Adolescent Participation

Some key aspects

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"Essentially all models are wrong, but some are useful".

(George Box, 1979)

Overview

1. Rights-based approach

2. Multiple settings, multiple modes

3. Inclusion and exclusion

4. Power and empowerment

5. Spaces for participation

6. The UN Committee's 9 basic requirements

7. Concluding thoughts

1. A human-rights-based approach

"Pathways to Participation"

My own thinking has changed and developed in many ways.
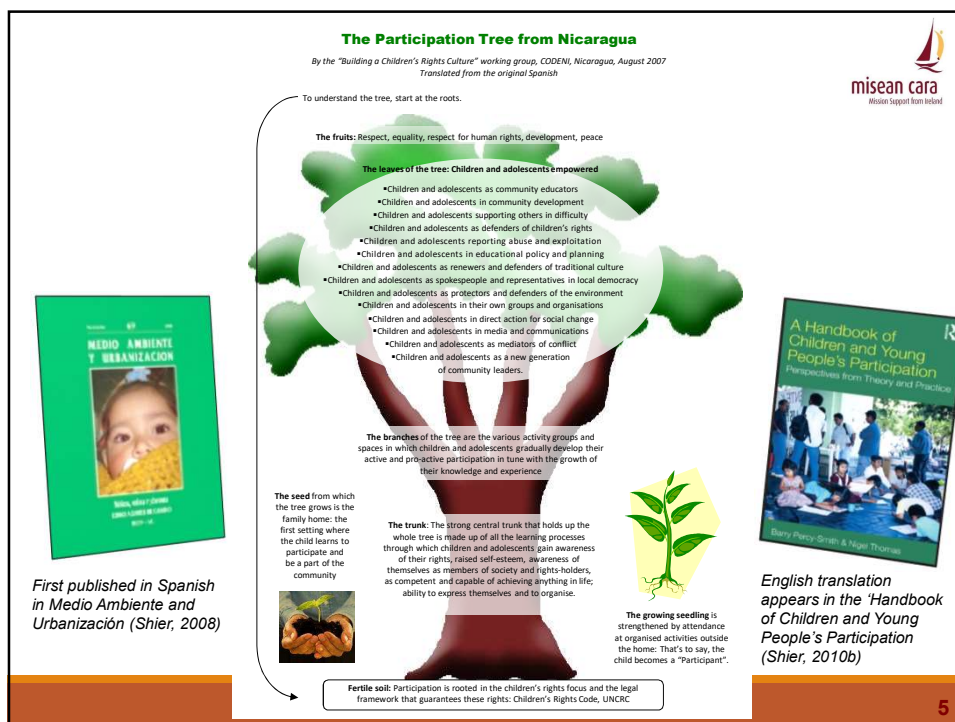
But here is a constant…

"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."

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2. Multiple settings, multiple modes

"Pathways to Participation" was first published in the UK in April 2001. On 5th May I arrived in Nicaragua.

- A new world opened up as I started learning from the experiences of Nicaragua's child coffee plantation workers.

- "Participation" was more organic, wider, broader, multi-faceted.

- I discovered "Protagonismo Infantil"

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The Participation Tree from Nicaragua

By the "Building a Children's Rights Culture" working group, CODENI, Nicaragua, August 2007
Translated from the original Spanish

misean cara
Mission Support from Ireland

To understand the tree, start at the roots.

The fruits: Respect, equality, respect for human rights, development, peace

The leaves of the tree: Children and adolescents empowered

- Children and adolescents as community educators
- Children and adolescents in community development
- Children and adolescents supporting others in difficulty
- Children and adolescents as defenders of children's rights
- Children and adolescents reporting abuse and exploitation
- Children and adolescents in educational policy and planning
- Children and adolescents as renewers and defenders of traditional culture
- Children and adolescents as spokespeople and representatives in local democracy
- Children and adolescents as protectors and defenders of the environment
- Children and adolescents in their own groups and organisations
- Children and adolescents in direct action for social change
- Children and adolescents in media and communications
- Children and adolescents as mediators of conflict
- Children and adolescents as a new generation of community leaders.

The branches of the tree are the various activity groups and spaces in which children and adolescents gradually develop their active and pro-active participation in tune with the growth of their knowledge and experience

The seed from which the tree grows is the family home: the first setting where the child learns to participate and be a part of the community

The trunk: The strong central trunk that holds up the whole tree is made up of all the learning processes through which children and adolescents gain awareness of their rights, raised self-esteem, awareness of themselves as members of society and rights-holders, as competent and capable of achieving anything in life; ability to express themselves and to organise.

The growing seedling is strengthened by attendance at organised activities outside the home: That's to say, the child becomes a "Participant".

Fertile soil: Participation is rooted in the children's rights focus and the legal framework that guarantees these rights: Children's Rights Code, UNCRC

MEDIO AMBIENTE Y URBANIZACION

First published in Spanish in Medio Ambiente and Urbanización (Shier, 2008)

A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation
Perspectives from Theory and Practice
Barry Percy-Smith & Nigel Thomas

English translation appears in the 'Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation (Shier, 2010b)

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Slide 6

CLOSE-UP ON...

The leaves of the tree: Children and adolescents empowered

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3. Inclusion/exclusion

What determines who participates and who doesn't?

Identifying, understanding and dealing with factors that exclude or discriminate: This is an adult responsibility, but also brings opportunities for adolescents to take up these issues and take action.
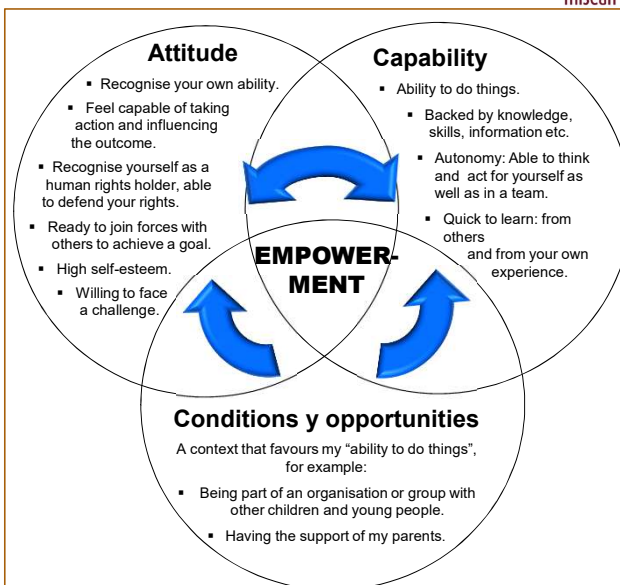
4. Power and empowerment

CESESMA's model of Empowerment

(first appeared in CESESMA, 2010, translated in Shier, 2015).

This has the potential to turn a devalued buzzword into a useful analytical tool.

BUT we still need tools to define and measure empowerment. We need consensus on a well-defined concept (that works across cultures) that will allow us to show the evidence and so measure 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.

EMPOWER-MENT

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.

My learning since "Pathways"…

- Empowerment is not a zero-sum game. I can't "empower" you by giving you some of my power. Empowerment as process, not a gift.

- I can't deliver empowerment to you, so what is the role of the adult "facilitator"?

- Beware of "participation as disguised social control".

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5. Spaces for participation

In adolescents' participation spaces:

- Who is setting the agenda? Are adolescents initiating, or mainly following adults' agendas and responding to adult proposals?

- Who controls the invitation list?

- Who controls the space itself?

- Who controls the resources (especially for mobilisation)?

- Where are the real decisions being made? Who controls adolescents' access to those with the real power?

Note the significance of 'space' in Lundy's model.

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Cornwall's ideas about "invited" spaces and "popular" (created or claimed) spaces.

Important for effective child/adolescent participation is the interconnection and dynamics of movement between them:

Children and adolescents meet, organise and work in their own safe spaces (with the adult support that they need) …

…from which they can plan for advocacy or launch campaigns to influence decisions in adult spaces, as and when they feel prepared.

6. The 9 basic requirements
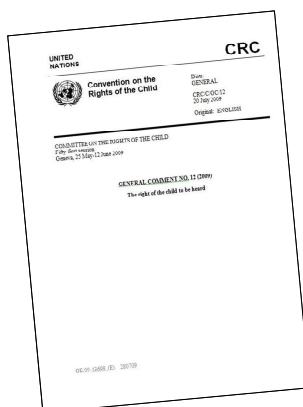
In General Comment 12, the Committee on the Rights of the Child urged member states to avoid tokenistic approaches and the manipulation of children and adolescents.

Due respect to Roger Hart, because no-one has so clearly warned us about the risks of these false types of participation: Manipulation, decoration, and tokenism. But have we listened? They are still all around us.

Then (with more than a little help from Gerison Lansdown) they introduced the Nine Basic Requirements …"for effective, ethical and meaningful implementation of article 12".

The nine basic requirements

All processes in which children or adolescents are heard and participate, must be:

1. **Transparent and informative**

2. **Voluntary**

3. **Respectful**

4. **Relevant**

5. **Child-friendly**

6. **Inclusive**

7. Supported by training for adults

8. Safe and sensitive to risks

9. Accountable

It is important for adults to meet these requirements for effective, ethical and meaningful participation, and it is important for children and adolescents to insist that they do so and complain if they don't, because:

⇨ If participation is not **transparent and informative**, it is secretive and manipulative.

⇨ If participation is not **voluntary** it is being forced on children and adolescents against their will.

⇨ If participation is not **respectful** it is disrespectful.

⇨ If participation is not **relevant** it is pointless.

⇨ If participation is not **child-friendly**, it is alien and hostile to many children and adolescents.

⇨ If participation is not **inclusive** it is discriminatory.

⇨ If participation is not **supported by training for adults** it is being run by people who don't know what they're doing.

⇨ If participation is not **safe and sensitive to risks** it is dangerous.

⇨ If participation is not **accountable**, the powerful can and will ignore it.

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7. Concluding thoughts

1. Hear their agendas, seek to understand their issues. Learn to put our own concerns aside so as to listen better.

2. Look for the factors that exclude, that lead to discrimination. Commit to dealing with these.

3. Look for false participation (manipulation, decoration, tokenism); learn to name and challenge it.

4. Don't let "safeguarding" trump the right of the adolescent to speak out if they wish to: There is always a solution to this dilemma if we seek it wisely.

Should Malala have been silenced to protect her?

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