involve them as participants in research in the absence of critical reflection on whether it is the right methodology has begun to trigger alarm bells. Gallagher and Gallagher (2008: 499) describe it as 'methodological immaturity' and there have been calls for greater transparency regarding the decision-making process (Franks, 2011). From an ethical perspective, the risk with such an approach is that their involvement will be tokenistic in nature, a knee jerk exercise in response to what is perceived to be the 'right' thing to do. The ideological drive to promote children and young people's involvement in research can potentially expose the participants to the abuse of being over-researched or to circumstances where they give up their time in return for little or no value.

Dyson and Meagher (2001: 70) caution that the involvement of children and young people in social research should not be the 'product of arbitrary decisions' on the part of the researcher, commissioner or funders. Prior to negotiating access, there must be a well-reasoned and transparent ethical justification for their inclusion. According to Daley (2013: 51), to include or exclude children and young people a researcher must 'think carefully about what constitutes harm and benefit, as well as the likelihood of each prevailing'. Daley

suggests that overly erring on the side of protection is only valid if the potential risk of harm outweighs the benefits of children and young people's participation in research. Equally, championing the benefits of participation is only justified if it does not come at the cost of protecting children and young people from exploitation and harm. Navigating the tension between a researcher's ethical duty to protect children and young people from exploitation or harm and at the same time respecting the principles of inclusion and participation is a dilemma confronting researchers today (Carter, 2009; Daley, 2013; Eriksson and Näsman, 2012; Powell et al., 2011).

This article argues that a rigorous but balanced assessment of harm and benefit goes some way towards responding to this challenge and aiding ethical reflection on when children and young people's inclusion or exclusion is justified. An analysis of our experience with two research studies discerned three prominent considerations when assessing harm and benefit. First, reflection on the purpose and the theoretical context underpinning children and young people's involvement in the research can reveal the likelihood of their participation adding value to the research process and yielding a benefit for the research participants. Second, the preferences of the children and young people and their parents<sup>1</sup> to be involved in research are a critical consideration in assessing the likelihood of research posing a greater harm than benefit. Third, giving consideration to

the time and resources available to support children and young people's meaningful involvement. It is not our intention to provide an exhaustive set of issues for consideration, instead this article identifies these as prominent and pragmatic considerations when assessing harm and benefit.

### **The Studies**

The two research projects that generated the learning upon which this article is based were conducted in Ireland. The first, a Baseline Study on Children and Young People's Participation was conducted by author one (Danielle Kennan) in 2015-2016. The primary aim of this study was to examine the extent to which children and young people's right to participate in decision-making is embedded in the structures and culture of Tusla - the newly formed Government agency for children and family services in Ireland. Tusla is committed to implementing a national programme of action to develop and mainstream participatory practices within the Agency, under the Development and Mainstreaming Programme for Prevention, Partnership and Family Support. Funded by the Atlantic Philanthropies, the aim of this study was to capture baseline data on children and young people's participation within Tusla services. As well as capturing baseline data, it was also intended that the study would be formative in nature and generate learning to inform service

delivery and the implementation of the Tusla programme of action to mainstream participatory practices.

The second study, was a Youth-Led Research Project completed in 2015 involving a group of five young people in the west of Ireland. The young people (aged 15-17) were members of a Neighbourhood Youth Project run by Foróige, Ireland's national youth development organisation, and were participants in a Youth Leadership and Community Action Programme (hereinafter the leadership programme). An underlying purpose of the leadership programme is to promote skills building and a commitment to action among its participants (Redmond and Dolan, 2014). It is intended to empower young people to investigate a problem of relevance to their communities and to take steps to address it through a community action initiative. In this case, the five young people identified youth mental health as an issue of concern in their locality. They wanted to research what are the triggers of mental health problems in youth and how do mental health problems affect youth in their community. The young people and their youth workers approached the authors for research support. This article does not detail the project findings or outcomes of these two studies. Instead, the focus is on sharing the learning following the assessment of harm and benefit undertaken to inform a decision on whether to involve children and

young people in the Baseline Study and whether to support the Youth-Led Research Project.

### **The purpose and theoretical context of the research**

The purpose and theoretical context of the research is a key factor in determining whether children and young people should be involved in research and to what level (Cahill, 2007; Hill, 1997; Holland et al., 2010; Sinclair, 2004). Clarity on the purpose and theoretical context can indicate the likelihood of children and young people's participation adding value to the research process as well as yielding a benefit for the research participants. A primary purpose of the Baseline Study was to generate safe knowledge on children and young people's experience of participation in decision-making within Tusla. 'Safe' is interpreted as meaning trustworthy (valid, reliable and objective) research (Dyson and Meagher, 2001:71). Children and young people in receipt of Tusla services were viewed as key informants in the process of capturing the extent to which participatory practices were embedded in Tusla. The seminal text *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood* presented an emerging paradigm (the 'new social studies of childhood'), which viewed children and young people as social actors, active in shaping their own lives and worthy of study in their own right (James and Prout, 1997). One of the key features of this paradigm was the



acknowledgement that children and young people have a role to play in the production of sociological data. In many cases, it is children and young people that are best placed to inform researchers about the reality of their lives and how they perceive and construct their social worlds. There is broad agreement in the literature that children and young people's involvement enhances research as it generates reliable knowledge, informed by their perspectives and lived experience (Harcourt and Einarsdóttir, 2011; Kellett, 2011; Morrow, 2012; Powers and Tiffany, 2006; Skelton, 2008).

While involving children and young people in research can enhance its quality and reliability, children and young people in turn can benefit from research that contributes to an improved understanding of their lives. Studies have found that children and young people have benefited from being involved in social research for altruistic reasons; making other children and young people in similar situations aware of their stories so they realise they are not alone (Eriksson and Näsman, 2012; Moore et al., 2011; Roberts and Taylor, 1993). The value of their involvement may be heightened if they have the sense that the research has the capacity to influence societal change (Decker et al., 2011). This brings us into the realm of research that is designed to enable voice.

Considering the formative component of the Baseline Study and mindful of children and young people's right to have their views heard in all matters affecting them, a

core purpose of this study was also to bring the views of children and young people to the attention of the stakeholders developing the Tusla programme of action to mainstream participatory practices. Research that is attributed to what Dyson and Meagher (2001: 71) describe as ‘enabling voice’ is underpinned by a recognition of children and young people’s rights, namely a respect for the dignity and competence of the individual child to have a voice on issues of relevance to them. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) codified for the first time in international law the right of a child to have their views heard in all matters affecting them and for their views to be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity. Lundy (2011: 717) identifies four key steps required for the realisation of the child’s right to have their views heard. First, ‘space’ - children and young people must be provided with the opportunity to express a view in a space that is safe and inclusive. Second, ‘voice’ - children and young people must be facilitated to express their view. Third, ‘audience’ - the view must be listened to. Fourth, ‘influence’ - the view must be acted upon as appropriate.

As set out above, a core purpose of the baseline study was to enable the views of young Tusla service users to be heard on their experience of participation within Tusla services and to generate learning to inform service delivery and the implementation of the Tusla programme of action to embed participatory practices. The authors were of the view

that ethical research facilitates children and young people to express their views in a safe and inclusive space. In addition, the documentation and dissemination of their views is a valuable methodological tool for the realisation of their right to be heard. While this is as a worthy goal to strive for, the authors were aware that expectations must be managed. It was imperative to be transparent about the study limitations and aspects beyond the control of the researcher. A researcher can make every effort to channel children and young people's views to the relevant decision-makers but can offer no certainty that these views will be taken seriously and acted upon in the policy and service domain. Acting on children and young people's views as appropriate is the final and critical step in the realisation of a child's right to be heard. As the Baseline Study was being conducted in partnership with Tusla, the researcher was confident that there would be sufficient openings to communicate the research findings on children's experience of participation to the stakeholders responsible for developing and implementing the programme of action to embed participatory practices within the Agency. Thus, the purpose and theoretical context of the Baseline Study provided a solid rationale for children and young people's involvement, at a minimum as research participants, with the likelihood of benefits accruing. It was considered that their involvement would generate safe knowledge informed by the perspectives of children and young people with lived experiences of being involved in

Tusla decision-making processes. Their involvement would also provide them with the opportunity to have their views heard, validated and potentially influence service delivery within Tusla. Thereby, offering the chance of immediate benefits for the young research participants and potential gains for future service users.

As referred to above, the Youth-Led Research Project was initiated in the context of a leadership programme that is designed to promote skills building and a commitment to action among its participants. The intended outcomes of this leadership programme, which are to promote positive youth development and to empower the young people to take action for change, provided the theoretical foundation for a youth-led research project. In the literature on children and young people's participation, one of the most commonly cited benefits of participatory practices is its contribution to positive youth development (Checkoway et al., 2003; Serido et al., 2011; Thomas and Percy-Smith, 2012). The positive youth development perspective is a strengths-based approach to conceptualising adolescence (Lerner et al., 2005). The focus is on the potential of youth to be guided towards positive developmental outcomes. These desired outcomes for youth have been classified as the five Cs, which are, competence, confidence, character, connection and caring (or compassion) (Lerner et al., 2000). Establishing positive adult-youth relationships, engaging youth in activities that promote skill-building and giving youth a

voice on issues that affect them have all been directly attributed to supporting positive youth development (Eccles and Gootman, 2002; Serido et al., 2011).

The participation of children and young people in research can legitimately be embarked upon for the purpose of positively contributing to young people's personal development (London et al., 2003). The potential for children and young people's collaboration in research to result in positive relationships, an enhanced skill-set and to communicate their voice makes it well placed to support positive youth development. Children and young people's involvement in the research process can increase their knowledge, confidence and self-esteem (Fleming, 2011; Kirby and Bryson, 2002; Shaw et al., 2011), can build research related skills, including critical thinking, writing and analysis (London et al., 2003; Powers and Tiffany, 2006) and improve their networks of support (Fleming, 2011; London et al., 2003; Powers and Tiffany, 2006). These positive outcomes are linked to research where the participants are directly involved in the research process, including design, data collection and dissemination, as opposed to purely being the sources of research data.

Research embarked on to empower young people to take action for change goes beyond a respect for children and young people's rights and a recognition of their capacity to generate expert knowledge on their lives (Kellet, 2011). It places the control in the hands

of children and young people to drive the research agenda and to use the research findings to act on issues of importance to them. Rappaport (1984) defines empowerment as a process whereby people gain control over their lives. In this context ‘agency’ rather than ‘voice’ is considered the key concept (Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010: 359). The literature reveals that, allowing children and young people take ownership of the research can provide them with a sense of empowerment and create a more equal power relationship between the adult researcher and the child or young person (Kellett, 2010). Participatory action research in particular is recognised for its capacity to empower research participants (Houghton, 2015). One of its key features is the commitment by the researcher to allow the participants to take control of the research (Hart, 1992). The emphasis on action not only signifies the active involvement of the stakeholders in the research process but also that the research findings are intended to benefit the participants by becoming ‘launching pads for ideas, actions, plans and strategies to initiate social change’ (Cammarota and Fine, 2008: 6).

As set out above, if the purpose of the research is to promote positive youth development, then a minimum requirement is that children are collaborators in the research process to provide them with opportunities for personal development. Similarly, if the underlying intent of the research is to empower children, it follows that they should have

significant control and ownership over the research. The idea for the Youth-Led Research Project was initiated by the young people. It was intended that they would lead on the data collection, analysis and the dissemination of their exploration of triggers of mental health problems in youth and how mental health problems affect their peers. In this context, the authors were of the view that the Youth-Led Research Project was well-placed to promote the positive youth development and empowerment of the youth researchers. However, to ensure it achieved these intended benefits would require comprehensive research skills training (a matter returned to below).

### **The preferences of the children and young people and their parents**

As outlined in the previous section, clarity on the purpose and theoretical context of the research can inform an assessment of the likelihood of research being of merit and generating a benefit for its participants. In designing the Baseline Study and deciding on whether to support the Youth-Led Research Project, the authors were of the view that the preference of children and young people and their parents to be involved in the research is a critical consideration in assessing the likelihood of harm or benefit prevailing. In some instances, an assessment of harm may seem to be very straightforward. If the research will exclude a child or young person from accessing a required service, unduly interfere with

the child or young person's education or, if there are clear concerns regarding their safety and protection, the risks may be considered too pronounced to justify the potential benefits.

More often than not, however, and as was the case in the Baseline Study and the Youth-Led Research Project, it is common for the lines between the likelihood of benefit or harm prevailing to be blurred. Unlike medical research, which can immediately and overtly cause physical harm, social research can be seen to be benign, yet can be a significant intrusion into people's lives causing them emotional distress (Alderson and Morrow, 2011). In the Baseline Study, the most prominent risk identified was the potential for the research to be an unwelcome intrusion for young service-users, whose lives may already be under scrutiny by an array of professionals. Although evidence is emerging to the contrary, arguably sharing their experience of participating in decisions regarding their personal welfare, protection and/or care may also cause distress. Distress may be caused if the child or young person's experience was not a positive one or if the outcome of the decision-making process was counter to their views. Returning to the Youth-Led Research Project, the issues of consent, confidentiality and emotional well-being have been identified as important considerations when protecting young people engaged in youth-led research and their research participants from harm (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2015).



These were all relevant considerations and potential risks in the context of this project and the sensitive nature of the research topic.

The literature provides some insight into whether these were valid concerns. Children and young people are often categorised as vulnerable and excluded from research on the grounds of it being ‘inherently risky’ (Carter, 2009: 585). However, research is beginning to emerge challenging this assumption. In the field of psychology there are growing efforts to establish an empirical evidence base to inform an assessment of the risks and benefits of being involved in research. Pioneering research by Newman and colleagues is generating data to enable an assessment on the costs and benefits of participation in trauma related research to be informed by evidence rather than being based on perception (Kassam-Adams and Newman, 2002; Newman and Kaloupek, 2009; Newman and Kaloupek, 2004). In 2009, Newman and Kaloupek reviewed the evidence on the costs and benefits of participating in research. Of note, this review of the evidence was not limited to research involving children only. They found that contemporary evidence ‘indicates a general absence of harm and, in fact, a generally positive experience for most participants’ (Newman and Kaloupek, 2009: 601). This includes participants who have been previously exposed to traumatic stress or developed posttraumatic stress disorder. They have found that a minority experience negative emotions and more distress than anticipated, but the

majority of these participants do not regret their participation in research (Newman and Kaloupek, 2009; Newman and Kaloupek, 2004). Elsewhere, research finds that children and young people's participation may provide opportunities to validate their traumatic experiences (Eriksson and Näsman, 2012). More recently, a longitudinal study with adolescent girls in the child welfare system who had faced considerable adversity found that from the perspective of the young girls, the positive aspects of participation in a study on a healthy relationship project, outweighed the negative aspects and this finding did not differ over time (Chu and DePrince, 2013).

While the literature provides some indication of the likelihood of risk to emotional well-being, children are not a homogenous group. Therefore, one cannot rely solely on the literature to provide an answer of the likelihood of a research project, with its unique set of participants and circumstances, posing a risk of harm greater than its potential benefits. Moreover, a social scientist or ethical oversight body may not be best placed to make what can be a highly subjective assessment of the likelihood of harm or have the requisite knowledge of the research participant's individual circumstances. For these reasons, the authors took the view that determining the preferences of the child and their parents is critical to the assessment process. Obtaining informed consent is a pre-requisite to determining the child's preference to take part in research and the parent's willingness to

permit them to be involved. Obtaining the informed assent or consent of a child or young person and the consent of their parents is a well-established ethical standard.<sup>2</sup> The consent process ensures that children and young people and their parents are informed regarding the purpose of the research and what their involvement entails. It has been described as ‘the legal means of transferring responsibility for risk-taking from the researcher to the participant’ (Alderson and Morrow, 2011: 23).

Involving children and young people in the assessment of risk, mirrors the emerging approach to child protection in the children’s rights sector. In this sector, there has been a move away from the traditionally adult-centric approach to assessing a child’s protection towards an approach that is inclusive of the views of the child. In 2011, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child stated that inviting children’s views and giving them due weight must be a ‘mandatory step’ at every stage of a child protection process (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2011: 24). More recently, the Committee issued detailed guidance on how to assess and determine the best interests of a child. The Committee states that a child, including a child that is very young or in a vulnerable situation, should be provided with the opportunity to influence an assessment of their own best interests by taking the child’s views into account (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013).

Giving weight to the views of the child or young person and their parent on the likelihood of harm or benefit places an onus on the researcher to have safeguards in place to ensure the child and their parent are in a position to make an informed assessment and to provide fully informed consent. The standard practice is to provide accessible information on the study, which identifies potential risks and benefits. Having strategies in place to empower the child and their parent to say 'no' is imperative, as is clarity on what exit strategies there are once consent is provided. Children and young people must be aware that they can withdraw their consent at any point in time without consequence. Anderson (2010) highlights the risk to participants when gatekeepers are used to facilitate the informed consent process. There is the risk of the participants feeling required to participate to maintain a good relationship with the organisation or the staff member approaching them to participate. Marshall et al. (2012) also note there is a risk that large incentives may unduly influence the consent process. These potential pressures place an onus on the researcher to ensure there is no risk of coercion.

There are also ambiguities in the research process in that consent is generally only sought after the research is designed and immediately preceding the data collection phase. This gives rise to the concern that making a commitment to involve children and young people during the research design, without gauging the preferences of the child and their

parents in advance of recruitment, can open the door to the risk of ‘methodological grooming’. Methodological grooming, a phrase coined by Bengry-Howell and Griffin (2012: 405), is described as a form of ‘implicit persuasion’; encouraging young people to take part in research despite having demonstrated an initial resistance to engage. According to Bengry-Howell and Griffin (2012), methodological grooming can occur when pressures arise to put research designs into practice or to meet the commitments outlined in research proposals.

In the Baseline Study, the implementation of a well-designed research plan, with careful attention to the informed consent process could have established if it was a valid concern that the research would be an unwelcome intrusion into the lives of the young service-users in Tusla. It would also establish whether the likelihood of the research causing them distress could outweigh the potential benefits. However, the research did not progress to this stage. An overriding factor when assessing harm and benefit and determining whether to initiate empirical research with children and young people was the limited time and resources available. This is discussed in the following section. In the Youth-Led Research Project, by opting in to being a part of the youth leadership programme and initiating the research project, it was clearly the preference of the young people to conduct this research. Their parents provided consent for their children to partake

in the leadership programme and all related activities, which they were made aware may include a research project. However, in making the decision to facilitate the research project, the authors were of the view that they still had a responsibility to counter the potential risks in conducting the research. The primary strategy to counter these potential risks was the delivery of a comprehensive research skills training programme and to provide the ongoing support of a professional researcher. A session on research ethics, focusing on the young people's ethical responsibilities to their research participants, as well as the importance of keeping themselves safe from harm, was an essential focus of this training.

### **The available time and resources**

The third consideration when assessing harm and benefit and making a decision on children and young people's involvement in research is whether there is adequate time and resources to support their meaningful involvement. While having the required time and resources are important safeguards to minimise the risk of harm and to ensure the research can deliver on its intended benefits, given that this is an issue that can be underestimated and easily overlooked it is highlighted separately here. It has been established elsewhere, that increasing the likelihood that children and young people's participation in research will achieve its intended purpose is labour intensive (Kellett, 2011). Significant time needs to

be invested to support their involvement in research. To access children and young people for the purpose of research, in particular those that are harder to reach, it takes time to build a relationship of trust with the children and young people and their gatekeepers (Kennan et al., 2012). Moreover, it is said that a child's authentic views will only emerge once a positive relationship with the child and the relevant adult has been established and this is unlikely to occur in a single meeting (Archard and Skivenes, 2009). The many methodological challenges to involving children and young people in research have significant resource implications if researchers are serious about children and young people's meaningful involvement.

The time and resources available to the researcher for the Baseline Study was a significant factor in determining whether to directly involve children and young people in the research. During the period of the Baseline Study, the number of children in the care of the state combined with the number of cases open to social work generated a sample size of just over 33,000 children and young people<sup>3</sup>. These numbers exclude other children and young people Tusla provides services to, including aftercare services, education and welfare services and family support services. There was no pre-existing structure within Tusla to access a representative sample of the population group. The project was resourced by one full-time researcher and, as it was intended to capture baseline data, there was a

finite amount of time available to collect the data prior to the implementation of the programme of work to mainstream participatory practices. Aware that negotiating access to hard to reach children and young people for the purpose of research can be a time-consuming, lengthy and an unpredictable process (Kennan et al., 2012) and within the constraints of the time available, there was the risk of an insufficient sample size being achieved and /or one that was not sufficiently representative. Yet without including the perspectives of children and young people the validity of the study would be at best questionable.

The researcher was aware that the national Inspectorate for social care in Ireland, the Health and Information Quality Authority (HIQA), monitors Tusla's compliance with children and young people's rights, including children and young people's participation rights. Compliance is monitored against national children's standards, comprising the National Standards for Child Protection and Welfare, Foster Care, Residential Care and Special Care. While these standards vary, they all include standards on children and young people's participation rights. As part of the inspection process, inspectors meet with children, parents/carers, Tusla staff, external professionals,<sup>4</sup> observe practices and review case files and relevant documentation to determine if children and young people's views are listened to and taken seriously. The inspection reports provide a rich source of timely



information directly informed by children and young people's views on their experience of participation in decision-making within Tusla. Some of these child informants are in receipt of welfare and protection services, while others are in foster care, residential care or special care units. Therefore, they are broadly representative of the range of children and young people in contact with Tusla.

With this knowledge and considering the time and resources available to the researcher, a decision was taken not to initiate empirical research with children and young people for the baseline study. Instead 53 HIQA inspection reports published in the preceding two years were sampled for secondary analysis of their findings on Tusla's compliance with children and young people's participation rights. Secondary analysis is now widely accepted as a valid form of inquiry, offering the potential of having access to good quality data, while being attentive to good stewardship of resources (Bryman, 2015; Yardley et al., 2014). The reports were imported to QSR NVivo 10 software to aid analyses by extracting and coding the relevant findings documenting children and young people's perspectives on Tusla's compliance with their participation rights. These findings were informed by the views of 371 children and young people. Their perspectives were triangulated with the findings from a questionnaire distributed to Tusla employees nationally. It was considered that this approach was justified for the Baseline Study as the

researcher would not be able to capture the perspectives of such a representative sample within the timeframe and resources available. Indeed, it may have been the more ethical approach, rather than posing an additional burden on young service users and disregarding timely perspectives already documented.

If children and young people are to be actively involved in the research process as collaborators or partners or if they are to take ownership of the research this is also resource intensive from both a human resource and monetary perspective. To engage children as co-researchers, it is said a comprehensive training programme is required (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2015). Additional funds may be needed to offer children and young people the necessary equipment to support their involvement in the research process and to provide remuneration. According to Alderson and Morrow (2011) payments may be made for several reasons: to reimburse expenses (including the expenses of accompanying adults); to compensate for time, inconvenience and/or discomfort; to show a token of appreciation; to pay young people; or to recompense young people who would have otherwise been earning. Finally, children and young people have varying demands on their time including educational, social and sporting commitments, which can leave little time or motivation for involvement in other activities. Consideration needs to be given to whether children and

young people have the time to engage and whether the benefits will outweigh the commitment invested by the child or young person.

The authors were of the view that there was adequate time and resources to support the Youth-Led Research Project. Approximately three months was set aside, during which time the young people provided a commitment to meet at weekends and outside of school hours to progress the research. It was agreed that the financial costs incurred were to be borne by Foróige and the authors' research centre (the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre in National University of Ireland Galway). Having taken all these factors into consideration it was likely that the benefits would outweigh the risks and supporting the Youth-Led Research Project was entirely justified.

A training programme, designed to provide a step-by-step guide on how to conduct a piece of social research, was developed by the authors and delivered to the youth researchers. It included sessions on reviewing current research, formulating a research plan, choosing the appropriate research methods, research ethics, analysis and write-up (Dolan et al., 2015). The session on ethics was designed to explore how to keep the researchers safe as well as being accountable for their research participants. Having completed the training programme, the young people commenced the research and agreed the appropriate methods. In this case an anonymous questionnaire distributed to their peers was the method

of choice. It sought information on what are the triggers of mental health problems in youth and how do mental health problems affect youth in their community. The young people led on the data collection, analysis and the dissemination of their research. Ongoing support and mentoring was provided by their youth worker and the authors as required. To ensure maximum impact, the research was disseminated by producing a short video of their findings with the support of a small film production company and the acclaimed Irish actor, Cillian Murphy, patron of the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, who provided his time pro bono (*see further*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Hc99KwbgQ8>).

## **Conclusion**

There has been a paradigm shift from children and young people being objects of research towards them being key informants and active participants in the production of sociological data of relevance to their lives. This shift in the study of childhood raises sociologically significant questions to be further explored such as, which assumptions concerning actorship are implicated and how shall the validity of findings underpinned by the views of children and young people be judged. The movement towards their active participation also raises complex methodological and ethical dilemmas for sociologists and their counterparts in the multi-disciplinary field of childhood studies. Feng-Beng (2009) previously wrote in this Journal about the methodological difficulties encountered in

accessing and recruiting children for participation in research. Elsewhere, appropriate methods to study this population group in its various forms are explored (*See for example*, Aldridge, 2012; Hill, 2006). However, it is the ethical challenges for sociologists that are brought to the fore in this article, specifically, the tension between a researcher's ethical duty to protect children and young people from harm and at the same time respecting their autonomy as social actors and independent rights holders to participate in research of relevance to their lives. As outlined, there is the risk that fervently promoting children and young people's participation in research, in the absence of reflection on the risks involved, can expose them to harm and exploitation. Equally, overly erring on the side of protection can silence their voices and deny the research community the opportunity to generate knowledge informed by their perspectives and lived experiences.

This article pursues a pragmatic approach to the ethical challenge of navigating the balance between participation and protection. While this is a challenge that is common to research with all human subjects, the issue comes into sharper focus when the research participants are children or young people. This stems from their vulnerability and incompetence (perceived or otherwise) and from what Morrow and Richards (1996) describe as the disparities in power between children and adults. It is suggested that a rigorous but balanced assessment of harm and benefit goes some way towards responding

to this challenge and aiding ethical reflection on when children and young people's inclusion or exclusion is justified. Rather than engaging in a vague assessment of harm and benefit, some prominent considerations for this assessment process are explored. Analysis of the authors' experience of designing a baseline study on children's participation in social care services delivered by Tusla and their experience of assessing whether to provide professional support to a youth-led research project found that there are three critical considerations when assessing harm and benefit. First, the research communities' energies are well placed reflecting on the underlying reason behind the research and its theoretical context to provide an indication of the likelihood of the research yielding a benefit for its participants. Second, to mitigate against the risk of harm, their energies are also well placed in ensuring it is the genuine preference of the child or young person and their parents to be involved in the research, secured through the provision of informed consent. Third, considering whether there is the time and resources available to support children and young people's meaningful involvement increases the likelihood of their involvement being a positive experience.

Drawing on the learning from two research projects and supported by the literature, the following set of reflective questions can form the basis of a strategy for assessing harm

and benefit to inform a decision on whether to involve children and young people in social research, in addition to determining the appropriate level of their involvement.

***Reflective questions to guide an assessment of harm and benefit***

- (1) What is the purpose and the theoretical context of the research? Are there sufficient safeguards in place to enable the research to achieve its goals?
- (2) Is it the preference of the children and young people and their parents to be involved in the research? Have provisions been made to enable children, young people and their parents provide fully informed consent?
- (3) Is there adequate time and resources to support children and young people's meaningful participation?

These are not an exhaustive set of reflective questions, instead they are what we consider to be the foremost considerations when engaging in an assessment of harm and benefit. Reflecting on these issues, when justifying children and young people's inclusion or exclusion from an ethical perspective, also lends itself to a more transparent decision-making process.

## Notes

1. The use of the term parents in this article is intended to encompass parents and legal guardians.
2. In the context of young people between the ages of 15-18, ethical guidance on the requirement of parental consent varies. Some ethical frameworks take into account the competence of young people in this upper age range to consent and provide an exception to the norm (Kennan, 2015).
3. At year end of December 2015, there were 26,655 cases open to social work and 6,388 children in the care of Tusla. These numbers exclude other children and young people Tusla provides services to, including aftercare services, education and welfare services and family support services (Tusla, Child and Family Agency; 2015).
4. These may include members of An Garda Síochána, professionals from health services, educators and youth workers.

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