Children's voices and children's rights: Participation, Empowerment and “Protagonismo”

Overview

1. Participation as the child’s right
2. Conceptual models
3. Empowerment
4. “Protagonismo infantil”
Participation as a child’s right

**Article 12:** The child’s right to freely express views on all matters that affect him or her, and to have these views given due weight when decisions are made;

**Article 13:** Freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, through any media of the child's choice;

**Article 14:** Freedom of thought, conscience and religion;

**Article 15:** Freedom of association and peaceful assembly.

Article 12 is of paramount importance as it is a “General Principle” of the Convention.

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Some points on Article 12 …

1. “Capable of forming a view…”

Children who don’t speak have the right to be heard.
2. “All matters affecting the child”

In the school situation, this includes the content of the curriculum and the quality of the teaching.

3. “Given due weight…”

“Children must be given their say, but they do not always have to be given their way”. Penelope Leach
4. Evolving capacities

Need for protection, care and guidance

Capacity for autonomous decision-making and self-protection

Important note: The exact shape and position of these lines will be different for every individual child.

5. “A right, in its fundamental sense, is power held by the powerless”

*Katherine Federle (1994)*
6. Recognising student voice as a child’s right, there is no need to further justify its practice and promotion.

When one has the right to do something, one is not obliged to give any justification in order to be permitted to do it.

However, benefits are now known to include:

- Improving the quality of schools;
- Improving academic outcomes;
- Reducing anti-social behaviour such as bullying;
- Enhancing social and political education;
- Increasing teacher satisfaction.
- Empowerment of children and young people; enabling them to develop a role as agents of social change rather than subjects of social control.

Conceptual models that have helped adults become more effective in supporting and facilitating participation

“Essentially all models are wrong, but some of them are useful”
George Box

For me this is still essential reading because Hart taught us to look out for the three types of false participation: “Manipulation”, “Decoration” and “Tokenism”.

2. Harry Shier’s “Pathways to Participation” (2001)
Once upon a time there was a painter. He was good at his job and painted all kinds of things from houses and shops to bridges and railway stations. Besides his brushes, his most important tool was his ladder, because it enabled him to work at exactly the right height to do a good job, whether he was painting a small cottage or a huge factory.

One day a man passed by and said, “That ladder’s all wrong. Let me fix it for you”.

He proceeded to take the ladder to pieces, separating all the rungs. He threw away the uprights that held the ladder together, and laid out the rungs on the ground in a circle.
“That’s better”, he said, “Now all the rungs are equal”.

“But all the rungs were equal before”, said the painter, “I used them all for my different jobs. But at least before, they had a frame to connect them, and I could rely on them to get me to the right height for every job. Now what use are they?”

“But hierarchical structures are so passe”, said the man.

“But my ladder wasn’t a ‘hierarchical structure’”, replied the painter, “It was a perfectly useful tool that helped me do a better job, and you’ve ruined it.”

...And as far as I know, they are still arguing.

![Laura Lundy's model diagram]

Official model featured in Irish National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-making (2015)

4. Gerison Lansdown’s three types of participation (2011)

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

**Collaboration:**
Is when adults and children and young people work together, sharing roles and responsibilities in planning and carrying out an activity.

**Child-led (protagonismo):**
Activities initiated, organised or run by children and young people themselves (adults may still provide support, though not always necessary).
But there are two sides to each one…

**Consultation:**

The powerful can listen to and take on board children and adolescents’ views and this can have a positive influence on policy-making etc.

OR: They can go through the motions of a consultation and totally ignore the results.

**Collaboration:**

Adults can facilitate a process in which children/adolescents and adults genuinely work together sharing roles and responsibilities according to their abilities.

OR: Adults can use their greater power and access to resources to manipulate the whole process to get whatever they want at the end of it (especially with younger children who have less experience).
Adults can support children and adolescents’ independent initiatives: provide resources (transport, food, place to meet etc.), help them get access to the powerful who make decisions and control purse-strings.

**OR:** Adults can either completely ignore the children’s efforts, or worse, they can attempt to silence them or even punish them for getting out of line.

So … it's not that one kind of participation is good and another kind is bad. They all have a good and bad side.

**And any kind of participation can be rendered meaningless if the basic requirements are not met.**

**Want more models?**

- **Andreas Karsten’s collection of participation models (2012)**
- **Another collection from the 360° project (Grace and Grace, 2017)**
Empowerment

- CESESMA’s model of 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 parents, friends and family.

*first appeared in Spanish, CESESMA, 2010.*

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August 2017, working with adolescents in Nicaragua to better understand these ideas.
Poster activity: Perceptions of adolescents who have power to influence decisions and those who don’t.

Re-thinking the adult role

Attitudes and self-esteem

Capability and knowledge

Self esteem, self belief, self-confidence, respect for diversity, will and drive to make a difference, sense of solidarity, commitment to teamwork ….

These things grow within a person; I can’t give them to you.

What kinds of processes can I facilitate that might help them grow?

We can help with knowledge and skills.

We can help establish conditions and create opportunities.
"Empowerment" paper published on CRN website

Protagonismo infantil

An alternative paradigm for child participation, "protagonismo" affirms that working children can acquire the capacity to autonomously pursue and defend their own interests, both individually and collectively.
Presentation by Harry Shier at Carlow Institute of Technology, 28 February 2019

What is “participation”

Fertile soil:

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

The growing seedling

is strengthened by attendance at organised activities outside the home: That’s to say, the child becomes a “participant”.

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 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 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 activism, willing to express themselves and to organise.

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 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 Participation Tree from Nicaragua

By the “Building a Children’s Rights Culture” working group, CODENI, Nicaragua, August 2007

Translated from the original Spanish

To understand the tree, start at the roots.

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

CLOSE-UP ON...

The leaves of the tree: Children and adolescents empowered

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- 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.
- How much do children organise and act without any adult involvement?
- How much do we know about it?
- What do we think of it when it happens?
- What roles are adults taking: Facilitating or manipulating? Visible or hidden?

Subcultural youth movements: Another example of adolescents organising themselves without any adult involvement...

Finally, one from my family album: Birmingham, England, 1997...

Joe Shier, then aged 16

Subcultural youth movements: Another example of adolescents organising themselves without any adult involvement...

Is youth rebellion acceptable “up to a point”?
References


CESESMA-UNN. (2010). Incidencia de niños, niñas y adolescentes como ciudadanos/as activos/as en Nicaragua. San Ramón, Nicaragua: CESESMA.


