Children and young people as transformative researchers in Nicaragua

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In this presentation:

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Children’s Consultancy: Roots in the UK in the 1990s

- Fashion for making programmes and institutions “child-friendly”, particularly in the arts, culture and recreation sectors.
- Awareness of Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC): The right to play, and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.
- Expert advice sought on how to make things child-friendly.
So where do we find the experts?

Children are experts on what is child-friendly and what isn’t, what works for children and what doesn’t, what’s fun and what’s boring, what makes them feel included and what makes them feel excluded.
1998

Child consultants advising the management of the new Manchester City Art Gallery on how to create a child-friendly gallery.
1998

Child consultants commissioned by British Waterways to research the educational and recreational potential of the English canal network.
1999

Child Consultants from the New-Age Traveller community in the South-West of England commissioned by The Children’s Society to advise on play and recreation opportunities for traveller children.
2000

Child Consultants advise senior management at the Tower of London on how to make it less boring.
The thinking behind it…

(a) Principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

- Article 3: When adults make decisions that affect children, they must do so in “the best interests of the child.”

- Article 12: Children have the right to express their opinions on all matters that affect them, and adult decision-makers must give due weight to the opinions expressed.
Combine these two principles:

Adults making decisions that affect children must listen to the children that are affected and give due weight to what the children tell them. This is a fundamental requirement to enable the making of decisions in the best interests of the child.
The “Old Paradigm” saw children as generally incapable, due to their relative lack of “cognitive development”.

The “New Paradigm” argues that:

- from a young age children have specific capabilities which make them the driving force of their own development;

- children develop through their experience of action and agency in the world around them.
CESESMA: A local Nicaraguan NGO working with children and young people in the northern coffee-growing area where extreme poverty leads to extensive exploitation of child labour and related human rights violations.

CESESMA supports the empowerment of children and young people, particularly those working on coffee plantations, helping them organise and participate to defend their rights.

Starting in 2007, CESESMA adapted the UK Children’s Consultancy model to work with child coffee workers in Nicaragua.
Children’s consultancy in Nicaragua: Some examples

2007: Children and young people from Santa Martha coffee plantation research the problem of violence on the plantation.

Preparation
Field research
Data analysis

Drawing up recommendations
Preparing a final report

Rehearsing the formal presentation
Journey to the national conference in the capital city, Managua
A direct challenge to the Minister for the Family…

…and to all the conference delegates.
The following year the children retold their experience in words and pictures in “A Handbook of Children and Young People’s Participation”.

A Handbook of Children and Young People’s Participation
Perspectives from Theory and Practice

Barry Percy-Smith & Nigel Thomas
2009: Children and young people from the indigenous community of Guadalupe Arriba research the issue of violence against children

Preparation
Analysis

Preparing the final report
Presenting the findings and recommendations to a district forum of teachers and education ministry officials.

Report published by CESESMA
2009: “Children and Young People Defending our Right to Play” campaign

Action-research teams carry out an appraisal of play opportunities and limitations in their communities.
They present their findings and recommendations in both the local communities and the Municipal Children and Youth Committees.
“Children and young people defending our right to play. For health, learning, development, happiness and a life without violence.”
These children’s research has had recognition nationally in Nicaragua:

Article by the children’s research team in Nicaragua’s children’s rights magazine “Arco Iris” (November 2009)

National newspaper feature drawing on the children’s findings. Title: “What are we playing at?”
…and globally:

As a contribution to the report “Children’s Right to Play” published by the Bernard Van Leer Foundation – which was influential in getting a UN Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment on Article 31.

As a case study of good practice in “Every Child’s Right to be Heard”, the resource guide on the UN Committee’s General Comment No 12 (UNICEF / Save the Children UK, 2011).
2009: The Santa Martha coffee plantation Young Consultants’ team reforms to research the relationship between business and human rights on the plantation.

Preparing the report and recommendations.

Field research.
Presentation of the findings and recommendations at a regional conference in Matagalpa

This report is also available on the website of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights as a contribution to the Committee on the Rights of the Child’s forthcoming General Comment on “Children’s Rights and the Business Sector”
2011: Young consultants produce a child-friendly version of the UN Committee’s recommendations to the government of Nicaragua as part of a national campaign to push for compliance.
National launch of the child-friendly version, programmed and presented by children and young people in Managua, August 2012 (three weeks ago)
Two factors that limit empowerment

1. An adult tells the young consultants what topic they are going to research and they can’t decide this for themselves.

2. Once they hand in their report, there is no commitment to follow-up or further action to support the young people in getting their recommendations implemented.
A new version: Transformative Research by Children and Young People

Takes the Children’s Consultancy model and adds two new features:

1. The teams of young researchers decide for themselves on the topics they want to research (though there may be boundaries set due to funding or other factors beyond the facilitators’ control).

2. Once they have completed their research reports, the teams are supported in developing an action plan to disseminate their findings and follow up their recommendations. The supporting organisation makes a commitment to support this process.
2011: Four teams of young researchers carry out their own self-chosen research projects

El Plomo-La Garita-Siare team
Research topic: Respect in the community, and how lack of respect leads to violence.

Without respect there’s no trust or friendship and that’s what causes violence

Young researchers investigate the concept of “respect” and how lack of respect leads to violence in families and communities.
Yasica Sur team
Research topic: The violence that children and young people suffer in the home.
Yúcul team
Research topic: Alcohol and violence in the community.

We want to live without violence!

Young researchers helping to find a solution to the problem of alcohol as a factor that causes violence in our communities.
Samulalí team
Research topic: Parents who hit their children. Why do they do it and what are the alternatives?
The four research reports were published in book form by CESESMA in Nicaragua in March 2012.

An English translation has been produced jointly by CESESMA and The Centre at UCLan, and will be launched on 6 September in Preston.
Based on all this experience, 10 guiding principles:

1. Founded on a human-rights-based approach.

2. The foremost experts on children’s everyday lives are children themselves.

3. Children readily take on board and identify with the idea of themselves as researchers, and understand what this role implies.

4. The role of the adult is to facilitate and accompany the research process. The adult facilitator is neither a teacher nor another researcher.
5. The children themselves decide on the topic they are going to research.

6. Children and young people already have knowledge based on their own life experience. However, through research they can learn more about a topic, expanding and deepening their existing knowledge.

7. The children and young people design and plan their own research. They decide what questions they are going to ask, who they are going to ask, how, when and how many.

8. Child researchers should have access to the same level and quality of technical support as would be provided to adult researchers – provided in an appropriate way.
9. The children and young people produce their own research report in their own words. They can also design the report and select photographs and drawings to illustrate it. If a formal report prepared by adults is required this is presented separately and the two are not to be confused.

10. The organisation that supports the young researchers must make a commitment to continue to accompany and support them in drawing up and carrying out an action plan to disseminate their findings, and promote the implementation of their recommendations.
What have we learnt?

Four adult responsibilities

If children are to be successful as researchers, it is the responsibility of the adults who support them to provide four things:

1. An approach to research methodology that is both effective in the field and suited to the experience and abilities of the young researchers.

2. Quality process facilitiation.

3. Technical support at least as good as what adult researchers would expect.

4. A responsible attitude to child protection, that recognises but doesn’t exaggerate the risks.
And finally: The Four Transformations

First Transformation: Empowerment of the young researchers

Just a moment: What do we mean by “Empowerment”?
**Attitude**
- Recognise your own ability.
  - Feel capable of taking action and influencing the outcome.
  - Recognise yourself as a human rights holder, able to defend your rights.
- Ready to join forces with others to achieve a goal.
- High self-esteem.
  - Willing to face a challenge.

**Capability**
- Ability to do things.
  - Backed by knowledge, skills, information etc.
  - Autonomy: Able to think and act for yourself as well as in a team.
  - Quick to learn: from others and from your own experience.

**Conditions y opportunities**
A context that favours my “ability to do things”, for example:
- Being part of an organisation or group with other children and young people.
- Having the support of my parents.

Our model of “Empowerment” (CESESMA / UNN 2010)
Our Transormative Research approach links and reinforces all three circles

CONDITIONS:

The act of a becoming a member of a team (which also needs their parents’ approval) establishes the conditions for the child or young person to start to make a difference to the problems that affect them. It affords their own space where conditions are created that will later enable them to influence decisions in adult-run spaces.
CAPABILITY:
The research process provides new knowledge and skills, and strengthens existing ones. Young researchers acquire knowledge about their research topic, and develop skills in communication, self-expression, research methods, data analysis and teamwork among others.
ATTITUDE:

The children and young people’s self-recognition and belief in themselves as researchers, which in turn enables them to make a personal commitment to the team, has a powerful effect on their attitude towards themselves, in other words, it raises their self-esteem.

That’s what we mean by “Empowerment”: Conditions, Capability and above all “Attitude”.
Second transformation: Transforming adult attitudes in the community and beyond

Their parents and teachers, and the leaders of their communities, have seen what these children and young people are capable of achieving, and this has forced them to rethink old-fashioned ideas about what children can and cannot do, and recognise their potential role as drivers of change in the community.
Facilitating and supporting the young researchers has been a learning experience for the adults of the CESESMA team, generating new knowledge and skills in relation to our facilitating role, and strengthening relationships based on mutual understanding, respect and solidarity with the children and young people we work with.
Fourth transformation: Transforming society through community action

Currently the four research teams are at the stage of disseminating their findings and planning activities to promote the implementation of their recommendations, with the continuing support of CESESMA.

The true impact of their work remains to be measured. But there can be no doubt that we will soon see real transformations that contribute to building a less violent society.
FIN

Muchas gracias