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Shifting How We Participate With One Another

By Darren Bird



PROTECTION PROVISION PARTICIPATION

At the age of 17, I sat on the board on the Children's Rights Development Unit, representing the Wales Youth Forum. Since then I have happily passed through all international definitions of youth. 'Participation' for me, has been both a professional and personal passion for nearly three decades. Therefore, given a choice, this was the obvious principle for me. In my life, I have seen what it is like for children who are not listened to, I have also had the privilege of seeing what happens when they are listened to, and the

benefits for all involved. In this viewpoint, my approach has been to recognize that in 'participation' everyone's needs, need to be taking into account, so that everyone benefits from the relationship. I am asking what do we all need to do, to work together, so that we can all thrive?

1. Introduction

If we are going to build a better future for everyone, then we need to include everyone in creating that future. This will involve children and adults developing new ways of working – ways that recognize each other's skills and experience and allow for relationships built on trust and respect.

In this viewpoint we are going to look first at what we mean by the term 'participation' and then to question when young people are capable of making their own decisions, and how we determine which decisions.

In the course of the article we will reflect on how the 'participation' of young people has been interpreted and implemented in the last 30 years. We propose some processes to help young people and older people prepare for engagement with one another and in shared decision-making.

We conclude with three examples of how the Learning for Well-being Foundation is striving to model participation within the paradigm of intergenerational partnerships.

2. Rights of the child

In November 1989, the United Nations adopted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Since then, **194 countries** have signed up to the UNCRC, making it the most ratified convention in the UN's history.

All countries that sign up to the UNCRC are bound by international law to ensure it is implemented. This is monitored by the **Committee on the Rights of the Child**.

The articles of the convention cover three main themes: Participation, Provision and Protection. The articles on participation are based on the idea of the child or young person as someone who actively contributes to society as a citizen in the here and now and not just as someone on the receiving end of good or bad treatment and services from others. While the UNCRC did not give birth to the idea of children being involved or as active citizens, it changed the language used to describe such actions by calling them 'participation'.

For many people the ideas of protection and provision were long established and understood. Participation, however, was a new idea. Many individuals and organizations began to question what it means to 'participate'. Our friends in the field of sport said, 'children participate in a game of football', while our friends in the child rights field said 'participation of children in football would see children represented on the board of FIFA'.

To some extents they were both right. However, the UNCRC gave a new definition to the word 'participation', giving depth to what we mean by being involved.

Thirty years after the CRC's almost universal ratification many children's organizations have implemented a range of ideas to afford the opportunity for children to participate in the organizations of which they are a part. A plethora of ideas such as school councils, youth fora, children's councils have been established, although in the U.K many of these have not survived the cull of public services under the government austerity policies. However, the idea of listening to children is still not 'common' or what some professionals would call 'mainstreamed', and as a result children and young people are often surprised when you ask their opinion about something that impacts them.

Concerns of young people

Many young people are not happy about aspects of the societies in which they live. They are taking on their responsibilities as active citizens and taking to the streets to protest. In Florida, young people have campaigned about gun control. In India young people have advocated for change in the education systems. In Europe, Greta Thunberg has ignited a passion in young people that has spread across the world to save their planet. Many young people across the UK and Europe have organized their own campaigns in their hometowns, creating controversy as they have chosen to protest on a school day.

These are just a few examples of young people who have become icons for their causes. We could mention scores more who are becoming well known such as:

AUTUMN PELTIER, 14

@Autumn.Peltier was appointed chief water commissioner for the #AshinabekNation and was just nominated for the International Children's Peace Prize 2019 awarded annually to a child who 'fights courageously for children's rights.' She is a #waterprotector and has been called a 'water warrior'.

ISRA HIRSI, 16

@Isra.Hirsi is the co-founder of the U.S. Youth Climate Strike and the daughter of Congresswoman @Ilhanmn. She says the climate crisis 'is the fight of my generation, and it needs to be addressed urgently.'

XIUHTEZCATL MARTINEZ, 18

Earth Guardians Youth Director Xiuhtezcatl Martinez is an indigenous climate activist, hip-hop artist, and powerful voice on the front lines of a global youth-led environmental movement.

These young people are representative of the thousands of unnamed young people who work daily to improve their communities and societies.

Many of the successes achieved by these young people have come despite the adults in their lives telling them that change is not possible. Toby Young, former director of the New Schools Network, said about the school strikes in the U.K addressing climate change:

‘Calling this a strike is ridiculous. What are they going to do? Down pencils? This is just truancy.’ Further, Young proposed that ‘the fact that so many students have been taken in by Greta Thunberg’s crude propaganda is an argument for raising the voting age to 21, not lowering it to 16.’ To explain the insult, ‘down tools’ was a phrase used by UK Unions when striking.

These statements and reactions continue even in the face of the obvious impact of bringing awareness to the various situations of gun control, education, climate change, and so forth. For example: at the time of this article, the impact of Greta Thunberg’s action, and those who have joined with her, has been linked to more than 670 governments in 15 countries declaring climate emergencies.¹

These children persisted, sometimes dismissed and sometimes aided directly by adults, or cheered on by others, such as the statement from the National Association of Head Teachers: ‘When you get older pupils making an informed decision, that kind of thing needs to be applauded. Society makes leaps forward when people are prepared to take action.’

I would emphasize that the earlier children and young people are prepared to take action, the more options there are for the kind of ‘leaps forward’ that our society needs.

3. How do we know youth are capable of participating fully?

If we are to involve children as active citizens in our organizations and our society, how do we manage that? Do we involve them in every part of our organizations? Do children actually want to be involved? How do we determine whether they have the capacity, and if we do not determine they are capable of active involvement, how do we help prepare them?

These are only some of the questions we need to be asking ourselves as adults, taking responsibility for the environment in which we want young people and children to live and thrive. While recognizing that we too will be part of this, and as such acknowledge what we need, so that the relation too, can thrive,

If we go back to the original text of Article 12 in the CRC:

Article 12

1. 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.

The text does not give children full rights to be heard. Instead it offers the right to express an opinion and specifies that opinion be given ‘due weight *in accordance with the age and maturity of the child*’. These caveats are then used by adults to decide what is the best interest of the child.

¹ According to date from Innovation for Cool Earth Forum.

This phrase 'best interests' can be used to justify that somehow children are not competent to make decisions for themselves.

We are aware that children are born with limited physical abilities, which in most children, develop as they grow. It is tempting to correlate development of competency with age. For instance, it is generally accepted that children learn to crawl between 6 to 10 months. However, even with this simple act, some children development specialists refuse to acknowledge any standard child development graphs. The fact is simply that children develop at their own rate, and the degree of divergence from child development norms increases with age. Quickly we can realize that age is a poor indicator of competency, even in terms of physical growth and development.

We continue to ask: when is a child competent enough to make decisions? And which decisions?

If we look to legislation, in the UK the magic age of competency is 18. The law assumes that prior to this age a child is incapable of making decisions without guidance, and after this date an adult (change of status) is totally competent. For this to be true, all of the divergence in child development graphs should converge at the point of someone's 18th birthday. We know this is not the case.

Looking to our politicians for answers, the answer we get is often confusing. As an example: in February 2019, Shamima Begum, a UK national, petitioned her government, to return to the U.K. At the age of 15 Shamima and two of her friends joined ISIS in Syria. At the time of her plea to return home she was 19 with a 3-week-old baby.

Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt² denied the request, publicly stating: 'The mother chose to leave a free country to join a terrorist organisation,' and went on to say 'Shamima knew when she made the decision to join Daesh, she was going into a country where there was no embassy or consular assistance. I'm afraid those decisions, awful though it is, do have consequences'. Essentially, he concluded that at 15 she was competent to make a life-changing decision and she and her family had to face the consequences of that choice. This episode is one small example of the continuing confusion as to when children are capable of making their own decisions. The policy seems to suggest that children under the age of 18 are incapable of making many life decisions, unless they have been brainwashed by a terrorist organization, and then they become fully responsible for their actions. This conclusion does not make sense at many levels.

If competency is not linked to age then how do we begin to gauge it?

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-47512659>

In his book *Bounce*, Mathew Syed³ proposes that there is very little evidence for what we might call talent. Instead, he proposes practice and experience. He claims that if you speak to anyone who is 'talented', and ask them how many hours they have spent on their chosen passion, be it football, violin or knitting, then you will find they have probably spent hundreds if not thousands of hours honing their 'competencies'.

Syed's premise is that to get better at anything, you have to practice, and practice with the purpose to improve. It is through this emphasis on process (the manner in which we participate) and the practice on ways to participate that Learning for Well-being approach complements the UNCRC's approach to participation.

4. Striving for engaged participation

Learning for Well-being (L4WB) describes the principle of participation as:

Supporting the engaged participation of those concerned, involving everyone in decisions that impact them. It emphasizes engaged participation as possible only when those participating have sufficient information, experience, and training in order to participate fully. In other words, when they have been offered opportunities to practice, they get better at doing it – whatever 'it' may be.

This principle of engaged participation incorporates the ideas of family therapist Jesper Juul⁴ about competency between children and adults. Juul suggested that schools and families need to adapt a healthier balance between content and process, and adults need to find a way of interacting with young people beyond the limited and outdated intellectual polarization of 'strict rules and consequences' in one extreme and 'free education' in the other.

Juul proposed a new paradigm, with two key concepts: equal dignity and responsibility.

Equal dignity is offered as a new standard for interpersonal relationships, especially for the relationship between adults and children. It draws its potential from seeing each relationship as a 'subject-subject-relationship', meaning that two parties meet in equality as humans. He is not suggesting that partners are equals in information and experiences but that each partner has specific expertise about their own circumstances. He acknowledges that adopting a perspective that does not put the needs of one before the needs of the other can be difficult emotionally and intellectually, particularly for adults who generally have authority over young people simply as a matter of age.

The second key is *responsibility*, specifically understood as *personal responsibility* – i.e. the responsibility we must assume for our own behaviour, feelings, reactions, values and so forth. Juul stresses that 'in any meeting between an adult and a child the adult is primarily responsible for the quality of their relationship. When children are forced to assume this

³ *Bounce: The Myth of Talent and the Power of Practice* Paperback – by Matthew Syed. Publisher: Fourth Estate (GB) (1 April 2011). Language: English. ISBN-10: 9780007350544

⁴ Juul, J. (2011). *Your competent child: Toward a new paradigm in parenting and education*. Balboa Press.

responsibility, because the adult is not willing or able, the child (and the relationship) suffers.’ This statement of responsibility returns us to the question of when a child or young person is competent to take personal responsibility for the relationship, under what circumstances, and within what limitations.

Although specifics may differ, *engaged* participation requires preparation and training for *both adults and young people* to engage with one another as partners in appropriate and relevant ways.

In 2004, I was Executive Director of Funky Dragon (the former Welsh Youth Assembly), a child-led organization. I, and other adult staff, were responsible to the board which consisted entirely of 3 young people under 18, 3 young people aged 18-25, elected by the membership, and 3 professionals selected by the young people (to our knowledge, the only Charity in British history to have under 18’s recognized as trustees). Using the guidelines of the UNCRC we began exploring what was meant by participation, what made good participation and what were the structure and processes required to allow and encourage good participation. Working with a consortium of Welsh children’s organizations led by Save the Children, we developed the first set of participation standards. These seven standards included: Information, free choice, no discrimination, respect, you get something out of it, feedback and working better for you. What is critical about this step is that it began to move forward the question of how do you recognize competency and how do you prepare young people to engage more fully. We were asking – as young people and adult staff – what conditions are necessary to allow this competency to emerge.

These standards were then expanded by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, in their General comment No 12, in 2009, to produce the nine conditions of participation. They now include: transparent, voluntary, respectful, relevant, child-friendly, inclusive, safe, supported and accountable.

In our work today with child participation, these nine conditions remain valuable tools, applied in situations from planning to evaluation. They are important for looking at structures and processes. What they don’t do, and which has become increasingly recognized as vital, is to consider the quality of relationships, and how to enhance them. The UNCRC conditions state a need for openness, respect and honesty (conditions that allow participation), but what is also required are ways to improve relationships, to help young people practice the processes implicit in these conditions, and to acknowledge and work with individual differences.

It is important to note the movement in the last 30 years from the guidelines provided by the UNCRC as legal rights of children and responsibilities to adults. At first, participation was defined by external regulations, largely determined by adult experts in the field of child rights. Gradually, children became more involved as consultants, collaborators, and even in some cases, such as Funky Dragon, leading organizations. This is a movement that increasingly has taken into account the importance of internalizing the notion of participation.

As Daisaku Ikeda,⁵ educator, activist, and Buddhist philosopher wrote: ‘Human rights will be a powerful force for the transformation of reality when they are not simply understood as externally defined norms of behavior but are lived as the spontaneous manifestation of internalised values.’

5. ACT2gether: Children and adults working together for a fair and just society

ACT2gether, through the stewardship of the L4WB Foundation, represents a way for bringing together the strengths of the nine conditions of the UNCRC, and the process orientation of L4WB, specifically cultivating core capacities. What we have realized is that **engaged** participation requires that children/young people and adults must all work together to ensure that everyone has the opportunities to practice participating. In the 30 years since the Rights of the Child were endorsed by the United Nations, we have moved from the phase of adults consulting with children, to that of children leading their own organizations with the support of adults, but there has remained a division between adults and children. We believe that the time has arrived for children/young people to come together with adults to act as competent partners. Only through true intergenerational partnerships can we create a world that is fairer, more sustainable, and where everyone can realize their unique potential.

We recognize that you cannot just put everyone – children and adults – in a room and stand back hoping that it will work. The first impulse is always to talk about how to prepare children to work with adults – to know how to participate within the norms and procedures of adult organisations – but partnership requires preparation of **both** adults and children. In my time with Funky Dragon, I was always surprised at how many politicians were nervous or even, to quote one minister, ‘terrified’ of meeting young people. Before putting these two ‘groups’ together, we need to consider that each will have their own excitements as well as trepidations or apprehensions concerning the upcoming encounter. There are ways in which both children and adults will attempt to assert their privilege. Allowing intergenerational partnerships to bloom requires preparation at every level, sensitivity to the needs of each individual, monitoring to ensure all are still included and on task. Most importantly it requires a framework that gives a common language and a structure to enhancing those relationships through reflection and dialogue.

The Learning for Well-being approach is based on a living systems perspective, using nature as its underlying model. Its primary elements are four perspectives, seven principles and nine core capacities. Together, they place emphasis on recognizing our individual and collective strengths and cultivating our relationships. The core capacities provide a means for exploring the individual qualities, aspirations and innate ways of processing of each person. They offer ways to address, with respectful awareness, the differences between people. Their practice helps enhance the quality of our participation, as well as a way to deepen relationships and transform communications of all kinds. We believe that the L4WB

⁵ <https://www.daisakuikeda.org/main/educator/edu/edu-02.html>

approach, specifically cultivating core capacities, provides a solid foundation for helping to transform and enhance intergenerational partnerships.

a. Building a movement through modelling our core values

The central premise is that ACT2gether is a social movement. As such, anyone who wants to be part of it, can. In launching the idea of competent partnerships between adults and children, we are beginning by training ourselves and creating new structures and processes to support genuine efforts.

To do this we are considering each aspect, level and action of the ACT2gether organization, and the L4WB Foundation, as stewards of the initiative. Here are three examples of how we – as adults and young people – are preparing ourselves to be competent partners, with our peers and across generations.

b. ACT2gether Youth

Within ACT2gether, we have created a section known as ACT2gether Youth. The young people involved in developing the idea wanted to be both part of something and have their own agency within the larger context so they can meet together collectively for discussions, ideas, preparing and most importantly, accountability.

This growing number of young people are exploring ideas of ‘What does it mean to be part ACT2gether Youth?’ and ‘How we can work together?’.

Along with the L4WB team the ACT2gether Youth members have been involved in developing the organization policies. They have been involved as equal partners to staff in all of the naming, logos, colours and overt aspects of the design process; they are attending events and running workshops with L4WB staff. And of course, they maintain an active role in the Core team for 2getherland.

c. L4WB Foundation Board

In September 2019 the board of the L4WB foundation began experimenting for the first time with 6 adults, 6 young people (3 under 18 and 3 between 18 and 21). The Board addressed working on the Foundation’s entire operational plan, in a co-creative way. It is intended the plan will consider, not just how we do the work, but how we do the work together?

To achieve success at this meeting, information on the foundation and its activities were prepared and shared with those attending. Pre-meeting calls via internet, gave the young people an opportunity to prepare and digest information for the meeting.

We spent a full day prior to the meeting with the young people to further prepare them, address their expectations and most importantly to give them what they needed to fully engage in the process.

During the meeting they had the support of all staff but in particular they had a Participation Worker whose role was dedicated to supporting them. ‘Checking in’ with the young people was a continual process throughout the event.

Post Board meeting sessions will be held again via internet to reflect on the process and hopefully improve.

d. Development of the Toolbox for Training

For the last 18 months the L4WB foundation has been working in partnership with Eurochild, and the Eurochild Children's Council as it was formed:

The first Eurochild Children's Council (ECC) and the new Child Participation Reference Group (CPRG) will work towards mainstreaming children's voices through all of Eurochild's work, with a focus on events, advocacy and strategy planning. They support the Eurochild network in reaching a gold standard in participatory practice by 2020. The mandate for both groups is just under two years – from July 2017 until April 2019.

This has given both L4WB-F and Eurochild as well as the adults and young people involved the chance to develop, try out and evaluate training around the issue of child participation. Much of this training has been developed around Eurochild events such as the General Assembly or BI annual conference. These events have traditionally been mainly adult orientated, still today the vast population of participants is over 18. However, members of the children's council have been able to take an active role within these events. In Opatia 2018 (the Eurochild Conference), this included giving speeches, running workshops, playing games and facilitating research activities. The events have also been an opportunity for young people to meet dignitaries and key players within the fields of education, health and other key areas in children's lives, to further both the causes of Eurochild and the children they represent from their home countries.

'Europe needs to strive to get closer to children. It needs to find new ways to get in touch with the reality of children coming from diverse backgrounds. No child is voiceless – it's just a matter of whether that child is given the chance to use that voice.' – Sharon, Member of the Eurochild Children's Council.

This training has been developed into a toolbox/manual that will be available in late 2019.

6. Conclusion

We know many examples of children and adults, across the world, working co-creatively. However, we also know that working with children on the basis of competent relationships is still far from the norm for most adults and in many societies. There are still people who believe children should be dutiful students and not given a voice in their environments until they are 18 years old. Some even advocate the age of competency being raised to age 21. Yet, we have met children and adults who have benefited the communities in which they live by working together. These same children and adults have told us about the benefits, learning and positive consequences for all those involved.

ACT2gether is not just waving the flag of intergenerational partnering – although we are very proud to be a part of any movement that works towards the inclusion of children in our societies. We want to promote, innovate and showcase examples of good practice – examples that offer ways to enhance the relationship between children and adults and to provide a platform on which these good ideas, issues and dreams can be shared, discussed and celebrated.

7. Author



Darren Bird has spent all his professional career working with children and young people: working for NGOs, local government, and private practice in the fields of play work, education, youth work and children’s rights. For 12 years he worked as Chief Executive Officer of Funky Dragon – the Children and Young People’s Assembly for Wales (UK). His work also consists of advising organizations on how to listen to children and implement participatory approaches within their structures.

8. Dedication

In pagan folklore there is a goddess called Brig. She is a triple-headed goddess, she is the mother, the child and the grandmother. For me, this is Jean, a goddess of feminist strength, who was many things to me, but most of all she was my friend. Thank you.