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PAR with children and young people: Tackling challenges and achieving transformations

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PAR with children and young people can be challenging, but it can also be transformative. Those of us who undertake it face tough questions such as: Whose agenda are we working to? How and when should we involve young people? Who is involved and who is excluded – and why? What are the barriers to participation and how can we dismantle them? How can we empower young people? How do we avoid manipulation? What do we mean by transformation and how can we achieve it? Who are we accountable to and how do we hold ourselves accountable? How can children and young people use PAR to achieving policy influence and other meaningful changes?

My keynote at CARN 2024 introduced three practical tools to help us find answers: The classic "Pathways to Participation" (Shier 2001); from Nicaragua, "Transformative Action Research with and from the Participation of Children and Young People" (Shier and Hernández Méndez, 2021); and a more recent matrix tool to help researchers develop partnerships with children and adolescents (Shier 2019a).

Before I introduce them, however, I want to share some wise words from US statistician George Box that you should bear in mind as you read on:

"All models are wrong, but some are useful" (Box, 1979)

I take this to mean that no theoretical model can fully represent the complexity and messiness of the real world, so the question we should ask ourselves about these tools is not whether they are right or wrong, but how can they be of practical use to us in planning, implementing and evaluating Action Research with children and young people.

1. "Pathways to Participation"

I started my career in the 1970s as a playworker in the UK (Shier, 1984). Then I 'discovered' children's rights at the 'World Play Summit' in Melbourne, Australia in 1993, and this experience changed the course of my life. I discovered that, whatever social issue you want to tackle, children's rights provides both an underpinning framework and an overarching approach – which I have been committed to ever since.

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) establishes the fundamental right of the child to be heard:

> States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

On my return to the UK I formed an action committee to organise the first Article 31 Conference. The Conference led to the Article 31 Action Pack (Shier, 1995), then the launch of the Article 31 Action Network. At the time there was a fashion for making programmes and

institutions “child-friendly”, particularly in the arts, culture and recreation sectors. “Expert advice” was being sought, but where were we to find the experts? Our answer, though it seems obvious now, was considered a startling innovation at the time: 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 (Shier,1999).

And so we launched the Article 31 Children’s Consultancy Scheme, which enabled teams of child consultants to act as special advisers to the senior management of major cultural institutions throughout the UK, advising on how to make their facilities more child-friendly and, or course, less boring.

As this work progressed, and the old millennium was drew to a close, I sought to better understand how adults interact with child citizens in these situations, and at the turn of the millennium, my new model, “Pathways to Participation” emerged.

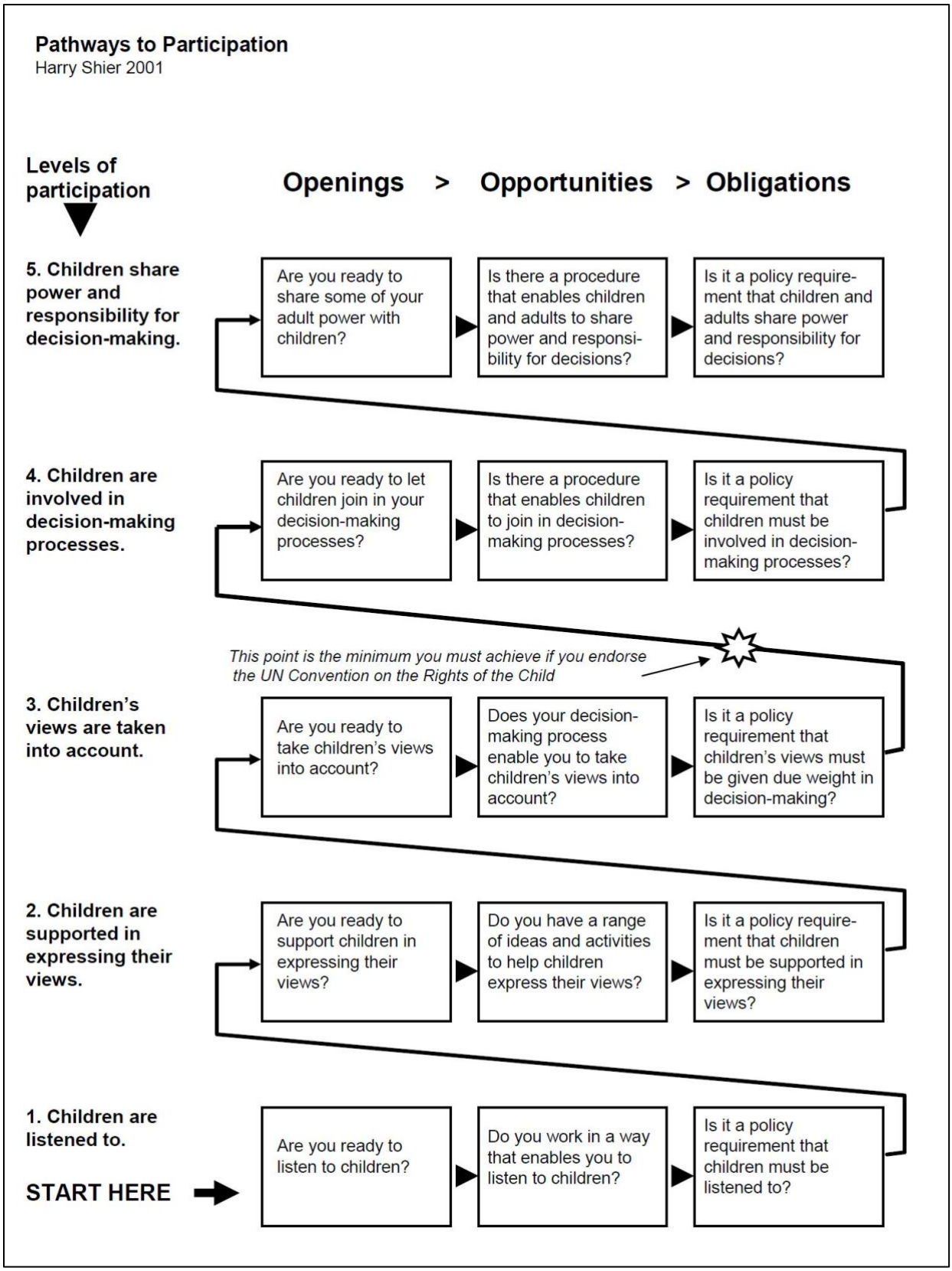
“Pathways” was inspired by Roger Hart’s (1992) Ladder of Children’s Participation, but added a new dimension to Hart’s analysis. I proposed five distinct “levels of participation”:

1. Children are listened to.
2. Children are supported in expressing their views.
3. Children’s views are taken into account.
4. Children are involved in decision-making processes.
5. Children share power and responsibility for decision-making.

The new dimension that I had identified was the three stages of adult commitment at each level. I called these “Openings”, “Opportunities”, and “Obligations”:

- An opening occurs when you or your team are ready and willing to work at this level.
- An opportunity occurs when you have the skills and resources to be able to work at this level.
- An obligation is established when the organisation’s agreed policy requires you to work at this level.

Combined, this resulted in the Pathways to Participation diagram (Shier, 2001). Published in the UK over 20 years ago, today this is one of the most widely used tools for analysing and enhancing children’s participation, in academic study, policy and practice, throughout the world.



Over the past 20 years, researchers around the world in many disciplines, including education, health, social care, recreation and public policy, have made use of the "Pathways to Participation" model in different ways. Many have used it to assess, evaluate or re-think the

reality of child participation in different service areas and settings (Tregeagle and Mason, 2008; Schalkers et al, 2016; Gilljam et al, 2019; Hultman et al, 2020; Nordlind et al, 2021; Shaik, 2021; Cheeseman et al, 2022). It has also been adapted to enhance the participation of other disadvantaged or unheard groups: Adults with Profound and Multiple Disabilities (Talman et al, 2019); People with Dementia (Ingard et al, 2023); and Refugees (UNHCR, 2023).

2. Transformative Action Research with and by children and young people

In 2001, the same year that "Pathways to Participation" was published in the UK, I moved to Nicaragua, Central America, where I worked with a local children's rights organisation CESESMA, supporting child workers on coffee plantations in claiming and defending their rights (Shier, 2010; 2017), and in particular accompanying them in the struggle for the right to education (Shier et al, 2013).

This provided an opportunity to review and reflect on the original "Pathways to Participation" model (Shier, 2006). Though the original model still works well, I found I had much more to learn; above all, a new approach to participation, known in Latin America as "Protagonismo Infantil", where children and young people organise, advocate, and take the initiative (Shier, 2019b). While this can be translated as "child protagonism" or "proactive participation," I prefer the Latin-American concept with its origins in the historical struggles of working children to defend their rights and pursue their collective interests (Taft, 2019). Through their many actions of protagonismo, I saw how children and young people established their identity as rights-holders and rights defenders, deserving and, if necessary, demanding, that their citizenship be recognised and respected (Shier et al, 2014; Shier et al, 2023; Shier 2023).

A particularly effective form of Protagonismo Infantil that I experienced in Nicaragua was when children organised to become transformative action researchers (CESESMA, 2012; Shier, 2015).

Though CESESMA supported and facilitated such actions from around 2007 onwards, it was not until the COVID-19 lockdown put a temporary stop to community action on the coffee plantations, that the CESESMA team found time to develop and publish a step-by-step guide to using CESESMA's Transformative Action Research approach (Shier and Hernández Méndez, 2021). The guide covers 18 methodological steps in CESESMA's version of transformative Action Research by children and young people – see Box 1:

Methodological steps in CESESMA's version of transformative action research by children and young people

1. Identification and selection of children and young people to form a research team.
2. Organisational preconditions for convening a research team of children and young people.
3. Role of accompanying facilitators/educators.
4. Building the research team.
5. Choosing the research topic.
6. Using children's drawings to encourage team reflection on the topic.
7. Design the research.
8. Design and development of the research instruments.
9. Preparations for field research.
10. Preparation of young researchers.
11. Field research.
12. Data management and analysis.
13. Reaching a consensus on conclusions.
14. Formulating recommendations.
15. Writing the report.
16. Drawing up an action plan.
17. Actions to disseminate findings.
18. Evaluation of the Transformative Action Research process.

In calling this approach "Transformative Action Research", we did not use the word "transformative" lightly, or as merely a buzzword. Our experience over the years had enabled us to observe how, when children assume active citizenship as young action researchers, four distinct transformations occur:

- First Transformation: Empowerment of the young researchers (Shier, 2019c).
- 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 2015)

Though we were was not aware of it at the time, during my doctoral studies some years later I discovered that the "Transformative Paradigm" already exists as an alternative paradigm for social research, developed by Donna Mertens (2007) to stand alongside the 'postpositivist', 'constructivist' and 'pragmatic' paradigms. The basic principles of the transformative paradigm established by Mertens are:

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

3. A tool to help researchers develop partnerships with children and young people

In 2012, after 11 years in Nicaragua, I was offered the opportunity to do a PhD at the Centre for Children's Rights at Queen's University Belfast. For my PhD fieldwork I returned to the coffee plantations of Nicaragua, and to the methodology of Transformative Action Research with and by children and young people (Shier, 2016). With help from my local colleagues, we formed a team of 17 young researchers, ages 9-15, from four rural villages and coffee plantations in the La Dalia district, and together we researched local children's perspectives on children's rights at school (for the full findings, see Shier, 2016).

As a byproduct of this experience, I created a new tool to help researchers build partnerships with children. The tool takes the form of a matrix (or table), and as such has a horizontal and a vertical axis.

The horizontal axis is a continuum of power and influence, where we ask ourselves "How much decision-making power or control over the research do children have?" For this I used Lansdown's simplified typology of participation, which reduces the whole range of participation in practice to three basic types:

- **Consultation**: Is when adults ask children for their views, and children are not involved beyond this.
- **Collaboration**: Is when adults and children work together, sharing roles and responsibilities in planning and carrying out an activity.
- **Protagonismo** (in Lansdowns's original version "child-led"): Activities initiated, organised or run by children and young people themselves (understanding that adults may still provide support, though this is not always necessary) (Lansdown 2011).

For the vertical axis, I adapted a list of the typical phases of a research process from Kumar (2014) into a timeline.

An analytical tool to help researchers develop partnerships with children

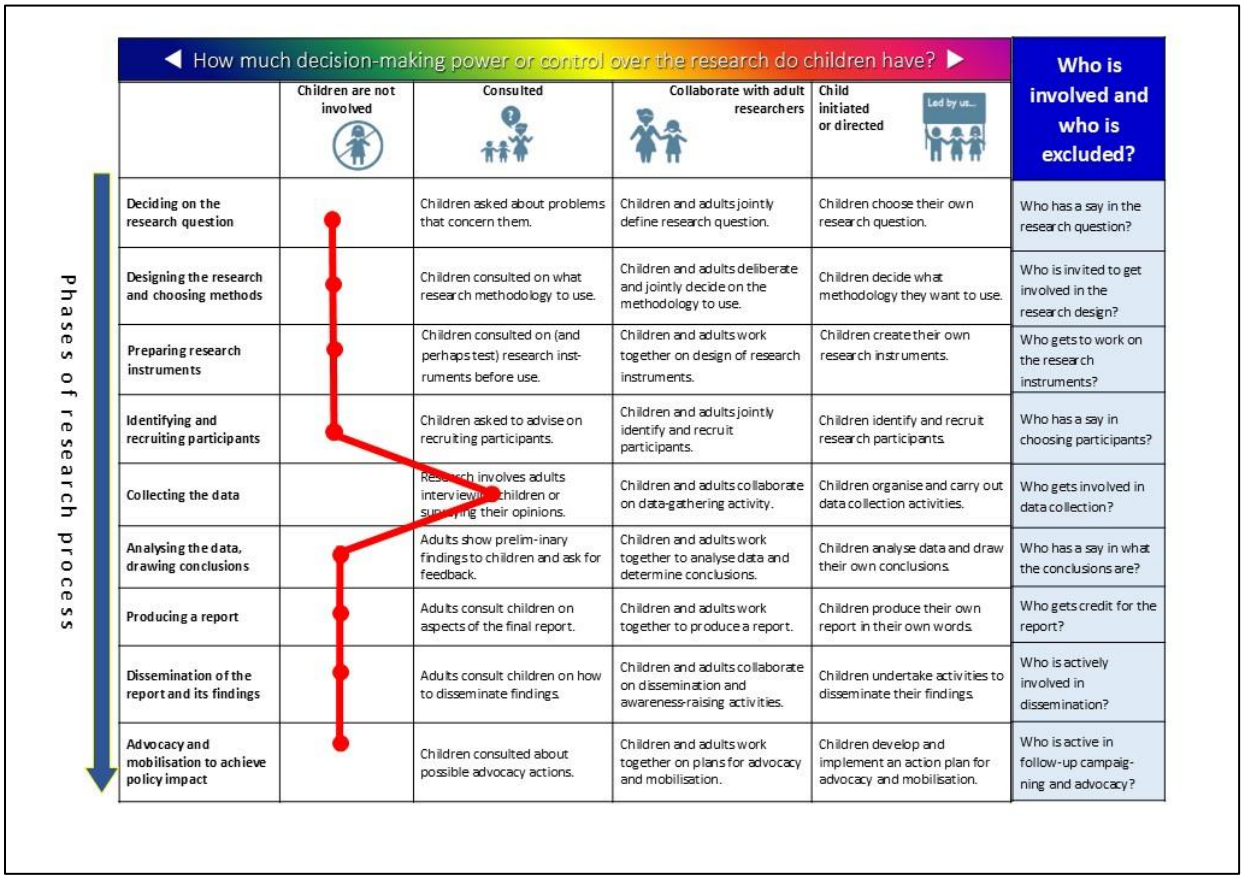
Harry Shier

Phases of the research process ↓	← Dimension of decision-making power or control →				Who is involved and who is excluded?
	Children are not involved	Children are consulted	Children collaborate with adult researchers	Children direct and decide for themselves	
Deciding on the research question		Children asked about problems that concern them.	Children and adults jointly define research question.	Children choose their own research question.	Who has a say in the research question?
Designing the research and choosing methods		Children consulted on what research methodology to use.	Children and adults deliberate and jointly decide on the methodology to use.	Children decide what methodology they want to use.	Who is invited to get involved in the research design?
Preparing research instruments		Children consulted on (and perhaps test) research inst-ruments before use.	Children and adults work together on design of research instruments.	Children create their own research instruments.	Who gets to work on the research instruments?
Identifying and recruiting participants		Children asked to advise on recruiting participants.	Children and adults jointly identify and recruit participants.	Children identify and recruit research participants.	Who has a say in choosing participants?
Collecting data		Research involves adults interviewing children or survey-ing their opinions.	Children and adults collaborate on data-gathering activity.	Children organise and carry out data collection activities.	Who gets in-volved in data collection?
Analysing the data and drawing conclusions		Adults show prelim-inary findings to children and ask for feedback.	Children and adults work together to analyse data and determine conclusions.	Children analyse data and draw their own conclusions.	Who has a say in what the conclusions are?
Producing a report		Adults consult children on aspects of the final report.	Children and adults work together to produce a report.	Children produce their own report in their own words.	Who gets credit for the report?
Dissemination of the report and its findings		Adults consult children on how to disseminate findings.	Children and adults collaborate on dissemination and awareness-raising activities.	Children undertake activities to disseminate their findings.	Who is actively involved in dissemination?
Advocacy and mobilisation to achieve policy impact		Adults consult children about possible advocacy actions.	Children and adults work together on plans for advocacy and mobilisation.	Children develop and implement an action plan for advocacy and mobilisation.	Who is active in follow-up campaigning and advocacy?

The basic matrix (Figure 2) is created by linking the two axes, though a couple of adjustments are required. First, an extra column is needed on the left-hand side to cover the situation where children are not involved at all, which is very much the reality of most research

processes. Second, the basic matrix ignores the question of which children are involved and which are likely to be excluded at each stage, so to address this aspect, an additional column is added on the right-hand side, specifically asking us to consider who gets involved and who doesn't and why.

The matrix tool was published in 2019 (Shier, 2019a), and the same year a team of researchers in Australia put it to the test as the basis for a scoping review on participatory research methods used with children in Australia (Grace et al., 2019). They found – as I had suspected – that in the vast majority of the 119 studies reviewed, children were not involved at all outside of the data collection phase of the research. Figure 3 shows how this finding can be visualised using the matrix tool.



Remembering the quote from George Box at the start of this paper, "All models are wrong, but some are useful", I suggest that this matrix tool can help us with designing and planning research projects involving children, and equally in reviewing and evaluating those projects, by offering us a practical check-list to make sure we are not excluding children through narrow thinking. I would never suggest using a tool like this to make judgments about whether a particular approach is right or wrong. The most the tool can do is help us ask good questions, and so make wise decisions about what might work well in a particular situation.

Note: The presentation that accompanied my original CARN keynote, including photographs of the experiences described, can be seen at: https://www.harryshier.net/powerpoints/Shier-2024-PAR_with_children_and_young_people-CARN.pdf

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