

# Child and Adolescent Participation: Reconfiguring the Tensions





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In 2007-08 I held a Practitioner Fellowship at the University of the West of England as part of an international research project called *"Non-governmental Actors in New Governance Spaces: Navigating the Tensions"*.



University of the  
 West of England



*International research team:  
 England, Wales , Bulgaria,  
 Nicaragua*

I used the opportunity to interview (adult) expert practitioners' in Nicaragua and Great Britain, to explore their thinking about children as public actors.

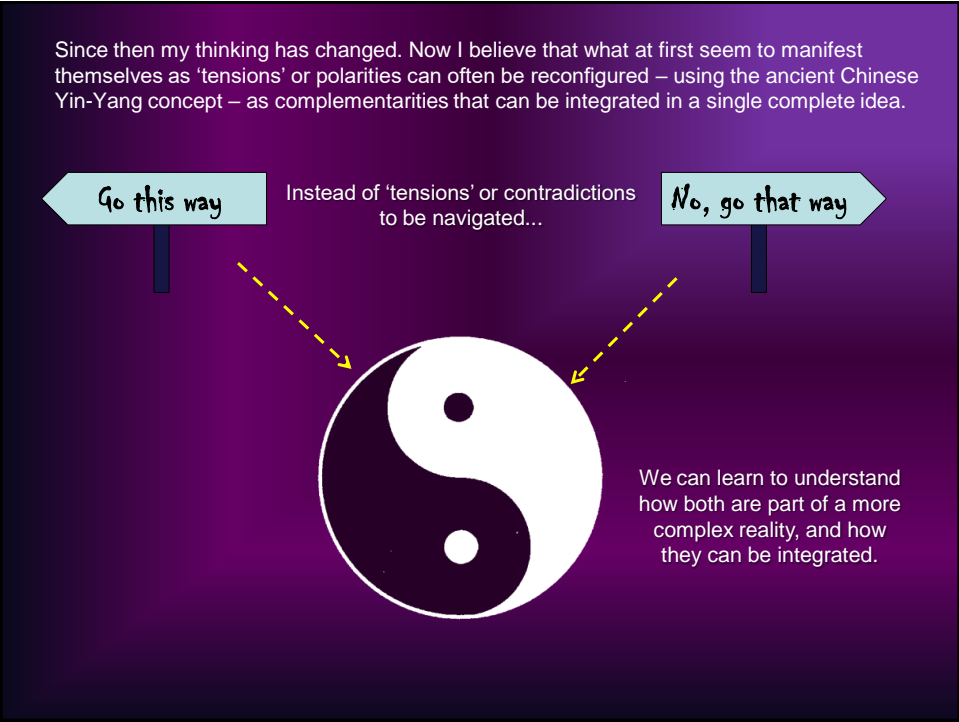
## Findings:

### Some differences between Nicaragua and the UK

1. Emphasis on child as service-user (consumer) in the UK. But not in Nicaragua, where services have to be fought for, rather than simply consumed.
2. In Nicaragua, effectiveness of participation was seen to lie in the capacity of the children and young people involved. In the UK, effectiveness seen to depend on the capacity, resources and commitment of the facilitating NGO.
3. In the UK, resourcing and time issues seen as major challenges to be faced. In Nicaragua the main challenges were the search for new methods, new opportunities, and extending participation into new settings.

But, on the whole, what emerged were a number of key issues that were common to both countries. I described these as the “tensions”. There were 15 of them.







**Tension 1**

**The child as consumer/  
service user**



**The child as activist**



The child/adolescent who is a user of public services ...



... can also be the active citizen who takes action (individually or collectively) to transform those services – make them work better for everyone.

It just takes adults who engage with this child/adolescent to share this vision.

**Tension 2**

**Adults' agendas**  
(often those of governments or authorities)



**Children and adolescents' agendas**



Supporting children to advocate and campaign on their own issues.....



... doesn't stop them from also advising government and local authorities on matters that are priorities for public policy.


It just takes adults who engage with them to see the value in both.

Tension 3

Consultation

Shared decision-making

Supporting children to get involved in collaborative decision-making...



Children and adults collaborate and plan actions together

Children respond to consultations on major issues

... Doesn't mean they can't respond in an organised way when someone wants to know their views.

Again, it just takes adults who engage with them to see the value in both.

Tension 4


"Invited spaces"

(Power of the adult to invite participation or otherwise)

"Popular spaces"

(Also known as "claimed" or "created" spaces)

By supporting children in organising, discussing issues, gathering information in their own safe spaces...



Children gather and organise in their own spaces

Children may accept invitations to engage in adult-run spaces.

... We make sure they are well-prepared when they accept invitations to enter the lions' den and engage with adults where the real decisions are made.

We need to protect and facilitate the children's own spaces, and accompany them when they are ready to engage with adult decision-makers

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**Tension 5**

**Reactive participation**



**Pro-active participation**  
(Known as "protagonismo" in Spanish)

At first, children may expect their adult supporters to put forward proposals for projects or actions.



But as their capacities evolve, they will have their own proposals, and look to us for support and resources.

It just takes adults to understand how, as their capacities evolve, their support needs also change.

**Tension 6**

**Manipulated voices**



**Autonomous voices**

No-one, whether poet or professor, has a voice that is not influenced by what they hear..



... But we can support children in learning to evaluate adults' messages (including media messages), and decide for themselves.

It just takes adults who will support them as they strive to think for themselves (and be sensitive if conflicts arise with home values).

**Tension 7**

**Legitimising the existing  
power structure**



**Challenging it**

A state that acknowledges children's participation as active citizens reinforces its own legitimacy.



... But those same active citizens are entitled to challenge the state when it fails in its duties to protect their rights.

Demanding accountability of duty-bearers is all part of a human-rights-based approach.

**Tension 8**

**A public service framework**



**A human rights framework**



Often, when children's basic needs are not being met...



... It is because their rights are not respected, and duty-bearers are failing in their duty.

Adults and children together can remind duty-bearers of their human rights obligations.





Tension 9

Youth participation

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Children's participation

Adolescents may get closer to understanding adult ways of thinking and decision-making...

Some projects involve mainly adolescents

Others effectively engage young children, or all ages.

... But there are plenty of ways to get young children involved on their own terms.

It just takes adults with skills for engaging with younger children, and vigilance to ensure they are not being left out.



**Tension 10**

**Mimicking adult structures**



**Inventing new ones**



Sometimes setting up committees, parliaments and so on can be a valuable learning experience.



So can working out a new way to do things that suits your own group.

It just takes adults who engage with them to see the value in both.

**Tension 11**

**Child protection**



**Child empowerment**



It is our duty to make sure the children we work with do not come to harm.



... But we must not allow this duty to trump the child's right to speak out and be heard.

Children who speak out – in public if need be – are stronger and safer. Those who are not heard are more at risk. "Risk awareness" should never be a barrier to participation.

**Tension 12**

Local and close-to-home issues



National and global issues



There's no reason why young children should not be engaged on redesigning their playground this week...



... and demanding government action on global warming next week.

It just takes adults who engage with them to see the value in both.

**Tension 13**

**Extrinsic motivation**  
 (doing something for reward or payment)



**Intrinsic motivation**  
 (doing something because it's worth doing)

If we ask children do undertake work for us (like on a research project) they should be properly recompensed.



If it's their project – something they want to take on in the full exercise of their citizenship – payment would not be appropriate.

If I, as an adult facilitator, am getting a salary, I should concern myself with the risk of exploitation.



**Tension 14**

Getting a quick result

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Involving everyone

Some projects need a small, manageable group. Some tasks need a high level of interest and motivation.

Sometimes a small group is formed to carry out a project or take an advisory role

Sometimes it's important that everyone can get involved

... But how representative are they? Sometimes its important that everyone's voice is heard and all opinions taken on board.

Sometimes, the large group can elect its representatives. Or the small group can consult widely across the community.



**Tension 15**

One-off projects



Long-term development



Short-term projects can offer great opportunities for children's learning and capacity-building.



... Short-term projects can happen in a long-term environment that continues to support that personal growth.

If support for children's active citizenship is the permanent ethos of our centres and programmes, one-off projects can come and go, and each will make its contribution.



**The end. Thanks for listening**

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