

# Transformative Research by Children and Adolescents



*Partnerships between adults and children as researchers*



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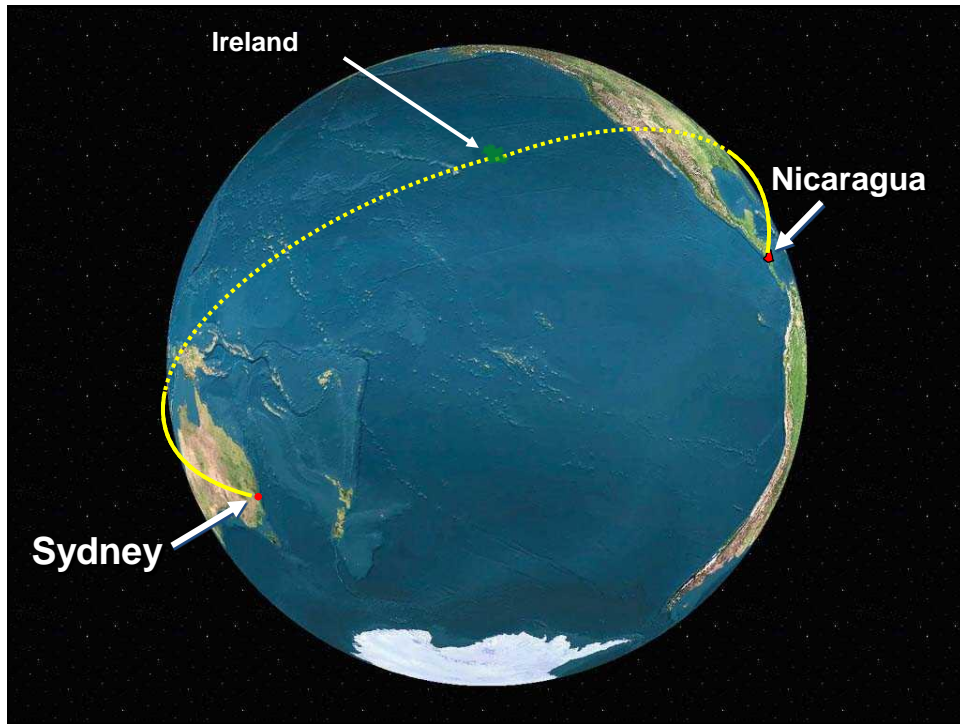
...and the Centre for Children's Rights, Queen's University Belfast



## Overview



1. 'Pathways to Participation' – the Australian connection
2. CESESMA in Nicaragua
3. CESESMA's view of 'Empowerment'
4. 'Transformative Research by Children and Adolescents' (TRCA)
5. Using TRCA in doctoral research – a stiff test
6. 'Transformation' – a synthesis
7. Child researchers and adult researchers
8. A new tool to support meaningful partnerships between adult and child researchers.



## 1. 'Pathways to Participation' – the Australian connection

I started my career working on Adventure playgrounds in the UK.



My first publication:  
*"Adventure Playgrounds,  
an Introduction"*, 1984.

I 'discovered' children's rights at the 'World Play Summit',  
Melbourne 1993



This experience changed the course of my life.

Whatever issue you are concerned about, children's rights provides  
both an underpinning and an overarching approach – which I have  
been committed to ever since.

Back in the UK, I set up the '**Article 31 Children's Consultancy Scheme**'



There was a fashion for making programmes and institutions "child-friendly",  
particularly in the arts, culture and recreation sectors.

Expert advice was being sought.



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.

7



1998

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





2000

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



Reflecting on this experience led to ...

#### Pathways to Participation Harry Shier 2001

Levels of participation

Openings > Opportunities > Obligations

5. Children share power and responsibility for decision-making.

Are you ready to share some of your adult power with children?

Is there a procedure that enables children and adults to share power and responsibility for decisions?

Is it a policy requirement that children and adults share power and responsibility for decisions?

4. Children are involved in decision-making processes.

Are you ready to let children join in your decision-making processes?

Is there a procedure that enables children to join in decision-making processes?

Is it a policy requirement that children must be involved in decision-making processes?

3. Children's views are taken into account.

Are you ready to take children's views into account?

Does your decision-making process enable you to take children's views into account?

Is it a policy requirement that children's views must be given due weight in decision-making?

2. Children are supported in expressing their views.

Are you ready to support children in expressing their views?

Do you have a range of ideas and activities to help children express their views?

Is it a policy requirement that children must be supported in expressing their views?

1. Children are listened to.

Are you ready to listen to children?

Do you work in a way that enables you to listen to children?

Is it a policy requirement that children must be listened to?

START HERE →

This point is the minimum you must achieve if you endorse the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Shier, H (2001). Pathways to Participation: Openings, Opportunities and Obligations. *Children & Society*, 15: 107-117

## 'The Australian Connection' – part 2

"Pathways to Participation" was published in UK journal *Children & Society* exactly 15 years ago this month – just as I was leaving the UK to start a new life in Nicaragua.

But the first public presentation of the published diagram was here in Sydney – to a workshop organised by the Network of Community Activities (linked to their biannual conference in May 2001 in Manly).

Since then, it has been widely translated and put to use in projects, programmes and policy documents all around the world

"Pathways to Participation" is by far the world's most widely-cited journal article on the topic of children's participation (683 Google Scholar citations as of last Friday).



Swedish version published by **Handikappförbunden**, the Swedish Disability Federation.

## 2. CESESMA in Nicaragua



In 2001, at the same time as "Pathways to Participation" was published in the UK, I moved to Nicaragua ... A new life in a new country.



Child labour on coffee plantations



The struggle for the right to education







A new approach to participation: "Protagonismo Infantil"



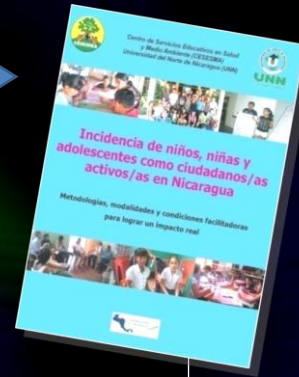
Children and young people organise, advocate, take the initiative





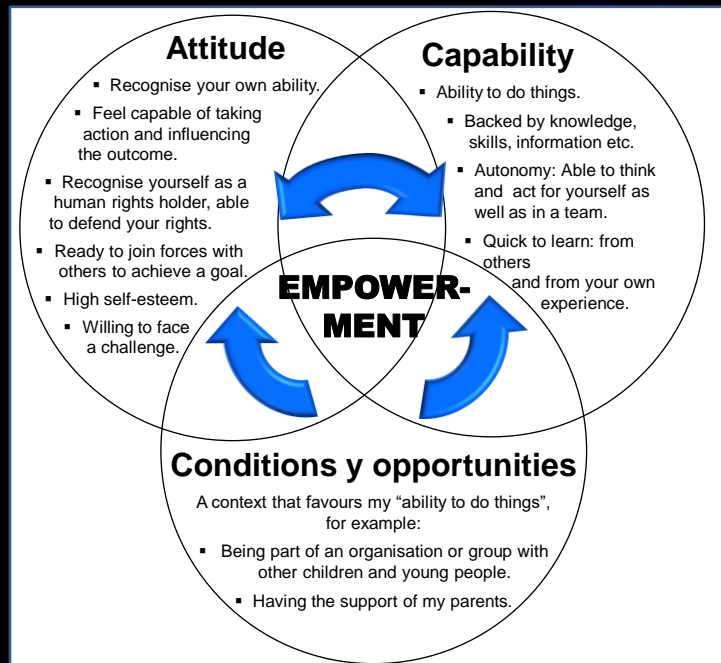
CESESMA's 2010 research report:

*"Policy advocacy by children and adolescents as active citizens in Nicaragua".*



English summary in: Shier, H. et al. (2014). How children and young people influence policy-makers: Lessons from Nicaragua. *Children & Society*, 28(1), 1–14.

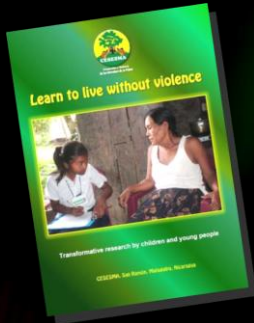
### 3. CESESMA's view of 'Empowerment'



#### 4. 'Transformative Research by Children and Adolescents' (TRCA)

CESESMA's approach to working with children and adolescents as researchers.

An evolution of the "Article 31 Children's Consultancy" approach from the UK in the 90s.



CESESMA (2012) *Learn to live without violence*. CESESMA, San Ramón, Nicaragua



##### Principles of TRCA

##### Guiding principles of Transformative Research by Children and Adolescents

1. It is founded on a human-rights-based approach;
2. It recognises children's as experts on their lives, but also that as researchers they can learn more about a topic, expanding and deepening their existing knowledge;
3. Children readily take on board and identify with the idea of themselves as researchers and understand what this role implies. The role of the adult is to facilitate and accompany;
4. Children and adolescents are supported in planning, organising and carrying out their own research, and provided with technical support and resources to do so.
5. Children and adolescents produce their own research report in their own words, and also control how it will be designed and presented. Reports by adults are kept separate and identified as such.
6. 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.

(Shier 2015)



### An important issue for further discussion:

#### *Who sets the research agenda?*

Ideally, children themselves:

- More decision-making control = more empowerment.
- Focus in issues that matter to them.
- Greater engagement with the process.
- More likely to engage in advocacy and campaigning afterwards.

BUT:

- Break with the real world (how often can adult researchers set their own research agendas?)
- Almost impossible to fund.
- No ready-made audience for their findings.
- So may be harder to get decision-makers to take notice and act.



## 5. Using TRCA in doctoral research – a stiff test



- TRCA: A methodology proven in the field but without academic precedents or standing.
- Convincing the ethics committee: Accepting local convention for child-to-child interviewing.
- Justifying the fact that children did most of the work for me.
- Approaching child researchers with a research topic and research questions already fixed.
- Proving the data were trustworthy.
- Distance – Getting back to the source.
- Separate analyses of data and reporting/publication of findings by child researchers and myself.
- Examination of the thesis.

## Summary of the Young Researchers' research process



**Session 1:** Becoming a research team, learning about research and education rights, using drawings to reflect on their experience of rights in school.



**Session 2:** Planning the research, deciding questions to ask and getting ready.



**Fieldwork:** Between sessions 2 and 3, the young researchers collected data by interviewing other children in their home communities.



**Session 3:** Analysing the findings and drawing conclusions.



**Session 4:** Producing a final report and formulating recommendations.



**Session 5:** Possibilities for dissemination and follow-up, action plan and final evaluation.



**Session 6:** Preparing to present their report at a public meeting with international Save the Children leadership.

## 6. Transformation – a synthesis

### (a) 'Transformation' as a concept in the literature

1. Buzz-word in organisational/management theory. Seems to imply that something changes into something different, as opposed to a bigger or better version of the same thing. (Appelbaum and Wohl, 2000).
2. Assumed to be harder to reverse than an ordinary change.
3. Also a buzz-word in development studies: "Transformative participation" linked to empowerment and contrasted with top-down or manipulative participation. Both people's reality and their own sense of it are changed irrevocably (including their sense of themselves) (White, 1996).
4. Theory of 'transformative learning': Person is able not just to acquire new knowledge, but to change the frame of reference that they habitually use to understand the world (Mezirow, 1997; Tibbetts, 2005).



### (b) The transformative paradigm

An alternative paradigm for social research, proposed by Donna Mertens (2009) to stand alongside the 'postpositivist', 'constructivist' and 'pragmatic' paradigms.

Basic principles of the transformative paradigm:

1. Primacy of qualitative methods;
2. Interactive link between researcher and participants;
3. Accommodating cultural complexity;
4. Explicitly addressing power issues; and
5. Acknowledging contextual and historical factors linked to discrimination and oppression (Mertens, 2010, p. 11).



### (c) CESESMA's view: the four transformations



*First Transformation:*  
Empowerment of the young researchers

*Second transformation:*  
Transforming adult attitudes in the community and beyond



*Third transformation:*  
Transformation of those adults who support and facilitate through mutual learning

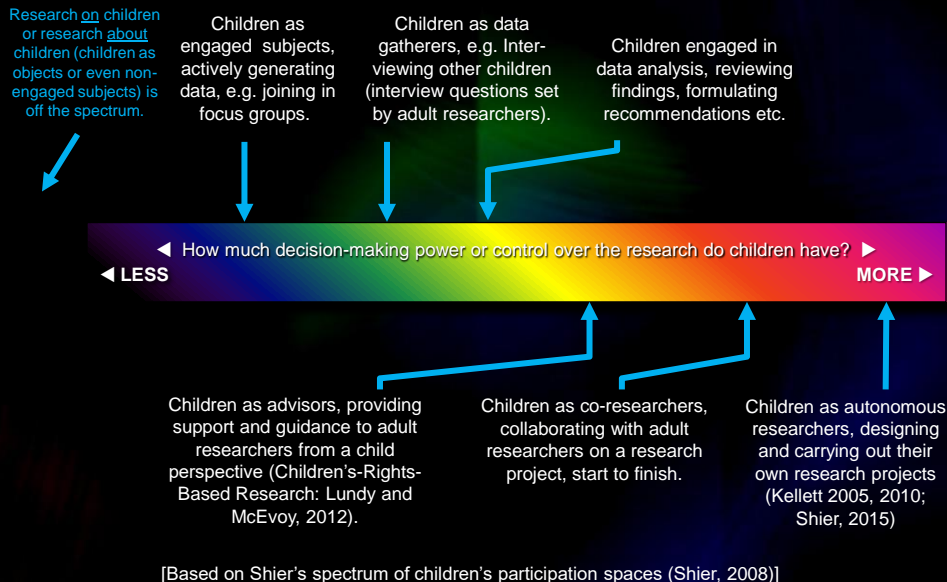
*Fourth transformation:*  
Social change, policy change, improving conditions of life through research impact, advocacy and community action.



Shier, H. (2015). Children as researchers in Nicaragua: Children's consultancy to transformative research. *Global Studies of Childhood* 5 (2), 206-219.

## 7. Child researchers and adult researchers

### A continuum of research WITH children and adolescents



### Decisions made or avoided?

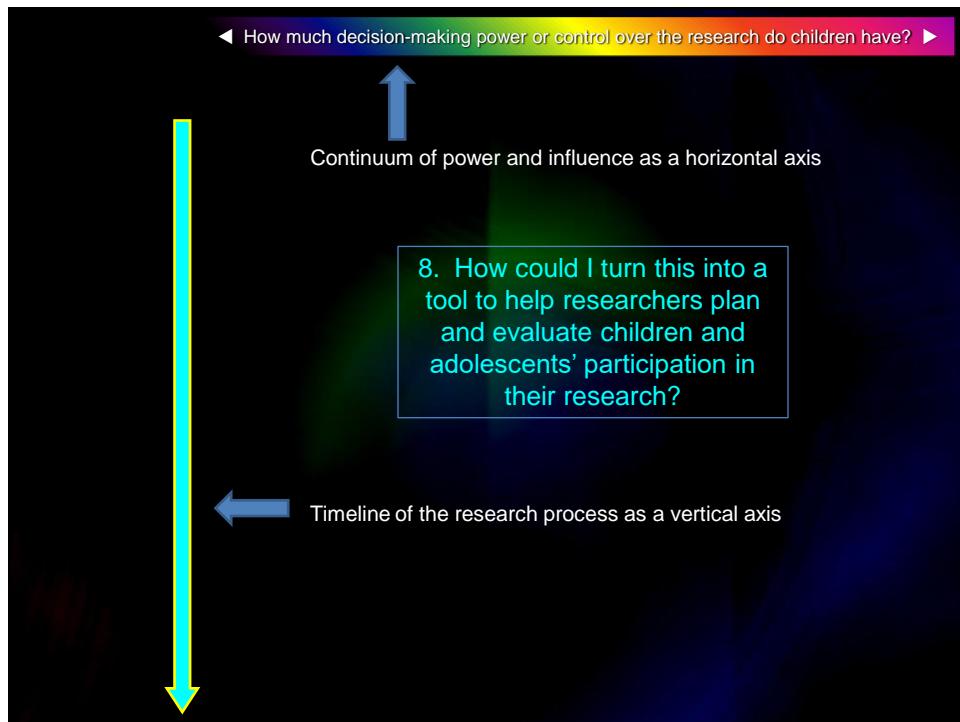
For some academic researchers, children are little more than data, while for others they are co-researchers. Those who research children and adolescents have to make decisions about how and when to engage them as participants in their research.

Factors that can influence decisions:

- Purpose of the research;
- Efficiency, validity, resources available;
- Age range of target group (evolving capacities);
- Underpinning values, culture and traditions of research establishments: Commitment to (or resistance to):
  - community engagement;
  - the emancipation or empowerment of the people involved;
  - a children's-rights-based approach.
- In short: **Can we be bothered?**







### For the horizontal axis: Lansdown's simplified typology of participation



Taken from "Every child's right to be heard" (Lansdown 2010): A user guide to UN CRC General Comment 12

Three significant categories of child /adolescent participation:

#### Consultation:

Is when adults ask children for their views, and children are not involved beyond this.



#### Pro-activism (child-led):

Activities initiated, organised or run by children and young people themselves (adults may still provide support, though not always necessary).







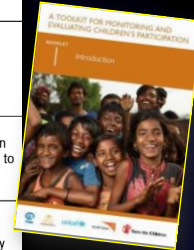
#### Collaboration:

Is when adults and children work together, sharing roles and responsibilities in planning and carrying out an activity.



**The inspiration for my tool: Save the Children's matrix for assessing the scope of children's participation in development projects.**

WHEN DO CHILDREN BEGIN TO PARTICIPATE AND AT WHAT LEVELS?				
	Children are not involved 	Consultative 	Collaborative 	Child-led 
<b>Finding out what the problems are (situation analysis)</b>		Children are asked to give their views.	Children asked to contribute to the process for finding out what problems they face in life.	Children undertake their own research with other children to identify issues of concern.
<b>Deciding what to do (planning)</b>		Planning takes account of the issues raised by children.	Children are involved in deciding what programmes to prioritise and develop.	Children decide for themselves what issues they want to work on.
<b>Taking action (implementation)</b>		Children are invited to take part in the programme.	Children work with adults to design and implement the programme.	Children organise and manage the programme and have full responsibility for its implementation.
<b>Measuring what happened (monitoring and evaluation)</b>		Children are consulted on whether they think the programme achieved what it planned to do.	Children work with adults to decide how to evaluate the programme.	Children determine what should be evaluated and, with adult support, undertake the evaluation of the programme.
<b>Acting on findings (dissemination and feedback)</b>		Children are invited to make suggestions as to how to respond on the basis of the findings.	Adults involve children in a discussion about the implications of the findings and explore how they should influence future programming.	Children reflect on the findings, and come up with proposals for the implications, which are then shared with adults.



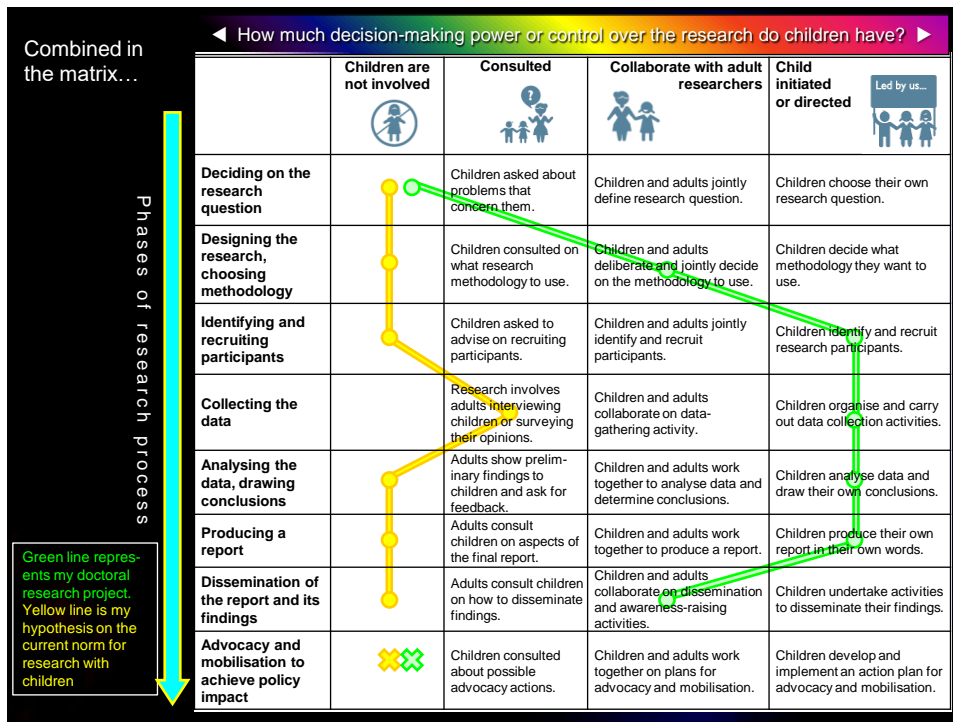
From:  
"A Toolkit for  
Monitoring and  
Evaluating Children's  
Participation"  
(Lansdown and  
O'Kane 2014).

(CESESMA worked  
with Save the Children  
piloting and validating  
this international  
resource).

**The vertical dimension: Phases of the research process as a timeline**  
(E.g. Kumar, 2014)

- Identify a research question: needs analysis, consultation, "diagnóstico".
- ▼
- Develop research design, select (or develop) methodology, draw up a plan (find funding, resources), design instruments, seek ethical approval.
- ▼
- Identify and recruit participants, obtain consent.
- ▼
- Generate data
- ▼
- Data analysis: findings, conclusions, recommendations.
- ▼
- Produce a report
- ▼
- Dissemination of findings: formal publication, wider publicity, media engagement.
- ▼
- Advocacy, public mobilisation, campaigning, policy impact, action for social change.





### Questions we could ask ourselves when planning research involving children and adolescents

1. What is the goal of our research? Is it only to generate academic knowledge (or career advancement), or are we also concerned with impact for social change and/or empowerment of the children and adolescents involved?
2. Where did the research question come from?
3. Have we thought about engaging with children throughout the process, or is it more convenient just to bring them in at a certain stage?
4. Have we considered forming a children's advisory group for this research project?
5. If we were to move along the continuum (i.e. consider increasing the engagement of children and adolescents in the research process):
  - ☐ What would be the methodological and resource implications?
  - ☐ What would be the challenges for us as adult researchers?
  - ☐ What would be the risks, if any? (Are we under pressure to play safe?)
  - ☐ What would be the potential benefits?
  - ☐ Are we up for a challenge?

(We should ask these questions in respect of each phase of the research process, and in answering them we need to take into account the age range and the evolving capacities of the children and adolescents involved).





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