



are children given the opportunity to express their views but, once expressed, their opinions are acted on, where appropriate [8].

There exists an increasing recognition that young people have a right to participate in issues that concern their own lives [9] and in the determination of decisions that are of relevant to them [10]. Participation has been characterised as a form of power [11]. If power is vested in the production and control of knowledge [12]; then those who create knowledge have a claim to power [13]. O' Higgins cites Kirshner & O'Donoghue's argument that once the researched are allowed to become analysts of data, they become generators of new knowledge [14].

The recognition of children's social agency is a key driver to their increased involvement in research. Children and young people's role in research has traditionally been as a resource - an object of or a subject for the researcher [15]. Malone tracks the shift from this position to one where research is done with children which, she argues, positions the children as experts with knowledge that will be valued and respected [15]. Likewise, Bowd identifies the move away from young participants being treated as respondents to inquiry instruments, to being partners in a transformative research process [12]. Participatory research engages young participants to do more than give responses to research instruments designed by adults [16].

Children's competence to actively engage in the research process has been questioned but this questioning has been countered with the proposition that children's competence is 'different from' not 'lesser than' the competence of adults [17-19]. Children, it is argued, are more likely than adults to be interested in all the stages of the research process. Children accept unexpected results and the need to revise their ideas to a greater extent than adults do because they are still in a life-phase wherein they know that their knowledge is incomplete and provisional [20]. As children and adolescents learn and play, as social competents, they are immersed in their own worlds [21], sharing cultural knowledge [22], negotiating meaning [23] and making sense of the world of adults [18, 24]. Children, Kellett stated "...are party to the subculture of childhood which gives them a unique 'insider' perspective that is critical to our understanding of children's worlds" [25]. Children's perspectives are based on their own experiences and are, therefore, as valid as perspectives offered by adults on their own lives [26, 27]. To the extent that a lack of skills inhibit the participation of children and young people, many research projects that partner with children and young people provide training to develop relevant skills [17, 28, 29]. A number of organisations also actively support and foster young researchers [30-32].

In 2013, Jacquez investigated the level to which youth were involved in 56 Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) projects that involved youth partners [33]. They found that youth most frequently participated in the design or conducting of research (84%) and the identification of needs, priorities and goals of research (77%) and were least likely to participate in the data

analysis (54%) or disseminating and translating research findings phases of the projects [33]. Notwithstanding the enthusiasm for involving children and young people in the research process it is evident that a number of barriers exist. These barriers include; funding, timing, ethics, maintaining the commitment of young people over the course of a project. Turtle suggested that some aspects of child involved research activity have been more reported than others, for example; there is more evidence of children and young people's participation in the processes of data collection and analysis than of their involvement in research design and the development of research tools [8]. There is little evidence in the literature of children and young people's involvement in key stages of large, cross-national research; such research is, to date, still the bastion of adult researchers.

### ***Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA)***

The DCYA is part of the Government structure in Ireland with a responsibility for children and youth affairs. The Department has a dedicated Citizen Participation Unit, whose work is undertaken through the establishment of structures for children's participation in decision-making; conducting consultations and dialogues with children and young people; and the development of evidence-based policy in keeping with national and international best practice. The DCYA Participation Team has extensive expertise in design and facilitation of children's participation initiatives and is comprised of staff from the DCYA and from two national youth organisations who deliver participation services contracted by the DCYA. The DCYA is currently establishing a Children and Young People's Participation Hub as a national centre of excellence on children and young people's participation in decision-making, under the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making (2014-2020). This Hub will support implementation of the Strategy through the provision of information, training and resources for Government departments and agencies and the non-government sector.

### ***Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC)***

The HBSC study is a cross-national research study conducted in collaboration with the WHO regional Office for Europe. This study is a conducted within the Health Promotion Research Centre at the NUI, Galway. The aim of the HBSC study is to gain insight into, and increase our understanding of young people's health and well-being, health behaviours and their social context. The target age groups of the study are 11, 13 and 15 year olds attending school, however HBSC Ireland include children from 9 to 18 years of age. The HBSC study is funded by the Department of Health in Ireland and the data is an important source for people working with and for young people in Ireland. An essential objective of HBSC Ireland is to engage with various stakeholders, and when possible involve them in the research process. In preparation for the 2014 HBSC survey cycle it was a priority of the

research team to focus on young people's involvement in the research process. Until recently young people's involvement in HBSC has been primarily during the data collection phase, when they voluntarily give information about themselves. A key function of the HBSC study is to inform policy and practice and it is vital that the research is inclusive of young people's own views and priorities to realise this completely.

### ***Working in Partnership***

During 2011, the HBSC Ireland research team approached the DCYA Citizen Participation Unit for advice on more comprehensively involving children and young people in the survey cycle. The NUI, Galway team explained that the domains explored in the HBSC Survey and the questions under each domain are developed by academics and policy-makers at national and international level. Based on the advice received and best practice in youth participation, it was agreed that because of the importance of the HBSC study in Ireland it would be important to include children and young people in all aspects of the study from conceptualisation to dissemination. Towards achieving the goal of youth participation in the HBSC research process a partnership approach was adopted. In recognising the expertise of both the DCYA Citizen Participation Unit and the HBSC research team a partnership was formed under the fledgling DCYA Participation Hub to enable young people to participate in setting priority themes for the 2014 HBSC research cycle. It was agreed that in order to ensure the most meaningful participation of young people, they should be involved from the beginning of the research process and, in particular, in identifying the most important aspects of their lives. Towards accomplishing this, two participatory workshops, each with specific objectives relating to the HBSC research process, were carried out with young people from various counties in Ireland. This paper focuses on the process and findings of these two workshops.

### ***The aim and objectives of the workshops***

The main aim of these participative workshops was to increase young people's involvement in the HBSC research process with a view to ensuring the 2014 survey reflected the priorities of young people's lives in Ireland now. It was an important objective that the methodology used was in line with the principles of health promotion; participation and empowerment of the young people. The research team hoped that the research process, as well as the research output, would have a positive impact on the young participants. It was also an objective of the process to explore the benefits and usefulness of involving young people in research about their lives and health, with a view to other researchers doing so in the future.

The workshops represent the first time a participatory research process was undertaken with young people within the International HBSC study. As a result of this, these workshops were also the first time young people

were given an opportunity to set their priorities in the form of themes they feel are important to their lives thus highlighting the areas to focus on when developing new questions for inclusion in the survey. The process of theme development was carried out without researcher interference enabling young people to have an input at the very beginning stages of a national scale research project in Ireland.

## **Methodology**

### ***Procedures***

Two workshops were carried out consecutively both using participative research methodologies. These two workshops were carried out in Autumn/Winter 2012 with a sample size of 24 post primary school children in workshop one and 43 post primary school children in workshop two, with an age range from 12 to 17 years. The first workshop provided the young people with a blank canvas for them to share what is important in their life for people to understand and this resulted in many themes. This workshop was named the 'Blue Sky Thinking' workshop as a reference to the idea behind the development of the methodology, enabling the young people to share information about their lives with complete openness. In the second workshop, using the data generated in the first workshop, the young people developed categories within the existing themes with the intention of focusing on these to develop questions for possible inclusion in the 2014 HBSC questionnaire in the future.

The Comhairle na nÓg was used as a recruitment vessel for the young people for both workshops. Comhairle na nÓg ([www.comhairlenanog.ie](http://www.comhairlenanog.ie)) are local councils for children and young people (aged 12–17) that give them a voice on the development of local policies and services. They are the recognised national structure for participation by children and young people in decision-making and are in place in all 34 local authorities in Ireland supported by the DCYA Comhairle na nÓg Development Fund. A letter of invitation was sent to each Comhairle asking them to nominate two young people to attend the workshop. The nomination criteria were: one male and one female young person, with one being between the age of 12 to 15 years and the other between the age of 15 to 17 years. The specific age groups were identified to coordinate with the target age groups of young people who complete the HBSC questionnaire. The letter also asked the Comhairle to nominate young people who have not taken part in any previous national consultation event. Just one of the two nominated young people from each Comhairle was selected to participate to ensure a gender and age balance on the day. Active parental consent was obtained for each young person that participated. Prior to the workshop the young people were communicated with regarding their travel arrangements for the day. A different group of young people participated in each workshop.

The two workshops were run in line with the procedures outlined in the DCYA Child Protection Policy.

Only adults directly involved in the process were permitted in the venue once the workshops commenced and each adult involved had Police clearance. Ethical consent was obtained for the HBSC study through the National University of Ireland Research Ethics Committee and these workshops were part of that process.

**Research Design**

Although the workshops had two separate aims and outputs they followed the same basic format, both with an introduction, a group game, idea generation/expansion, idea grouping and voting. In workshop two the young people used the output from workshop one as their starting point and they developed the data further. The design of workshop one and workshop two are described below.

**Outline of the Participatory Workshop**

**Introduction**

For each workshop there were at least two researchers and a number of participation officers present. At the beginning of the workshops the researchers and participation officers introduced themselves to the young people. A brief description of the HBSC study was also provided. The purpose and the exact process to be followed for the workshop was then explained (Table I).

**Group game**

All of the young people, the participation officers and the researchers took part in a series of group games. The purpose of this was to make everyone feel more comfort-

able in the group and to encourage the young people to work with the facilitators and each other.

**Results**

there are three key pieces of information resulting from these two workshops. Firstly the themes that emerged from the question “what would somebody need to know about you or your friends to understand what life is like for young people in Ireland?” and the votes they received, displayed in Table II. Secondly, the six themes that received the most votes and an example of some of the reasons why they are important to young people, displayed in Table III below and finally, from these themes the categories that that young people prioritized as most relevant to their lives, displayed in Table 4 below.

Table III displays the six themes that received the most votes by the young people and some examples of the reasons why these are important to them.

Four of these six themes were used in workshop two by the young people to develop their priorities. These four themes included; Diversity/Individuality, Independence, Mental Health and Bullying. The theme Diversity/Individuality resulted in 13 categories, Independence produced 12 categories, Mental health resulted in 10 and Bullying in 7 categories. Each young person voted on the three categories they thought were most important within each of these four themes. These votes were collated and resulted in the 3 categories that received the most votes within each of the four themes. These are displayed in Table IV.

At the end of both of the workshops each young person completed an evaluation sheet. Overall the results of both evaluations were very positive with the young

	Workshop 1	Workshop 2
Aim	To explore what young people identify as important to understand what life is like for young people in Ireland.	For young people to identify their priorities for the 2014 HBSC questionnaire.
Idea generation/ expansion	Each young person was asked to consider the question “what would somebody need to know about you or your friends to understand what life is like for young people in Ireland?” and write as many answers as they wanted to on individual pieces of paper.	Four of the six themes with the most votes in workshop one were used in this workshop**
Idea grouping	Randomly assigned into 4 groups the young people discussed their answers and grouped them together in common themes. Any similar themes from the other groups were merged together if the young people decided they addressed the same issues. This resulted in 16 themes.	The young people worked in 4 groups each working on a different theme. The ideas identified in workshop were further categorised by the young people. They also had the opportunity to add new ideas to their respective themes.
Voting	Each young person voted on the themes they would like more time to discuss. Six themes were prioritised in this vote and the young people then discussed the question ‘why is this important’ for each of the 6 themes and noted their reasons.	Each young person voted on the three categories they thought were most important within each of the four themes (each young person had 12 votes). These votes were collated and resulted in the top 3 categories that received the most votes within each of the four themes.
Output	As a result 6 themes and the reasons why they are important to young people’s lives in Ireland were developed.	Four themes, each with 3 categories within them, were prioritised by the young people.

\*\* Two of the themes were not used for workshop two as they were very similar to some questions already included in the HBSC questionnaire.

Table I. Outline of participatory workshop one and two.

Source: Own elaboration.

Number of Votes	Themes
24	Relationships
18	Diversity/Individuality
15	Independence / Influence of Parents/ Adults
12	Drink and Lifestyle
7	Bullying and Mental Health
6	Social Life / Social
4	Stereotypes
3	Bullying
3	Interests
3	Current affairs
2	Money
2	Stress
2	Cork way of thinking **
1	Pressure
0	School
0	Maturity

\*\* Cork is a large county in Ireland.

**Table II.** The sixteen themes and the number of votes they received.

Source: Own elaboration.

people reporting that they enjoyed participating in the workshops, they had fun and that they found the activities easy to carry out. Many young people also wrote individual comments on the evaluations sheets expressing their appreciation for being involved in the research process. One young person commented ‘It’s good to know that the questions asked of young people are in some way asked by young people’.

## Discussion

The main focus of these participative workshops was to increase young people’s involvement in the HBSC research process with a view to ensuring the 2014 survey reflected the priorities of young people’s lives in Ireland now. The young people actively participated and worked hard to generate rich data in both workshops. They produced the data, categorised it and presented it in an orderly fashion fit for the purpose that was intended, highlighting young people’s priorities. These workshops demonstrate how willing, interested and capable the young people were to participate in the research process. It also highlights how enthusiastic they were to share their opinions with adults that were willing to listen and take their opinions into account. They generated new knowledge about what is important in their lives proving that they are the experts in their own lives.

### Workshop One

The young people who participated in the first youth participation workshop successfully identified a number of key themes they felt were important in young people’s lives in Ireland without researcher interference or interpretation. They displayed an impressive level of di-

plomacy in choosing and voting for the themes and they discussed and debated them in groups before agreeing on the six priority themes. The six priority themes that emerged were; ‘Relationships’, ‘Diversity/Individuality’, ‘Independence/Influence of Parents/adults’, ‘Drink and Lifestyle’, ‘Bullying and Mental Health’, and ‘Social Life/social’. These provided the research team with some new topics that have not been included in the HBSC survey before and also highlight the relevance and importance of some topics that have been present in past surveys. The themes ‘Relationships’, ‘Drink and Lifestyle’ and ‘Social life’ were not brought forward to the next stage of the research as the HBSC survey has previously addressed much of the issues that emerged within these themes including; friendships, relationships with parents, drinking alcohol, sex, family, socialising and interests.

Through these workshops the young people provided a wealth of valuable knowledge that must be respected by the researchers. They rated the theme ‘Diversity/Individuality’ very highly in their vote and discussed it passionately during the workshop highlighting it as an important theme to be addressed within HBSC. The young people linked this to being hard to ‘find yourself’ as a teenager and to young people’s mental health, something to consider when developing new questions for the HBSC survey. ‘Independence’ was another theme that received a large number of votes from the young people. This theme focused on their need for independence as they grow as a person. Within this theme the young people referred to struggles with parents and gaining independence being a gradual process. This theme emerged as important to the young people so should receive some focus by the researchers, possibly within the topic of ‘family’ in the HBSC survey. ‘Bullying’ and its link with ‘mental health’, as perceived by the young people, cre-

Theme	Why is this important?
<b>Relationships</b>	Sometimes young people aren't ready for mature relationships Some adults don't trust young people to be in mature/sexual relationships Relationships make you feel like an adult It gives you an insight into who they really are More confident around the opposite sex Family and friends are important Parents can be too strict Not everyone talks to their parents
<b>Diversity/ Individuality</b>	Being yourself is a contributing factor to your mental health It can be hard to find yourself "who you are". People place people into groups too much As you get older you become more unique/individual People aren't trusted to choose their own religious path Aim for what you like, not what's individual Impacts on mental health
<b>Independence/ Influence of parents/adult</b>	Independence necessary for you to grow as a person Young People are the future – we know what we don't want country to look like Giving independence builds a trust between young people & parents Adults can guide us in right direction about some things Gaining trust gradual & step by step!
<b>Drink and Lifestyle</b>	People drink even if they don't want to There's nothing for youth to do & nowhere to go Young people don't know their limits Major relationship between drink & sports especially GAA & sailing Young people learning from adult culture Need to know what happens if you do start drinking Such a big issue Peer pressure from friends
<b>Bullying and Mental Health</b>	Bullying can lead to suicide Some people do not consider mental health seriously enough Both topics are linked very closely It is currently a 'taboo' subject and this needs to change Bullying from peers but frequently from people from perceived powers e.g. teachers Listening helps It's a serious problem & there is such a stigma about it. Low self esteem
<b>Social life / Social</b>	Dangers of being revealed in the social media Making friends Independence Online bullying Gives you good communication skills Express yourself Interests & hobbies So you have people for you when you feel down or feel alone

**Table III.** *The reasons why these six themes are important to young people's lives.*

Source: Own elaboration.

Theme	Category 1	Category 2	Category 3
Diversity/Individuality	Sexuality	Stereotypes	Finding yourself
Independence	Stereotypes	Gaining Independence	Trust
Mental Health	Solutions	Social Media	Causes
Bullying	Causes	Types	Coping

**Table IV.** *The three categories that received the most votes within each theme.*

Source: Own elaboration.

ated a lot of discussion. A link between bullying and suicide emerged so too did the idea of mental health being a 'taboo' subject and one that is stigmatised. Bullying has been included in the HBSC questionnaire in some detail in the past however with the seriousness and lengthy dis-

cussion around this topic further participative workshops are needed to provide the young people with an opportunity to develop this theme further and consider how HBSC could help in capturing it more comprehensively.

## **Workshop Two**

In the second participative workshop the young people developed these four themes further. They categorised the data and effectively prioritised these categories in order to reduce the data to a feasible amount for further investigation and to focus their priorities. Within each of the four themes, three categories emerged as critical to consider for the HBSC survey. 'Diversity and Individuality' was categorised into 'sexuality' and 'finding yourself' as youth priorities. 'Stereotypes' also emerged as a category within this theme however this one mainly had a negative connotation with the young people expressing their dislike to being stereotyped by other people. The issue of 'stereotyping' strongly emerges, which in itself is important information about the lives of young people. The theme 'Independence' resulted in the category 'stereotypes' again along with 'gaining independence' and 'trust'. It became clear from the workshops that it is critical to teenagers and their relationship with their parents that they are given the opportunity to develop and grow as a person with guidance.

The categories within the theme 'mental health' focused on addressing the 'causes', one of which was very strongly identified as 'social media' by the young people and 'finding solutions'. Some of this may be beyond the remit of the HBSC survey but there is scope for the young people to develop some questions in this area that have the potential to influence policy or practice in the future. Again a similar thought process occurred with the theme 'Bullying' with the young people identifying the important categories relating to this as 'causes', 'types' and 'coping'. Some of these have been addressed in previous HBSC surveys but due to the level of importance placed on this area by the young people it highlights there is much more information to know, especially on the effects of social media. Throughout this workshop the young people proved they have exceptional capabilities to rationally choose the categories they felt were most important and relevant to the lives of young people in Ireland. They also had the ability to explain the categories in a simple and concise way for the purpose of the research.

## **Observations after the workshops**

Prior to both workshops a detailed protocol was developed and all facilitators were familiar with this. However during the workshops it was evident that different facilitators, despite the protocol, may have influenced the way their group worked on certain tasks due to their own specific facilitation style. This may have resulted in differences across the groups of young people and how they approached the task. Young people in both workshop one and workshop two expressed a need for more time during the workshops to work on the activities. Due to the time constraints of the day however it was necessary to keep the activities within the assigned time allocations.

The objective of involving different groups of young people in workshop one and two was to ensure as many young people as possible were involved in the research

process. This secured a wide variety of opinions and priorities were discussed in each workshop. However it needs to be stated that having the same group of young people participate in both workshops may have resulted in a more cohesive process of data generation and theming. In workshop two, to a certain extent, the young people interpreted the data generated in workshop one so some of the meaning may have been misinterpreted. Although the methodology used for these workshops was a great success, even using two different groups of young people, the question remains if just one group participated would this have resulted in slightly different themes?

## **Added value of the workshops**

The workshops proved to be very valuable to carry out as part of the HBSC research process. Some new and unexpected youth priorities emerged as a result, including the focus on independence, young people finding themselves, individuality, and feeling that they are stereotyped. Other themes that emerged were not unexpected to the researchers. These included bullying and mental health concerns. However, the level of importance given to these categories and the lengthy discussions about them, confirms these as topics of as priority for HBSC in the future. The extent to which the young people perceive bullying and mental health problems to be linked is also a very important finding. It is very valuable information for all those working with young people in a role of responsibility for their wellbeing.

These youth participatory workshops laid a foundation for the future participation of young people in research. It highlights the benefits and usefulness of involving young people in research about their lives and health. Due to the success of this research process, and the very valuable outcomes from it, this methodology is exhibited as an excellent model for other researchers in the area of youth research to follow and learn from.

These workshops also made the initial steps towards HBSC International becoming a more youth inclusive research project. It would be very interesting for other HBSC countries to undertake a similar process and benefit from the youth in their individual countries identifying what is important in their lives. This process confirmed to the researchers that young people are in fact the experts when it comes to their lives and health and they are very interested in participating in the research process. Many of the young people involved in the process expressed their appreciation for being given the opportunity to participate and to share their opinions. They proved to be competent and knowledgeable and were able to share their opinions in a structured and methodological way. All of the learning from this process has the potential to aid in the further development of an even more appropriate structure for the inclusion of young people in any research process.

Although the data we have from the young people to date is very valuable there are more steps planned as part of the process of involving young people in the HBSC research cycle. The next step is to continue working with

young people to enable them, from the themes that have emerged, to develop possible questions for inclusion in the 2014 HBSC survey. These questions will then be reviewed and piloted before a final decision is made on the questions to include in the 2014 HBSC questionnaire.

## Conclusions

These workshops, for the first time in the history of the HBSC study, represent the opportunity young people were given to express their views and perspectives on what the priorities should be for HBSC Ireland 2014. This will ensure the young people themselves have an impact on the HBSC Ireland study, a national research project and thus will influence the outcomes of the research findings. The young people provided invaluable data during the workshops and set priorities that the researchers had not previously considered for the study. This highlights the usefulness of involving young people in research about their lives. Due to the International status of the HBSC study these workshops have the power to serve as a catalyst for other countries to involve young people in their research process and as a result each country could potentially develop new youth health priorities.

The inclusion of new questions, based on these themes, in the 2014 HBSC Ireland Study will provide valuable information on aspects of the lives of children and young people never before explored in the survey. This information will assist in the development of policies and services that meet the needs of children and young people in aspects of their lives that are important to them.

The journey described in this paper represents a radically different approach to development of a national survey. The direct involvement of young people in identification of their priority themes and the nature of the partnership between a Government department and a team of academic researchers are new methods of working on such initiatives. This project affirms the benefit of the partnership between the DCYA and the HBSC Team. The success and learning from the process and findings are a model of good practice for the fledgling DCYA Children's Participation Hub. The outcomes from the process confirm the value of involving children and young people as stakeholders in the HBSC Survey and challenges researchers and policy-makers to consider involving children and young people in the development and design of other research into their lives and behaviour.

It was an important objective that the methodology used for these workshops was in line with the principles of health promotion; participation and empowerment and it is clear from the positive reaction and feedback by the young people involved this was achieved. Although this research was carried out within the HBSC research project, the findings of the study identify the potential of such a methodology to transform the path of any research project concerning young people. It identifies how a research project and its possible outputs can be made more relevant to young people's lives by involving them in the process and thus gives them an opportunity to have a voice in shaping their environment.

## Limitations

Using Comhairle na nÓg to recruit the young people for the workshops may have resulted in a voluntary bias. This is due to the personalities and motivations of the young people who participate in such activities. However this was minimised by asking each Comhairle to nominate young people who had not participated in a national consultation event previously. The Comhairle was also seen as an opportunity to involve young people from different counties and different schools in Ireland, and this was achieved. A further limitation of this study that socio demographic status information was not collected from the young people. Although it is relevant that the involvement of 'seldom heard' young people is one of the qualification criteria for the DCYA Comhairle na nÓg Development Fund. These would be important considerations for any research team undertaking a similar participative process.

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