This is an extract from *Rethinking Children and Inclusive Education by* Sue Pearson, published by Bloomsbury, London, in October 2016. I would like to thank Sue Pearson for including this interview in her book, and to urge readers to get hold of the book, so as to read the interview in its context, which is ultimately more important.

Human rights: Universal, the same for all
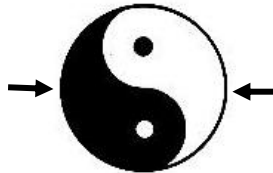
Children and young people: Unique and diverse

Interview with Harry Shier about his research

Harry Shier, Centre for Children's Rights, Queen's University Belfast, UK; CESESMA, Nicaragua

Sue Pearson: How do you think your ideas about children's participation have developed over the years? What were the key influences?

Harry Shier: I think of myself as a person who seeks to embody and enact ideas of learning, growth and change in my life, but as I reflected on this question, what struck me was how many of my early ideas about children's participation have persisted and taken root. These would include for example: (1) Participation is a human right, and therefore, although there are many reasons why children's participation is beneficial to society, none of these reasons is needed to justify it. The fact that it is every child's right is sufficient justification in itself. (2) We should strive to learn about and work on children and adolescents' agendas, rather than always inviting them to work on our pre-set agendas (whether in research or policy-making). (3) Following from this, we should look for ways to nurture and support children and adolescents' pro-active participation (what we call *protagonismo infantil* in Latin America), i.e. actions based on their initiatives and where they make the key decisions (I would also note that this is constantly stifled by the way we adults always have to maintain control over resources, particularly controlling and constraining

children and adolescents' mobilisation). (4) I believe the lasting legacy of Roger Hart's work is his naming of the various forms of false participation that abound in this field, which he called 'manipulation', 'decoration' and 'tokenism' (Hart, 1992). We need to pay more attention to these as persistent problems, learning to recognise them and weed them out wherever we can. (5) We need to stop restricting children and adolescents' opportunities to speak out as advocates for themselves and others on the grounds of an excessive, overbearing protectionism, which it seems to me often has more to do with covering our own backs than genuinely protecting children.

So, having mentioned some of my ideas that haven't changed at all, I will now answer your question. There are many ways my thinking has changed over the years and continues to change, but I can think of four that I have thought through enough to share.

(1) I now have a much clearer grasp on the idea of 'empowerment'. When I re-read 'Pathways to Participation' (Shier, 2001), the one thing I wish I could change is where I said that for children to be empowered adults have to 'give away' some to their power; that is, I used to think of power relations as a 'zero-sum game': If you have more it means I must have less. I no longer see empowerment in this way. In more recent writing (Shier et al., 2014; Shier, 2015), I am clear that adults cannot "empower children". Our role is rather to seek to facilitate the processes through which children and adolescents can gradually become empowered, and this involves a fusion of conditions, capacities and self-perception (Shier, 2015, p 214). Key influences here would be my *compañeras* and *compañeros* at CESESMA in Nicaragua, and through them, indirectly, the work of Paulo Freire.

(2) Children themselves change as they grow and develop. I think at one point I was taken in by a tendency in the 'new sociology of childhood' literature to deny the very idea of child development. This can still be seen in the number of articles that start with a footnote saying "'Child' means anyone under 18". I believe we must take more account of 'evolving capacities' and the way children and adolescents change as their capacities develop (Lansdown, 2005). And, particularly in our writing, we must stop using the term 'child' as a catch-all that includes babies, toddlers, pre-schoolers, primary schoolers, working children, young adolescents and near adults up to the eve of their 18th birthday, as if they all belong to a single neatly characterizable social actor group that we can label 'children' (and as an aside, I think using 'children and young people' as a work-around is just as bad, as 'young person' has no standard meaning, so unless you define it, you shouldn't use it in any kind of serious discussion). I have started to use 'children and adolescents' in my own

work and, though not unproblematic, I do think it takes us a step forwards. The fact that we recognise and respect children and adolescents as citizens and rights-holders *now* does not mean we have to ignore the way they continue to learn and grow as they develop. Again the key influence here would be my work with CESESMA in Nicaragua, where, as in most of Latin America, child (*niño* or *niña*) is 0-12 and adolescent (*adolescente*) is 13-17: clear, consistent legal definitions that everyone knows and understands.

(3) Some years ago I wrote a paper called 'Children as public actors: navigating the tensions' (Shier 2010), the whole idea of which was to identify a number of polarities, or oppositions in thinking about child participation, and look at how experienced adults working in this field had learnt to navigate around and between these (examples were: 'The child as consumer vs. the child as activist'; 'Invited spaces vs. popular spaces'; 'Child protection vs. child empowerment' – there are 15 in total). Recently I've taken a different approach, and what I then saw as oppositions or polarities causing tension, I now think of as complementarities, requiring integration and balancing. This way of thinking inspired the use of the Yin-yang symbol to show how we can integrate ideas about diversity and individuality with the universality or 'same-for-everyone' nature of human rights (Shier et al, 2014, p. 3). I don't think I could write 'Navigating the Tensions' the same way now.

My key influence here is the Tao Te Ching of Lao Tzu. I've studied this a lot over the years, and even created my own re-visioning of it, *The Tao of Development* (Shier, 2007), which you can download from my website http://www.harryshier.net/docs/Harry_Shier-Tao_of_development.pdf.

(4) One example of such a complementarity I've been working on recently is the one that links *getting everyone involved* with *working with those who want to be involved* (so this by chance will also answer your next question). I think it is no exaggeration to say that making democracy work – at any level – depends on how we integrate both approaches and get them into balance. I checked some statistics and it seems that 65% of the UK electorate turned out to vote in the 2010 general election (66% in 2015) but only 1.2% belong to a political party. Does democracy require that everyone become a party member, or alternatively that only those who show commitment by joining a party get to vote? Of course not. It requires that everyone has a say; that everyone's vote counts equally, whoever they are, wherever they come from and whether or not they choose to be politically active; and that those who choose to be politically active are able to get on and do it without repression or discrimination. Both the active engagement of the few and the universal representation of the many are essential aspects of democratic governance, and the trick is

how to integrate them. Of course children and adolescents don't (yet) have a vote in general elections, but I think the same thinking can usefully be applied to child participation projects in general. On the one hand, it is essential that everyone's views are heard and included and that no individual or group is left out. On the other hand, it makes sense to invite those children and adolescents who are committed and enthusiastic about getting actively involved to take leading roles in the project, whether as researchers, reporters, data analysts, advocates or spokespeople. If you follow this approach, I think the ethical question is: are you capable of identifying and dismantling the barriers that privilege some children and adolescents and discriminate against others in terms of who gets involved? An example of this occurred in my most recent research in Nicaragua. We had a team of 17 young researchers (aged 9-15) and, although we were fully aware that there were a number of disabled children living in our catchment area, none of them were included in our final team. So I must ask myself: Did they have the same opportunity as everyone else to come forward and get involved in the project? They may not have wanted to, but that's not the issue. The issue is, did they have an equal chance? For example: Were the selection criteria entirely relevant and necessary? Did we identify those children, or groups of children, who might have wanted to join the team but faced obstacles to putting themselves forward? And those who might have needed additional support to play a full and equal role in the team once selected? And what about those who would have loved to participate but never heard about the project because no-one made the effort to reach them? In this particular project, with the benefit of hindsight, I don't think we got it right; but these are now questions to be asked at the start of every future participation process.

A key influence here is Malala Yousafzai (Yousafzai and Lamb, 2013). While we cannot expect all children and adolescents to do what Malala did – and continues to do – that's not the point. We must learn to support, respect and honour those who do. Malala is just one, but she now has the support she needs, and she is a voice that speaks for millions who might not otherwise be heard.

Sue Pearson: Some children were very involved in this research whilst others weren't. Did this create any issues for the children or for you as the researcher?

Harry Shier: This is covered in the previous answer, but to sum up: Every child and adolescent has an incontestable right to be heard, but they are not under an obligation to be actively engaged in research or advocacy work if they are not interested. The ethical challenge for adults facilitating such work is to ensure that no-one is excluded through either direct or

indirect discrimination, and this requires consistent positive efforts on our part.

Sue Pearson: When you are developing a research project, at what point do you start to think about how it can make an impact?

Harry Shier: Before I start developing a research project, I've already thought about the potential impact. For me, research is a tool that can be used to help children and adolescents defend their rights and so improve their lives; research is at the service of advocacy. I don't deny that knowledge has value in itself, and I know there are researchers who dedicate their lives to seeking it on that basis, but that's not my interest. And this applies equally to supporting child researchers. The question I ask them at the start of a project is not "What do you want to research?", but, "What are the problems you face in your family, school or community, that new knowledge from research might help you tackle?" (See CESESMA 2012, pp 5-6, for an example of this approach in action). So the research question itself is derived from considerations of potential impact. I wouldn't be doing research otherwise.

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