

## "Pathways to Participation":

Inspired by British childhoods, reimagined through Nicaraguan childhoods, refocused for Nordic childhoods



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

(George Box, 1979)



### Overview

1. Inspired by British childhoods:  
The origins of "Pathways to Participation".
2. Reimagined through Nicaraguan childhoods: "The Participation Tree".
3. Refocused for Nordic childhoods:
  - Empowerment
  - Inclusion/exclusion
  - Whose space?
  - Whose agenda.

## The Danish connection



The first thing I learnt was that our Adventure Playgrounds were inspired by ... **Denmark**

I started my career in the 1970s, working on Adventure Playgrounds in the UK.



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

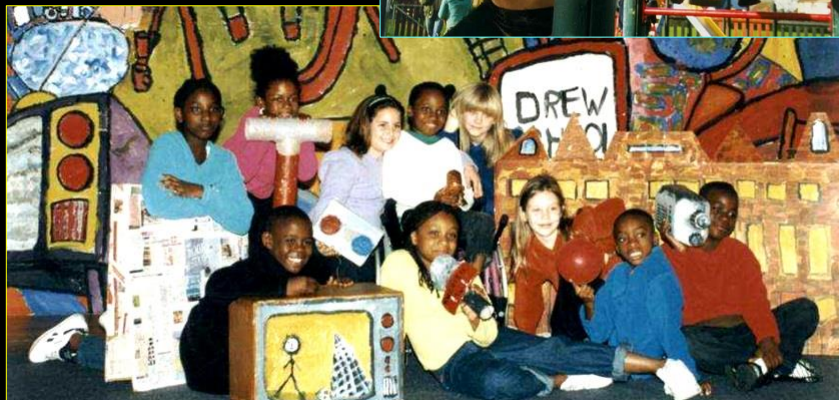


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## 1. Inspired by British childhoods

In 1993, on a visit to Australia, I discovered the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

I made it my mission to make the world aware of **Article 31**: Every child has the right to play, and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.



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Children's Rights are indivisible: The right to play is underpinned by the right to speak out and have your opinions given due weight (Article 12).

I returned to the UK and set up the 'Article 31 Children's Consultancy Scheme'



- There was a fashion for making programmes and institutions "child-friendly".
- Expert advice was being sought.

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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.

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1998

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



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1998

Child consultants commissioned by the British Waterways Board to research the educational and recreational potential of the English canal network.



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**1999**

Child Consultants from the New-Age Traveller community in the South-West of England commissioned by The Children's Society to advise on play and recreation opportunities for traveller children.

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**2000**

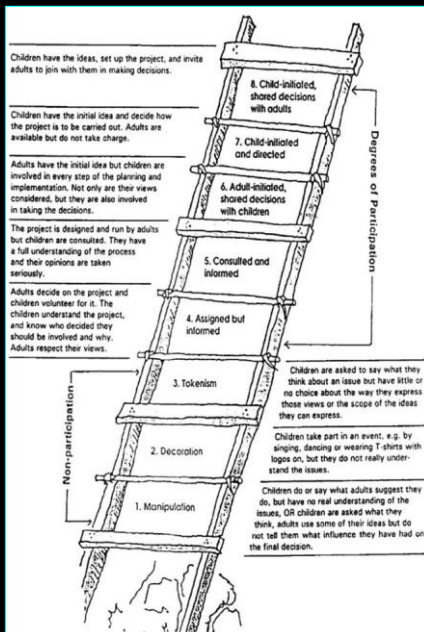
Child Consultants advise managers at the Tower of London on how to make it less boring.

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- Around the turn of the millennium I had the sense that "My work here is done" and I knew it was time to move on.
- I wanted to leave something behind from those 25 years, hopefully something of value.
- But I had no theoretical knowledge to build on, just my 25 years' experience.



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When I started working on children's participation, the only tool we had was Roger Hart's "Ladder of Children's Participation".



Still the best-known and one of the most useful models for children and young people's participation.

(Hart, R.A. 1992. *Children's Participation, from Tokenism to Citizenship*. Florence, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre)

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".

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I saw the role of adult supporters and facilitators as central to almost all the participation practice going on (still is).

I wanted to understand how adults interact with child citizens in these situations.

I wanted to help people understand and reflect on this role. How can I, and people like me, become effective facilitators – as opposed to manipulators – of children’s participation?



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At the turn of the Millennium, this led me to create “Pathways to Participation”

**Five levels of participation**

**Three stages of commitment at each level**

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.

**Openings >**

An opening occurs when you or your team are ready and willing to work at this level

**Opportunities >**


An opportunity occurs when you have the skills and resources to be able to work at this level

**Obligations**

An obligation is established when the organisation’s agreed policy requires you to work at this level

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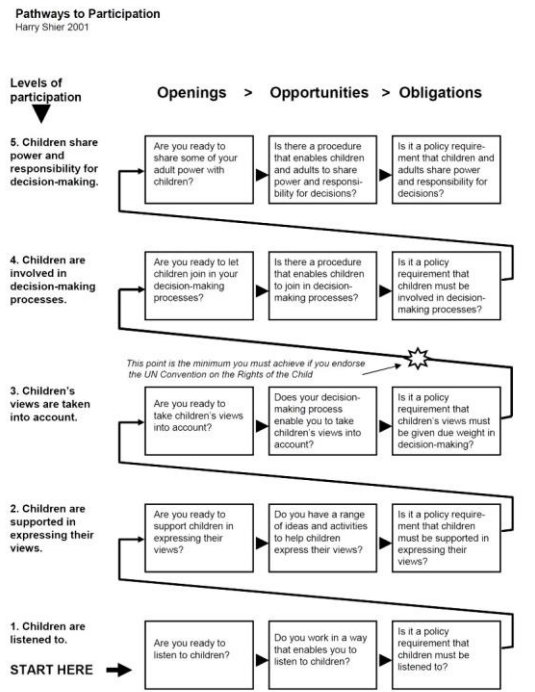
Shier, H (2001). Pathways to Participation: Openings, Opportunities and Obligations. *Children & Society*, 15: 107-117

### Pathways to Participation


Harry Shier 2001

Levels of participation

Openings > Opportunities > Obligations



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



Swedish version

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“Pathways to Participation” was published 16 years ago, and it is one of the most widely used tools for analysing and enhancing children’s participation, in academic study, policy and practice, throughout the world.

How has my thinking changed?

❑ **Empowerment**

I didn’t understand “empowerment”

“Pathways to Participation” supposes that I can empower you by making you a gift of some of my power.

...and that power is a “zero-sum game”: I have more – you have less.

But that’s not how it is. Freire taught me that I cannot empower anyone.

Now I understand empowerment very differently.





## 2. Reimagined through Nicaraguan childhoods



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*"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

*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.

**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 is 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, UNCRRC

### CLOSE-UP ON...

#### The leaves of the tree: Children and adolescents empowered

- Children and adolescents as community educators
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### 3. Refocused for Nordic childhoods



- Empowerment
- Inclusion/exclusion
- Whose space?
- Whose agenda

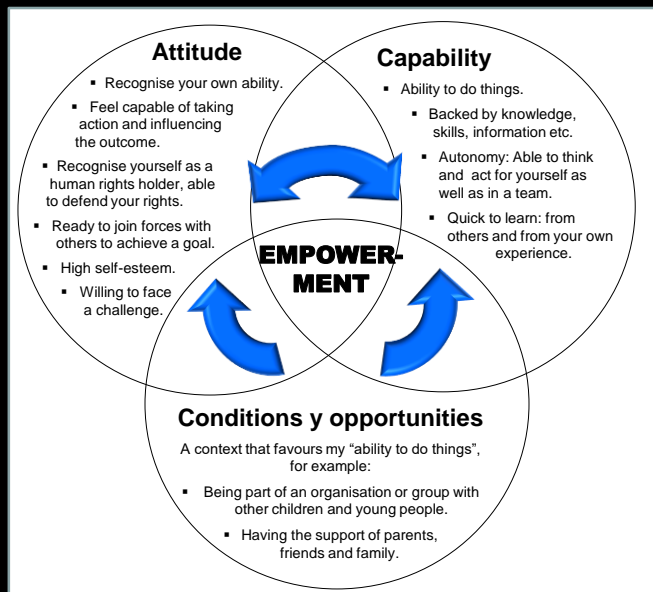
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### Empowerment

- CESESMA's model of Empowerment



(first appeared in Spanish, CESESMA, 2010).



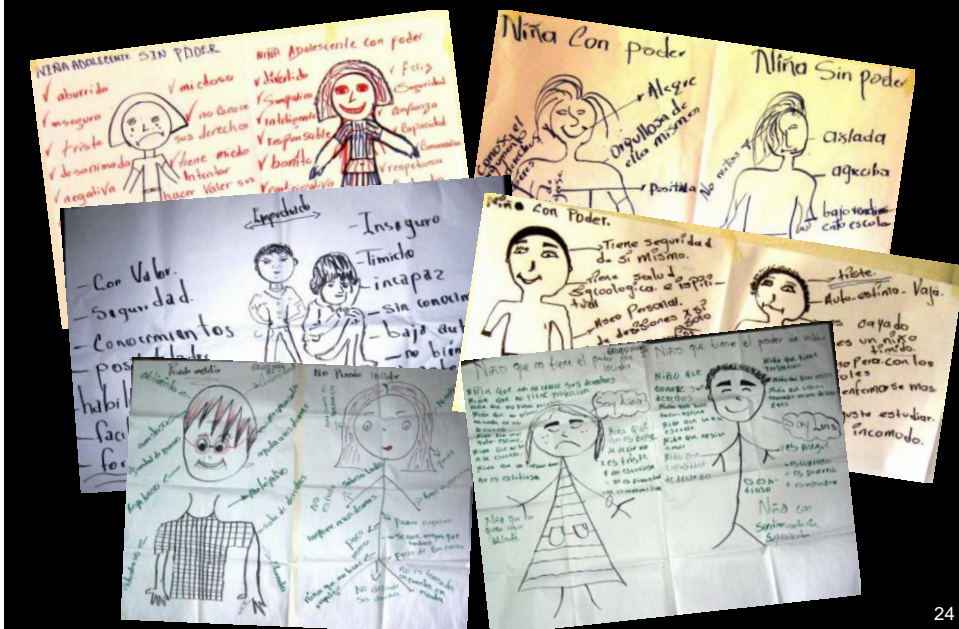
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This year, working with adolescents in Nicaragua to better understand these ideas

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, belief in equality, 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.

Conditions and opportunities

We can help establish conditions and create opportunities.

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## 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.

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## Spaces for participation



In adolescents' participation spaces:

- 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?

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- Andrea 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.

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## Whose agenda?



In children and adolescents' participation activities:

- Who controls the agenda?
- Are children and adolescents acting on their own initiative?
- Or are they mainly following adults' agendas, accepting invitations from adults, and responding to adults' proposals?

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- We will always have issues we want to explore with children and young people, and hope to engage them on.
- We must also clear space for their issues, hear what is on their agenda, make support and resources available for them to work on their issues.
- Support for advocacy, campaigning, media work (old and new), protest.



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## Summary

1. We can't empower, but we can help empowerment to happen.
2. We can understand exclusion and discrimination and organise in solidarity to oppose them.
3. We can facilitate dynamic interaction between children's own safe spaces and the adult-run spaces where decisions are made.
4. We can support (and resource) children to take action on the issues that concern them, as well as the issues that concern us.



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