

Children's Participation in Educational Projects and Sustainable Design – Comparing the UK and Nicaraguan Contexts: An Interview with Harry Shier, 17th January 2009

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Born in Belfast, Ireland, in 1954, Harry Shier lived and worked in England for 25 years, initially on adventure playgrounds, then in training adults working with children out of school. In 1981 he founded Playtrain, an independent training agency specialising in children's rights, play and creativity. In the 1990s he worked and wrote extensively on children's rights and participation, most notably developing the "Article 31 Children's Consultancy Scheme", which enables young children to act as specialist consultants to the senior management of diverse cultural institutions, helping them make facilities and programmes more child-friendly. This experience was crystallised in his 2001 paper *Pathways to Participation*, which has become one of the most important conceptual models of children's participation in decision-making, widely used in many parts of the world.

In 2001 he moved to Nicaragua, Central America, where he works in community education, supporting local colleagues developing new education programmes with children and young workers on the region's coffee plantations. In November 2002 he was attacked and badly beaten by local delinquents in his new hometown of Matagalpa. Left for dead in a pool of blood by the roadside, he was found, barely alive, the next morning and rushed to hospital. He made an almost complete recovery and, against professional advice, returned to Matagalpa to continue his work. Nicaragua is now his permanent home.

From September 2007 to March 2008 he held a Practitioner Fellowship at the University of the West of England, researching concepts of children and young people's participation in Nicaragua and the UK. An extensive list of Shier's papers including links to online resources are included in the appendix to this interview transcript.

Andrea Wheeler: I've been working with children from an architect's point of view. Getting them to design their school and telling me what they think about sustainability. My project is about whether you can encourage children to learn about environmental issues through design. I think it is a really good way and it can encourage them to care more about the environment. So can I ask you some very direct and simple questions for a start? Do you think architects should consult children? There's a lot of policy out there that says you should, and must, but I'm getting to the stage of thinking is it even worthwhile, because how well can architects ever listen? Architects are doing what they should do in consulting children now, but what is the benefit? Is anything transformative actually coming out of it? When, in fact, participation could potentially be quite a transforming process.

Harry Shier: You've hit the nail on the head as far as I'm concerned. The bit about specifics of architecture and design is one issue, but the general issue you've raised, "Why bother if nobody takes it seriously?" is crucial. I live and work in Nicaragua, but in the last year I've become reconnected with the field here in the UK, and talked to a lot of people working in the field in both countries, and this is a real issue. People are writing and publishing articles questioning whether it's rhetoric or reality, and there's at least one that's called that (Graham *et al.*, 2006; Driskell *et al.*, 2001; Freeman *et al.*, 2003). It is about exactly this idea that there is all this rhetoric about children's participation, but what is the reality? It's hard to find good evidence of how this process works in terms of policy influence. I come from a children's rights focus, so it's the children's right to have a say and the children's right to have their opinions given due weight in decisions that affect their lives (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12). For me, the design of any buildings that children use involves decisions that directly affect their lives, so if the design process doesn't include their participation it violates this right.

Being in a school will have a huge affect on children's lives. So by right, under the Convention on the Rights of the Child – of which the UK Government is a State Party – that implies it's a right that all children in Britain have (I understand that the UK Government is now prepared to waive its reservation saying that children who are asylum seekers and refugees weren't covered, so now all children in the UK have that right). So that's the starting point. In Nicaragua we're very conscious that rights are valuable and have to be defended, and if you want them to be defended you have to make an effort to demand that they are. So that's the starting point, and where you see adults engaged in tokenistic exercises like having a focus group with children around the design of new schools because it's a requirement that they have to tick for their grant, or to get a contract, or whatever, and they have no intention of doing anything about it, that's a violation of children's rights. So if you put it in that way, you then have to ask who has a duty

to comply with that right, why they're not complying with it and what can be done to get them to comply with it.

This can be a collaborative way of working. Sometimes you have to try and defend rights through direct confrontation, but in general, in cases like this, it's better to defend rights by working with the person who's violating rights so that they can understand they're violating someone's rights by the way they're acting, and that they need to change the way they act and how they can do it. So that would be my starting point.

So yes, it is definitely worth doing because you can't deny people their rights. That would not be a good thing! So what you need to do, where it's not working, where rights are not being respected, is be aware that this is a violation of children's rights and look for positive ways to work with people to improve the situation. If I was conscious that I was being involved in, or getting dragged into, a consultation process that I thought was tokenistic, that would be my approach.

When I started getting involved in this work, the only accepted model we had was Roger Hart's Ladder (Hart, 1992. See also: Arnstein, 1969; Hart, 1997), and for all the usefulness and convenience of the ladder, the most powerful learning that came out of that for me was the three lower rungs, making us aware of manipulation, decoration and tokenism; and it is my personal view that a lot more work should be done on this area. Academics, experts, write about these things but they don't put them into practice. Weeding them out where they occur, that would be part of my approach: looking for places where the children are being manipulated by the architect to provide a nice gloss on their design or where their presence is purely decorative, or tokenistic where they're being encouraged to speak but not listened to.

AW: I've been doing workshops, sort of exploring – I have to say it's exploring, because I've been going into schools where they expect to get money from Building School for the Future – the children sort of know that there might be some sort of building going on, but they know I'm not the architect who is going to do it. So what I'm saying is, well, if you can talk to me then when the architect does come along you'll have ideas or knowledge to talk to her or him. There's all sorts of things that come from the children in the workshops. I'm at the stage now of having to interpret what they're saying and they have a lot of fun and do all sorts of things. They talk together, challenge each other and I've got lots of images of, you know, drawings of gardens and lovely things like that.

For me, what's actually going on and what they are actually doing is playing, and that's important, but the problem is if an architect comes along (or even a teacher), and I've heard them talking about this sort of thing, he's more likely to have a very crude or very direct relationship to the data. You hear architects saying how silly children are, we asked them and they told us we want a pink football

pitch; how silly, they can't have a pink football pitch, but you only need to ask the children the one little question: "why?"

HS: Exactly; it's a perfect example. You're absolutely right. First of all, you're right because children think in creative, imaginative, often magical terms – part of childhood it seems. So that often influences the way children express their needs and desires, like the pink football pitch. And you're right that adult professionals often find it hard to go beyond that and understand that this is an expression of a real need, but the real need is not for a pink football pitch. And there are various ways to do this.

In the past I have been in situations where I've had to provide the interpretation, presenting a report. Before I went to Nicaragua in 2001, I worked here in England and the most exciting work I did around this was the Article 31 Children's Consultancy Scheme, which was about enabling, facilitating, empowering groups of children to become expert consultants to all kinds of high level management and institutions, and a lot of that was around facility design. For example, we went to the Royal Festival Hall, we went to the Tower of London, we went to Manchester City's new art gallery; and the idea was that children were providing consultancy advice to the management about what they needed to do to improve the child-friendliness of their facility. And sometimes, yes, when the children presented their report, they presented it in their own imaginative, creative way, and it was left to me to write the formal adult report to suggest some ways in which the children's presentation could be interpreted. So if I can give you an example of that: when we worked with traveller children around play facilities, and visited adventure playgrounds, they found it objectionable that the children got so muddy; and that's very strange, because one of the joys of adventure playgrounds is the mud. Even the washing powder adverts on the telly are saying it's great for kids to get muddy. But when you think about it, the thing about traveller children is that they don't have washing machines where they live; they live in caravans, and it's a struggle for their parents to have to wash, and therefore, when they complain that they don't want to play where they'll get their clothes all muddy, you have to understand where they're coming from and interpret it in a certain way. That's one example where the adult can interpret the children's expressed views in a certain way.

AW: If you listen...

HS: Exactly, that's the next point. It's much better to be able to work with the children, exploring the issues underlying their first statement, because I think that adults who do consult with children are often bad at framing the question, and they often ask kids what they want or what they'd like to see – very simplistic questions, which often get those kinds of simplistic answers, often the magical

answers. And if you think about reframing the questions, for example: Why do you come to school? What are the things you enjoy about the experience of school? What are the things you hate about the experience of school? From that you can look at aspects of the environment: What are the ways the environment needs to be improved to build on the things you like about it? And to try to deal with some of the stuff you don't like? If you ask those questions you're going to get much more useful stuff, not only about pink football pitches. I think this works better because it avoids the misinterpretation that can easily occur if an adult is doing that work.

Another example that occurred to me was where a team of child consultants were providing consultancy to the public parks service in Southwark, and they said they wanted a coke machine, and we thought this is something we would hesitate to recommend. But by exploring the issue with them, it was clear that what they actually wanted was something to drink when they're thirsty. But because of the life they live, a can of coke is a source of liquid refreshment. Actually, a water fountain would serve their need much better, so you explore with the children what it is they really want. In the end, the recommendation is: "We want water fountains because we go to the park to play, and sometimes we get hot and sweaty and want a drink and we have to go to the shop and spend money on a can of coke when really a drink of water will cool our thirst, and we can enjoy the can of coke later." And all this kind of stuff can come out if you've got a process that goes beyond "What do you want in the park?" "We want this, this and this".

AW: Another problem I have is the idea of what school is there for. It's not just about the architecture; it's about the education schools are there to give. Does a school need classrooms, for example? It needs all sorts of things, and that's the way you learn, but sometime it is more critical, you will learn better in this way or that way? So there's a part of my project which is about finding out how children best want to learn, so there is also a conflict with the idea about what schools are and should be there to do.

HS: This is fundamental stuff. What is education for?

AW: Do you think children should be concerned about how they learn? It is a difficult question because it's our responsibility to look after children and ensure they are learning.

HS: It's an adult's responsibility to do exactly as you say. That is, to safeguard children's right to education. There's no doubt at all that children do have a right to have a say in these things and adults have to take into account what children say, but there's nothing in the Convention that says that children have to be

involved in making those final decisions. Adults have the right to make the final decisions because the best interests of the child is the overriding factor, but at the same time the adults also have an agenda of what they want for the children. To make a final decision, it's not what the children want to do; it's what is considered to be in the best interests of the child. So you give the children's opinions due weight in terms of determining what is considered to be in their best interests, and that would apply to Educational Designers, I would think. So if the best interests of the child is to have access to an effective education, then it's a political matter of what is an effective education in this society. Nowadays there's another whole set of issues about measuring; that education can be tested, and therefore the aim of education is to get test marks. I think this is an appalling retrograde step, like a 20th-century education going back to a 19th-century education, when we should be going forward to a 21st-century education. So there's an urgent need to establish a social consensus about why we educate, and to challenge the idea that we educate to get high test scores and to get schools up league tables. I'm not an expert on educational policy, but just from what I read in the papers here about testing and league tables, it appears that the aims of education have almost been reduced down to this in this country. And if you don't have a consensus on why educate, it's very hard to make rational decisions about the "how?" You need to know what the intended outcome of your education is in order to decide how to do it. If we decide to stick with the idea that the output of education is high test scores, then we will look for some type of rote learning and drilling system like 19th-century education, with regular practice tests, and we'll just have to find a way of selling this to the kids or forcing the kids to accept this, because that's what their education is. So for me, it would be much better to stop this and challenge the outcomes of education first, and this will enable us to be clear in the design of the process. But that's a big task, a major challenge (For an alternative vision of a 21st-century education, see Shier, 2001). Another way of looking at it, that is perhaps more manageable in reality, is the idea of ownership. Who is the owner of this education? Whose education is it? Is this the teachers' education? No. Is this the education authorities' education? They act like they own it, but it's not their education. Is it the parents' education? No, it isn't their education. The parents often treat it as if it's theirs, but it's not. Whose education is it? It's the kids' education. They are the ones whose education it is. So if we believe that, we can plan and design and work with them. "This is your education. You should be the ones who can decide what you want out of it. But once you decide what you want to get out of it, then we will push you to get that outcome." That's the adult role and I think a lot of progress could come out of that way of thinking, of getting children to reflect on why do they want an education, not "Do they want to go to school?" because that's a "How?" question, rather than a "Why?" That's another example of asking the wrong questions.

AW: The children I have asked do want to go to school and they tell me that it is because they want to get good exam results so they can get good jobs.

HS: Yes, I know.

AW: Sometimes they tell me they also go to school just to hang out with their friends.

HS: School is a good place for social space and that's one way you can sell schools, I suppose, but you shouldn't have to do that; you shouldn't have to rely on that to sell the idea of education. I'm being very hypothetical here, but it would be great, at various stages during the education process, for children and young people to reflect on "Why am I here for myself, what do I want out of this?" and I think that would help them accept the impositions teachers make on them.

Designing schools is very difficult until you've got children who know what they're for. If you do, then you can design the "how" so that the physical space of this environment reflects its function. So what is the function of the school? Is it, as so often seems to be the case, to control children during the daytime in a disciplined way, in which case you design it for that purpose, and many school designs look like that's what they're designed for. They're not that different from prisons in the way they're designed, but they don't have the bars. Or is the function of the school about enabling and empowering each individual human being to achieve potential? In which case, what would a space designed to do that be like? How would we try and create that sort of space? Another point is the idea of giving children more of a sense that this process is theirs; it's not up to somebody else. It's their education in the sense that any benefits or lack of benefits will come to them, not to their teachers, not to their parents. If they're able to benefit from a good education and get a good job, be happy, be fulfilled in their life, that's not going to affect their parents or their teachers or the local authority or anybody else, only them, because it's their process, and I don't think anybody works with kids in that way; that "This education is yours".

In Nicaragua, that's easier because you don't have to go to school. Very much the opposite; often you struggle to be able to get to school. So if it's your right to go to school, you fight for it, you defend it, sometimes you negotiate around it. That's the way we're working at the moment, because the children I work with are on coffee plantations and many of them are unable to get access to education because they're working when they would have to be in school if they wanted to get through their education. We're exploring the issue with them, because in Nicaragua you can't move up from one year to the next unless you complete a year. It's not like the UK system where all the twelve-year-olds are in year x and all the thirteen-year-olds are in x plus 1 and all the fourteen-year-olds, and so on.

It doesn't matter how good they are; they all move up a year. This was the problem on the coffee plantations. The kids neither finished nor started the year because the coffee harvest overlapped the end of the school year and the start of the next one, which meant they were constantly repeating years, which meant they were losing all interest and faith in the educational process, because it was not of any conceivable use to them. And the other issue for them was not only that, but even if they managed to finish their primary education, which was six years, so they could go to secondary school, there isn't a secondary school to go to. There isn't a secondary school in these communities. So what's the point of struggling to get through primary, because primary education doesn't actually equip you for anything except to go to secondary school. In this situation, the challenge is often about negotiating with parents about issues like the coffee harvest. For example, a child might say to his or her parents: "The coffee harvest is coming early this year, and picking is going to start in the middle of November, but school goes on until the first week in December. It's better that I stay in school, while my older brothers, my mum and dad, my uncles start picking the coffee. You'll lose a small amount of income because you won't get my contribution until school finishes on the 7th December and I'll join the coffee picking then."

And that's a family thing, and our organization is working at that kind of level: enabling children to negotiate those kinds of deals with their parents. It's an idea of ownership of education. So if a child is negotiating their education in that way, it gives them much more of a sense that it matters to them what happens when they get to school and if they get to school. It matters for them whether it's relevant when they get to school. Now that access to education has improved greatly, the issue we're working on is not so much access, but quality, now that kids get to school and find that what's offered to them is of very poor quality and of very little use. There are structural, political and economic reasons for this, so the issue now for us is working on what is "quality" in education and why are we dissatisfied with the quality of what is being offered. Now that we have made the effort to get to school, having made all this effort, why is what's there so crap? All this is so different from the system here in the UK, where children have no motivation to think about these things; it's just a sausage-machine process you have to go through. Adults find no real need to involve children in dialogue about "Why am I here in school?" It doesn't make any difference anyway. You've got to come, and so if children are not encouraged to be involved in dialogue, they have no need to think about what they need to do to, much less to have aims and objectives, to set personal goals. So people who are designing the educational process or the built environment in which it takes place have no motivation to worry about these things in that kind of system. Building a place to contain children from nine to five is, I suppose, the main motivation. That's it.

AW: Ok. Sustainable schools...we've got these policies in place now that schools are going to be low carbon and there is a lot of reference to sustainable behaviour and encouraging. Do you think all this is a good thing? Do you think that it's something schools can achieve and encourage children to care more about the environment? Is it an ethical position to set about trying to impose on children's this sort of aim?

HS: Yes, I think it is. I think it's an ethical issue. I think it's fascinating from a human rights point of view because sustainability, or environmental conservation in general, is about recognizing the rights of future generations, the rights of people yet to be; that my future great-great-grandchildren will have a right, not only will have rights in the future, but have a right now of respect for their right to live in a healthy environment. Probably philosophers have thought about this, but those ideas, those links, certainly don't come up in the area I'm working in.

We work on children's rights, and one of the rights that children recognize and are keen to work on is the right to live in a healthy environment. But sustainability is more than that, it's not just that the environment must now be healthy, but that I must be thinking now about a healthy environment for future generations, and that's conceptually quite challenging. I think about these things from a human rights perspective, and sometimes that opens up new windows and issues. So for that reason I believe it's an ethical issue. It's an ethical judgment. Am I prepared to accept that future generations have rights and am I bound by a duty to respect the rights of people who don't exist yet, who haven't been born? Because, if not, if I'm only concerned about my own rights and the rights of my fellow citizens, then all I'm concerned with is a healthy environment now. And sustainability as I understand it is more than just a less contaminated environment.

Nicaraguan kids can definitely relate to that, and that's one of the issues we work on with them. For example, reducing the spraying of toxic chemicals on coffee plants because it's harmful to them and the environment. There's a sustainability aspect to that, but the issue is more about the environment now. There is the issue of the healthy environment now, and then there is the issue in the future. So I think this idea of sustainability requires people to make an ethical commitment to it, and requires an ability to accept the importance of future generations and not just the selfish now. It's like expanding the ability to include others in the "us" group. In this developmentalist view of human evolution, you start with defending the tribe against everybody else and then the tribe expands and becomes the nation state. Patriotism is about defending the nation state against all the other nations, and then nations form alliances and then you have a kind of a one-world movement that says we are all human beings, we are all one people, we are all one identity. Then it doesn't make sense to think in terms of "us" and "them" any more. And so we are saying even beyond that, all those human beings in the world now and all those who will come into the world have

rights, and they are all part of the one humanity. So, yes, I'm committed to sustainability because I think like that.

AW: Thinking like that is probably quite a radically different point of view for most children.

HS: So the work with kids would possibly be opening up the spaces in which those kinds of ideas can be thought about. It wouldn't be impossible to do that with children because fantasizing about future worlds is...

AW: Oh, they're very good at imagining fun places to be...

HS: ...and to the professional mind, fantasizing the future would be one thing, but does it matter? At the moment it's just an image in my mind; does that matter? Is that fair? I can imagine a world contaminated with no clean seas, no clean land, no unpolluted resources and so on, and I can also imagine a world with nature in abundance with renewable resources and so on. Does it matter?

AW: That's interesting to me, because, in asking those questions, I can then go back and say: "How would the school be like if you're thinking of those terms?" I think the sorts of things I've been doing, they seem to be more teaching tools than concentrating children into the actual design of a school. I've almost made it a teaching tool, but I haven't made it into a process that explores "how do I interpret this or how can this be interpreted by architects?"

HS: Yes, I can understand that. In order to make informed, what I might call wise decisions about anything, one has to have knowledge about the issue, to make an informed decision: the decision that is made from having information. So, if we want to involve children in decision-making of any kind, we want them to be informed decisions, so whatever the topic is that we want children to decide about, we need to inform them about. We may need to acquire information or construct knowledge and that was certainly one of the factors in the success of the children's consultancy scheme that we developed here in the UK a few years back. If children were brought in to be consultants, say to the management of a major art gallery, they needed to be informed about art galleries because they were working-class kids. We recruited from out of school clubs and play centres so as not to get the usual gallery visitors, because the management were interested in broadening their appeal. So, these were children who, to start with, would have had very little knowledge of art galleries. They might have been on a school visit before, so we would start by exploring what knowledge and ideas they already had about art galleries, drawing pictures of things they already associate with art galleries, and then we would arrange visits to other art galleries. Not the one they

were going to consult on, because until you've got a frame of comparison, how can you recommend ways of making this gallery more child-friendly than any other gallery? So, there's a whole process by which children became informed of the issue, learnt a lot about art galleries, and then were able to visit the site of the new City Art Gallery – or the Victoria and Albert Museum, which was another one we did – and look at what's wrong with this from the point of view of children as users. So, the point here is that if you want children to be involved in making decisions about the design of sustainable schools, they need to be informed about sustainability. So how do you link those things together? A process through which the children gain knowledge and understanding of sustainability and then a process through which they are able to apply that knowledge to decisions that need to be made. It wouldn't make sense to ask them questions about sustainable school design if they were not informed about what we mean by sustainability and why it's important. So you need a whole teaching tool. In my example, it was the comparison with other art galleries. The teaching tool involved the children reflecting on: "What do we think of this place? How does it compare with that other place? And now, compared to those two, what needs to be done in this place?"

In the case of sustainable school design, I suppose taking kids to sustainable buildings would be a very appealing way of doing that; using examples of buildings or spaces that are considered good practice in sustainability, because children are going to learn far more if they see those kinds of things than if you simply tell them what sustainability means. Take them to some zero-carbon houses and hear people explain why this is a good thing. This kind of work is probably a lot easier in Nicaragua, because kids live in a rural environment where nature is all around them; their lives are integrated with nature, their play is integrated with nature. And then there's the farm environment, the woodland and forest environments, and they're very aware of it. That gives you a good starting point to reflect on. They know about the natural environment by direct experience of it, so you can move straight into the reflection phase. You don't have to take them to safari parks or whatever it is you do here. I guess in urban UK, children have only really grown up familiar with urban and city environments. It will be a lot of work getting them thinking about sustainable environments and how that is related to the bigger world.

AW: When you ask children about the environment, stories about their pets and having pets in school are often the first things to come up.

HS: Absolutely right. This is one of the big differences in Nicaragua. Children grow up with animals all around and farm animals wander freely around the village, whereas here even if you take children to a farm, they're not going to be allowed to touch anything. The animals are going to be penned in or at a distance

and most farms here you would be horrified to take children to them anyway because they would be battery farms, they would be intensive farms. Whereas in Nicaragua, kids are used to pigs wandering around the streets, and cattle, and chickens. They're used to avoiding snakes and scorpions in the woods. They're used to seeing the beauty of wondrous butterflies, coloured birds and flowers all around. So they wouldn't come up with pets as a priority.

But you can understand how that offers us a way in, because you can explore with children the relationship between animals and human beings in this world, and the keeping of pets is certainly one small but not ideal example of this relationship. I prefer to relate to animals in their free state; they live in their environment and we respect that environment and we visit that environment with care and respect if we want to see animals, rather than bringing animals into my environment. Forcing them into cages; that wouldn't be my way of doing it. I wouldn't forbid kids to have pets, but I would use them as a stepping stone to start investigating other ways we could relate to wildlife, and that is part of this process, I suppose. The kids saying to you they would like to have pets in school is a kind of stepping stone. You can take that to all kinds of places.

A problem is the time you have to do it. Someone asked me yesterday at a conference where I presented my recent research (Shier, 2008), "What's the most important thing that's come out of your research on participation with children?", and I had to think about this, because it was something I hadn't thought about. I said if there's one thing that's a real problem, it's the tension between participation as one-off events, short-term activities, and participation as a long-term development and learning process. Much of the work that I was told about in the UK and the responses to my interview questions in the UK were about this. "We're asked to do a consultation, we're hired to do a consultation, the consultation involves a report which has a deadline and it has a budget attached so that we can do three workshops with "x" children and we can write up a report." So the work is bounded by that, by outcome. But in Nicaragua it's about helping to facilitate a lifelong learning process where children learn to recognize themselves as part of a community, part of a society, to have a role in that society, to participate, to understand the reality they live in, to influence decisions that have to be made that affect that reality; and this goes on over years. And so for me, if there's one contradiction or tension that stands out, it is this idea of people in the UK wanting to work on this long-term process of seeing children and young people as active citizens, and that's more about children seeing themselves as active citizens than me offering them a workshop to make a decision. And I would imagine that you're often in that situation because you're brought in, you don't belong to the school, you don't even belong to the architecture firm, so you have to work within a specific timescale and you have to produce your results at the end of it. You might hope that this might sow seeds or at least contribute in some way to the children's development as active and involved

citizens, both now and in the future, but you can't guarantee it because it's outside your remit.

AW: Yes, absolutely. Have you ever done any work at all where young people have wanted to act out discussions with you and create performances, because that's what I've had with some girls who've wanted to play at being me, the researcher, and acted it out and created a documentary video, because that's what they wanted to do.

I thought it was really amazing, actually, and they developed it all themselves, and I felt it was such a wonderful thing they wanted to do.

HS: We do it all the time, but I'm trying to think of an example where this has been the children's initiative. It's a recognized and valued method in Nicaragua. We call it "socio-drama" – you probably call it "role play" here – and children are aware of it as a way of exploring ideas, expressing ideas, sharing ideas, looking at things from a different point of view. So, in putting a workshop programme together, we will often suggest socio-drama as one of the ways of looking at an issue. Looking at examples of how kids can respond to situations of violence in the family, for example, one thing would be to act out a situation that's typical, if not in their family, then a home that they know of, and then explore ways children could intervene in such a situation, and then act the situation again where somebody tries to make a change. We've also used it in work on gender equality. So yes, I think there's a happy congruence between our educational methodology ideas and the fact that the kids enjoy that kind of thing anyway. There may be some examples where the kids initiated this. We also use drama as a big part of our work: children's theatre groups where right from the start they're coming together because they're interested in the idea of being in a theatre group, and then they put together plays which are theatrical works but based on shared experiences of real-life situations around issues they want to work on.

AW: So do they create the play itself, improvising, as it were?

HS: Yes, exactly. The process would be: forming a group, exploring some of the issues in the community. At the moment, we have a project around children's participation in prevention of violence, and children are choosing aspects of this that they feel are relevant to work on; telling stories about things that happened, about real life. They decide how much they want to share, and sometimes this can get quite heavy, because children who are suffering violence may want to actually talk about this for the first time, and they may want to bring this into the play. Once lots of ideas are shared, you start putting together a storyline, using not one person's story but a made-up story that involves several people's realities sewn together to make a storyline, so that when you present it, nobody's being

pinpointed. So then it's improvising scenes, putting those scenes together; eventually they come up with a text which they learn off by heart so that they can present the play, and then they have a play ready for presentation. We have had huge success with this way of working, starting in little village communities, and plays have been taken nationally and internationally in the time I've been there. I don't do this myself, but I so admire the drama workers and the children that work on this. And of course, there are other forms of creative expression. For example, I use drawing a lot.

AW: Yes, from an architect's perspective, I assume all children will draw, but I realize when somebody says, actually, "I want to write a story", or the girls want to create a little drama; not everyone does.

HS: That's fine. Drawing is an easy thing to suggest, and if you've got an environment where kids feel they are entitled to make suggestions – which in the normal school classroom they don't – they will. So you have to open up that space for them first so they don't feel as if you're telling them what to do. You're offering drawing but the drawing often leads on to mural painting, because that's a big Central American thing. So we also have mural painting workshops and other creative activities.

AW: Do they ever build anything together? Does any of the work you've done ever gone on to building spaces?

HS: Now there's a thought. Not that I'm aware of, no. There's nothing that I can think of bigger than chicken runs, where we were supporting young people on the economic side, those who had left school, where they're thinking the only way they are going to earn a living was to emigrate to the city or try to move across to Costa Rica. We can help them get together and provide the tools and nails and wire and stuff to help to build a chicken run, so they can do a bit of poultry farming and produce and sell eggs. So the building of chicken runs is the only thing that's going on, which is not exactly architecture, is it?

When I first went to Nicaragua, there was a house building project, but that was completely different and that was simply because post-Hurricane Mitch, a vast proportion of the homes in Nicaragua were washed away by floods, leaving thousands and thousands of homeless people. So there was this huge influx of overseas aid to rebuild housing stocks as quickly and cheaply as possible. So any organization with a presence in the community was encouraged to get involved. So organizations like CESESMA set up a house-building programme, bringing in local people to build simple prefab houses, which had nothing to do with children's education at all. No architects, just prefabs built quickly and cheaply with

a certain amount of foreign money provided to do it and that was that. Now that's finished, that's not what we do – until the next hurricane, I suppose...

Educating people about sustainability, for me, comes from an ethical position, from ethical ideas about the nature of human rights. And the other aspect is about involving children in the decision to work for sustainability; and you can't do the second without doing the first. It sounds to me that what you're doing is trying to fuse the two together, and you're looking for the right way to do that, but I want to teach these children about sustainability as an ethical issue and not purely an ecological issue. It's convincing them that it's of importance to them and then the second thing is, I want to get them actively involved in the promotion of it, for example working with architects to ensure the sustainability of the built environment. This is probably quite challenging, but that in itself justifies doing it. I can't simply ask children what they want in terms of sustainability if they don't know what I'm talking about, but I don't simply want to preach my values to them when they have a right to explore their own values. I have what I would suppose in educational terms is a constructivist approach. A construction of knowledge, a shared and collective construction of knowledge is a very Latino thing: It's not about individual knowledge; it's about shared knowledge.

We start from reflecting with the children on the reality of their daily life. We create the space to reflect on that and then to look at what are the issues, the challenges, the problems. Then the third phase is the seeking of explanation, which is what some people call theory. It is a structured way of thinking that explains why my life is like this, why I have this problem in my community, that's the theory. And then once you know that, once you have an explanation, you are ready to plan how you can act to change things, which leads you to another action phase. This is the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984), which is very well known, and we have adapted it to our situation (Shier, 2009). So all our education work will follow that kind of idea, and that will work well with what you're doing, because we're not teaching the children about sustainability, they're exploring the environment in which they live, they are identifying some of the big issues, problems in that environment, and maybe that's where you expand their knowledge and you tell them about CO₂ emissions (which they can't see, obviously). So they would learn about some of those things, and are reflecting upon their reality. Then there comes a point at which you give input and some explanation of this, building upon their reflection, their reality, so you're not preaching at them, you're offering an explanation of what is real for them. And then they're ready to start thinking about what needs to be changed: "How can we intervene now that we understand what a sustainable school is and why having a sustainable school would have positive effects on our lives, our reality? Then we can think about what to do about it, and one of those things is that we might want to talk to the

architects who are designing our schools. For example, we want to look at how is the school going to be heated”.

AW: Thank you.

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Appendix¹

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¹ All resources listed in this Appendix are by Harry Shier. Most of these resources currently available on-line, and also some unpublished material not listed above, can also be accessed via Harry Shier’s personal web-space: www.harryshier.110mb.com.

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