

Pathways to Participation Revisited: Nicaragua Perspective



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Why Revisit

Five years ago, after 25 years working in informal education in England, I packed up and moved to Nicaragua, Central America. Here I work with a locally-run rural community education organisation called CESESMA, supporting child workers in the coffee industry in the promotion and defense of their rights.

One of the last things I did before I left England was to submit an article for publication in a respected academic journal called “Children and Society” (Shier 2001). I was pleased with the article because in it I felt I had managed to sum up in a neat and simple conceptual framework, called Pathways to Participation (see the Diagram below), everything that I had learnt from all my years of experience.

By the time the article appeared in print in the UK in April 2001, I was already making a new life for myself in the remote mountains of northern Nicaragua, and had all but lost contact with the professional sphere I previously inhabited. I only found out a couple of months ago that during the five years I’d been away, without my knowledge or involvement, Pathways to Participation had become one of the foremost theoretical models in the field, having been reprinted, translated, applied and adapted in innumerable settings and sectors in many parts of the world.

Having recently discovered this happy fact, it didn’t come as a complete surprise when your editor tracked me down to my remote mountain hideaway (tracked me down via e-mail, I mean – he didn’t actually come looking for me) and asked me if MSR might publish key aspects of the original article and add comments that might be of interest to early adolescence educators in Aotearoa New Zealand. And so

it has come about that, for the first time in over five years, I find myself revisiting Pathways to Participation and asking myself what, five years on, do I have to add?

Differences

One of the biggest differences between the lives of children and young people in Nicaragua and wealthier countries like England, Ireland or Aotearoa New Zealand is that here in Nicaragua young people go to school because they want to, and not because they have to. Here, in Nicaragua, getting an education is a struggle. The quality of the education on offer may be sadly lacking, with run-down, overcrowded, poorly-equipped schools; teachers with little or no proper training, and not enough of them to meet the needs, and a national curriculum that has little bearing on the real lives of rural children. And yet, against all the odds, tens of thousands of children and young people do everything in their power to attend school each day. At harvest time they work long hours in appalling conditions picking coffee so as to pay for the next year’s classes. They may walk dusty dirt-tracks an hour or more each day to reach school. And as rural communities in Nicaragua do not have secondary schools, going to secondary school may mean getting up at four in the morning for a long walk followed by a bus-ride to a school in a town many miles away or, especially for girls, leaving home and working as a domestic in the city, with all the risks this entails, and only returning to home on Sundays.

The young people make this effort firstly because education is their right and, here in Nicaragua, rights have to be defended. Secondly, they know that, for all its inadequacies, education offers at least a chance of a different and better life for themselves and their families; provided, that is, that they take it seriously and put in the effort.

In short, for these young people, their education matters to them. And this means that they are prepared to make a big effort - after all it has been a struggle to get there, so “I might as well give it my best shot”. It also means they want to be treated with respect, and above all to have a say in the way their education is organised and delivered, which brings us back to Pathways to Participation.



Conditions for Participation

Each school in Nicaragua has its “Student Government”, equivalent to a student council, and also its School Committee, equivalent to a board of governors. Villages have Children and Youth Committees, and municipalities have Children and Youth Commissions and Community Education Committees, among other local bodies actively involved in educational and community development. Part of the work of CESESMA is to prepare and empower children and young people so that they can have a presence and a voice in these decision-making settings. So, for the CESESMA team, it goes without saying that children must be listened to, they must be supported to express their views, and their views must be taken into account in all decisions that affect them (represented by levels 1, 2 and 3 of the Pathways to Participation diagram).

As supporters of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, CESESMA team members understand that they have a clear and undeniable duty to ensure that these things happen. However, we believe that higher levels of participation, where children and young people have a genuine and non-tokenistic role in decision-making, whilst not mandatory according to the UN Convention, are immensely valuable to

children and young people, to schools and to communities, and that is why CESESMA actively promotes and facilitates them.

Key writers and agencies in Aotearoa New Zealand and elsewhere (e.g. Auckland Regional Child and Youth Engagement Project 2005, Kirby et al. 2003 and Treseder 1997) have extensively discussed the main reasons for this belief, and the growing evidence to support it. The main reasons that support students experiencing high levels of participation are:

- Better quality curricula and teaching development (service provision);
- Children and young people develop an increased sense of ownership and belonging (and thus, commitment);
- Students’ and teachers’ self-esteem increases;
- Students experience increased empathy and social responsibility; and
- The experience helps to lay the foundations for citizenship and democratic participation, thus helping to safeguard and strengthen democracy.

One of the challenges CESESMA faces in this work is trying to convince teachers that education should be a partnership between learner and educator, and that therefore the empowerment and pro-active participation of their students is a positive force for

progress and not, as many view it, a dangerous challenge to traditional teacher authority.

Many teachers everywhere, not only in Nicaragua, give a high priority to maintaining authority – by which they really mean control over their students – and I believe this is one reason why schools rarely have been in the forefront of moves to promote children and young people’s participation in decision-making. I see many signs, however, that this situation is changing, in Nicaragua and around the world. The fact that you are reading an article like this in a professional journal for teachers is one such sign.

I believe the Nicaraguan experience can help us explore this idea further. In developed countries, a stereotypical teacher mindset can be caricatured as: “The children are here in school like it or not, and it’s my job to make them learn. My success as a teacher is measured in terms of how much I can make them learn – by any means necessary”.

In Nicaragua, the teacher’s mindset is: “The children are here because they want to learn. The fact that it has been a struggle for them to get here, in many cases involving great sacrifice, leaves us in no doubt that this is why they are here. My job is to recognise their desire to learn, and work with them to facilitate their learning to the best of my ability, with the limited resources at hand”.

Another thing that it’s sometimes hard for teachers to recognise is that it’s not the teaching that’s important, it’s the learning. The learning I am talking about here is the students’ learning, not the teachers’. And yet the teacher often considers it his or her job to dominate, control and manipulate the students’ learning, especially at the secondary level but at other levels too.

Is this an inevitable result of our school system? Or is it possible to change it; to give back to the learner the ownership of his or her learning process, and make the teacher-student relationship a functional partnership in which both agree to work together to facilitate, guide and enrich this process?

Well, obviously we can’t change things overnight. The system includes deep-rooted, learned and internalised pupil and teacher roles. We can’t suddenly say to a class of young adolescents who all their lives

have depended on the teacher to control their schooling, “OK kids, it’s your education, it’s up to you now to run it yourselves!”

But I do believe in processes of continual improvement. And I firmly believe that giving children and young people more of a say in their own education is going to improve it substantially. I therefore make the following claim: I believe it is 99% certain that giving the students more say in decision-making at school will lead, directly and indirectly, to improvements in both the atmosphere and the learning environment of the school, and that positive educational outcomes will follow. Conversely, the likelihood that giving young people more say in decision-making will lead to negative outcomes is miniscule. In the very few cases I know about, where giving young people more say led to results that adults were unhappy with, the increased level of participation they experienced, in itself, has never been the problem. Rather poor planning, poor preparation or faulty practice most commonly explains the results.

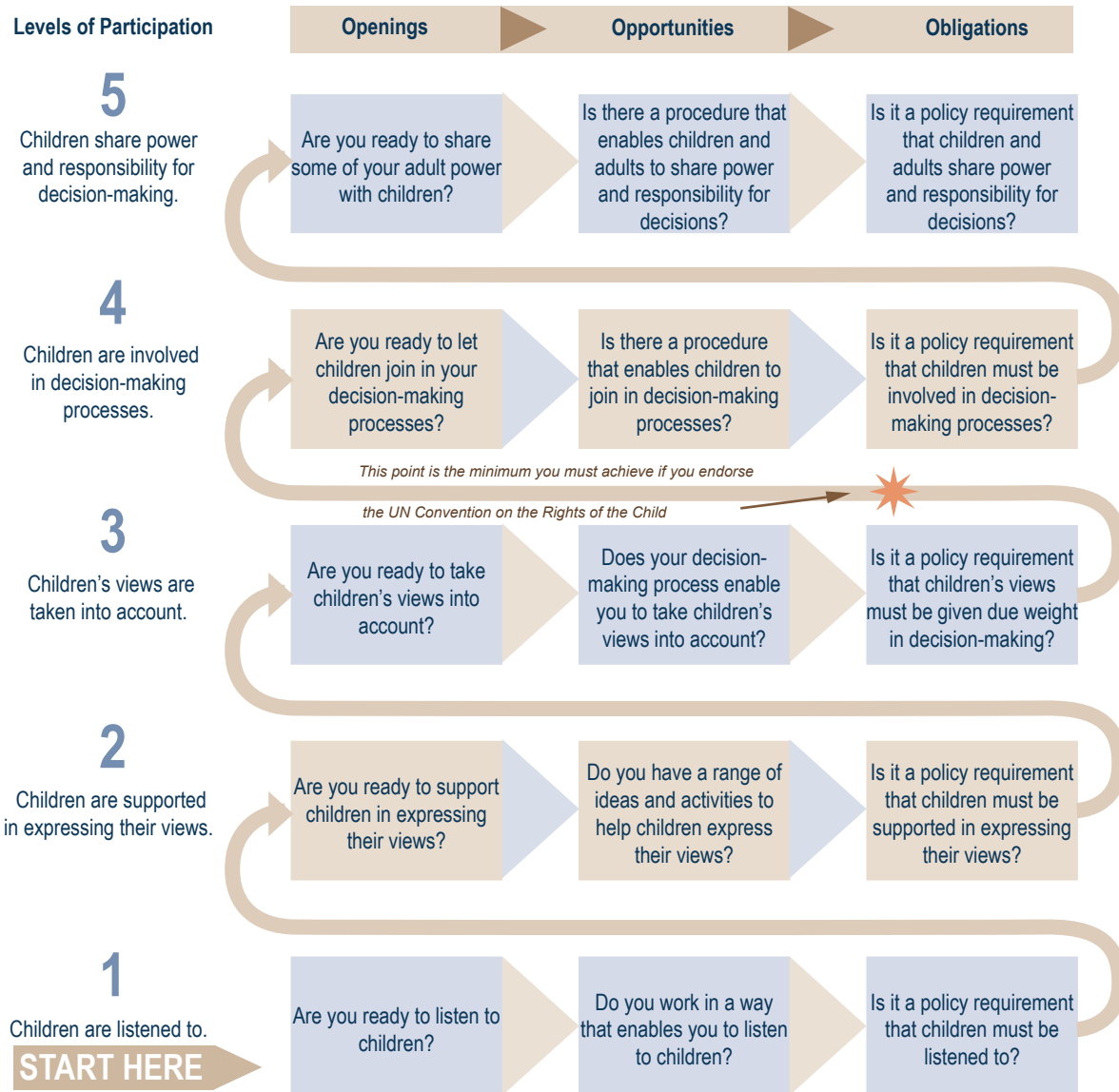
Pathways to Participation

The Pathways to Participation diagram is a practical planning and evaluation tool that can be applied in almost all situations where adults work with children. Its purpose is to help adults to identify and enhance the level of children and young people’s participation in terms of five levels of participation, as shown in Diagram 1. According to Owen (2003), the diagram has the logical structure of “a flow chart embedded in a matrix”. The adults who adopt it, e.g. teachers and teams of teachers, use the fifteen simple questions spread across the five levels of the matrix not only to assess “Where do we stand?”, but to reflect on “Where do we want to get to?” and “What do we need to do in order to get there?” For example, teachers or school staff teams can readily use the levels to enable students to participate more actively in decisions about curricula, learning programmes, school organisation and management, the school environment, equipment, staff and student conduct codes, uniforms and so on.

At each level in the Matrix, teachers and schools may have differing degrees of commitment to the processes for each level. Accordingly, three stages

Diagram 1

Pathways to Participation
Harry Shier 2001



of commitment are identified across the top of the matrix: *openings, opportunities and obligations*.

The first stage at each level is when an opening occurs and a teacher or group of teachers expresses an interest and is ready to operate at that level; i.e., make a personal commitment or statement of intention to work in a certain way. It is only an opening, because the opportunity to make it happen may not be available.

The second stage is when an opportunity occurs as when teacher needs are met enabling them to operate at this level in practice. The needs may include

resources (including staff time), professional skills and knowledge, (maybe acquired through teacher PD), and the development of a new teaching method or a new approach to curriculum planning.

The third stage is when consensus establishes an obligation and this becomes the agreed policy of the school, or part of the school, that teachers and staff should operate at this level and in this way. Working in a particular way, enabling a specific level of student participation, thus becomes built-in. It becomes part of the way we do things around here, i.e., part of the school culture.

At each level and each stage, Pathways to Participation provides a simple question to be answered, making fifteen in all. The answers given can be used to identify a teacher's current position or practice, and easily identify the next steps that might be taken to increase students' level of participation. In reality, it is unlikely that a teacher or group of teachers will be positioned neatly at a single point. They may be at different stages and at different levels. Also they may be at different positions in respect to different aspects of their teaching and curriculum work.

Pathways to Participation makes no suggestion that students should be pressed to participate in ways and at levels they do not want, or that are inappropriate for their level of development and understanding. In practice, though, teachers are more likely to deny students developmentally appropriate degrees of responsibility than to force responsibility upon them. Experience indicates that sound policy is to look for areas in the Matrix where, weighing up all the potential risks and benefits, it is appropriate for children and young people (in this case, early adolescent students) to share power and responsibility for decisions, and then help them make the decisions in a supportive environment. As with any innovation in practice, the process and outcomes should be monitored, so that policy and practice may be reviewed and adjusted if necessary.

Commentator reflections

Some commentators (e.g. Madge and Willmott 2004, Sinclair 2004) say that the hierarchical nature of Pathways to Participation pushes teachers and school to move relentlessly from the lower levels to

the higher. This feature it shares with Hart's (1992) Ladder of Children's Participation, the best-known and longest-established conceptual model in this field. Some other commentators (e.g. Sinclair 2004, Dorrian et al 2000) have commented that the ladder concept implies that higher levels are better - that a ladder is for climbing up and one must always aim to reach the top. As these commentators correctly point out, this is not always the case, and different levels of participation are appropriate in different circumstances.

In response to these criticisms, the way that people use ladders in real life provides a useful analogy. Sometimes we use a ladder to climb to the top and move on, but very often we just want to get to a rung some way up so as to work at the correct height for the job we are doing, for example painting a window-frame. This may be only half-way up, but if this is the right height for the job in hand, it would be counter-productive to climb higher. Without the ladder, however, it would be impossible to climb to the appropriate height for the job. A set of rungs, however well-crafted, is of little use without the frame that connects them together.

The Pathways to Participation framework, like the ladder, makes visible the relationships between different levels of participation and the stages within each. In this way Pathways to Participation offers teachers and schools the logical system they need, so that, like the worker on the ladder, they can ask of themselves, "Are we at the right height for the task in hand?" "Would it be beneficial to climb higher?", "What are the potential benefits and risks, if any, of moving up a rung?"

