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Editorial: Engaged Participation

By Jean Gordon & Linda O'Toole

Introducing Engaged Participation

Welcome to Issue 3 of the Learning for Well-being Magazine. This magazine focuses on illustrating the vision of Learning for Well-being, which is helping to create and encourage inclusive and supportive societies where each and every one of us learns to realise their unique potential throughout their lives. Each issue centres on a theme of interest to the L4WB community. We aim to bring together contributions with differing perspectives on the theme. In this issue we introduce a new section – Viewpoints – which will include two or three short personal perspectives in addition to the longer articles. Our intention is to invite people to contribute their thoughts on the theme whether through a written or a visual piece.

We selected 'Engaged Participation' as the theme for Issue 3 essentially because change for the better in our society can only come about through involving everyone, children and adults, in decisions that affect their lives. Engaged participation is about having some control over your own life in the context where you live. It necessarily links you to other people and requires you to develop skills and capacities for making decisions about your life. It also requires an understanding of how those decisions relate to other people and the environment. Fundamentally, while taking very different forms, participation refers to the vision of the world we want to live in and being part of making decisions which will contribute. Understanding the difference between rumour or 'false facts' and solid information (such as that about climate change), which deeply affect the lives of people all round the planet, but is in some quarters challenged.

The choice of the phrase, *engaged* participation, implies that participation primarily involves the *process* of participation, and the *choice* made to engage, beyond legal or formal structures (e.g. Children's Parliaments, local citizen structures, etc.) however

important the latter. Hence we decided to focus on the *practices* and tools that support engaged participation, rather than theory or concepts. The articles in this issue cover the immediate environment (such as the family, the school); the community (such as local community-based activism); international (such as those interacting beyond their immediate environment or impacting media or global organisations). We hope that you will see a wide range of actions demonstrated that are making a difference in the lives of children, young people and adults.

As context for the articles we would like to reflect on links between rights (such as children's and human rights), participation and well-being. Participation is fundamentally about democracy and as such is enshrined in both the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child ([UNCRC](#)). In Article 12, the latter unequivocally states that:

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.

Furthermore, Article 13 goes on to say that:

The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.

Turning to the Declaration of Human Rights, Article 19 states that:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. And Article 20 states that: Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association, and that (Article 21): Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.

One could consider the statement of these rights as technical or abstract, which is why it is important to understand the fundamental effect on children and adults of being able to exercise these rights as well as consider how they are exercised. In recent years there has been much discussion about links between developing the mechanisms to ensure rights in practice and whether or not there is a direct link to enabling well-being. It is well stated by Lundy: *For a partnership between child rights and child well-being to be effective and genuine, it is not enough to employ a veneer of child rights discourse to boost the case for well-being in national and international arena: there must be both real understanding and a willingness to engage with the rationale, content, and underpinning principles of children's human rights* (Lundy, 2014. P. 2443). But what is meant here by well-being?

There are different explicit and implicit definitions of well-being. We see it as a process that continues to develop throughout life: 'realizing our unique potential through physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual development in relation to self, others and the environment', i.e. engaging in life as whole persons whereby children are encouraged to grow and develop and adults continue to develop their human capacities ([Learning for Well-being](#)).

More specifically, it is clearly interesting to look at the dimensions highlighted by children and young people. The following examples from research give us some indications of aspects that are important to children and young people. In research undertaken by the New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People in Australia entitled 'Ask the Children: overview of children's understandings of their well-being', 126 children and young people aged 8–15 years across New South Wales were interviewed in detail about what well-being means to them (Fattore et al., 2009). The dimensions highlighted by the interviewees as important were: agency – having some control over everyday life; having a positive sense of self; and security & safety including relationships and trust. Recent research in Norway observed and talked to children in early childhood education and care provision (i.e. 4–6 year olds) and concluded that agency and participation were also important to these younger children: they appreciated having a choice about the activities and use of time and being consulted on what they would like to do (Beate et al., 2015). This is further emphasised by Lundy:

Its relevance for child well-being is clear: children's ability to influence their own lives should be looked at in its own right as a core aspect of well-being, and secondly, any process purporting to measure outcomes from a child rights perspective should comply with it by engaging with children from start to end in a meaningful way.
(Lundy, 2014, p. 2444)

Is it different for adults? In 2008 the New Economics Foundation was commissioned by the UK government's Foresight project on Mental Capital and Wellbeing to develop a set of evidence-based actions to improve personal well-being. The project aimed to analyse the most important drivers of mental capital and well-being to develop a long-term vision for maximising mental capital and well-being in the UK for the benefits of society and the individual. The concept of well-being they developed comprised two main elements: feeling good and functioning well. The latter included experiencing positive relationships, having some control over one's life and having a sense of purpose.¹ Martin Seligman in his book, *Flourish*, sets out a theory of well-being as a construct, identifying five elements that can be measured both objectively and subjectively – PERMA. They are: positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. He underlines that well-being is plural in method as well as in substance and is something developed over the course of our lives (Seligman, 2011, pp. 16 & 25).

The picture building up here is that participation (or engagement) acts as a bridge between what is enshrined in children's and human rights and dimensions of well-being presented in

¹ http://neweconomics.org/2008/10/five-ways-to-wellbeing-the-evidence/?_sft_issue=wellbeing

different types of research, including qualitative research with children and young people. The common aspects are agency (having control over one's own life and impacting on decisions affecting one's life) and engagement, going from the simple aspect of being absorbed by a task to a conscious decision to involve oneself with others. In many ways these two aspects are entwined in the notion of engaged participation, as highlighted in the articles in this issue.

Concerning agency in the context of participation, *If children are to be able to express their views, it is necessary for adults to create the opportunities for children to do so* (Lansdown, 2001). Furthermore, there is no lower age limit imposed on the exercise of the right to participate. Very young children are capable of both holding and expressing views, as long as appropriate forms of expression are used (Lansdown, 2005).

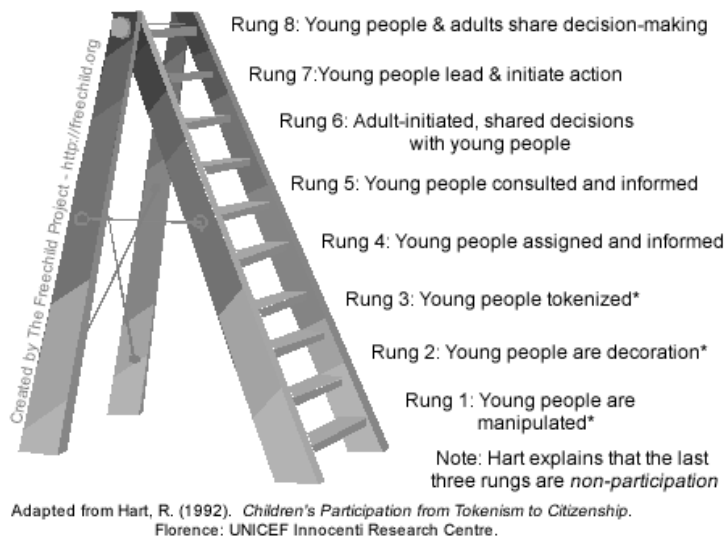
'In other words, children, from birth, start to develop the skills and competences for participation. However, the responsiveness and respect they receive from caring adults and their surroundings will enhance and support the development of these competences and characteristics.' Respecting their right to be heard *'necessitates a preparedness to create the space to listen to their views in ways appropriate to them – through music, movement, dance, story-telling, role play, drawing, painting and photography, as well as through more conventional dialogue. This requires the provision of time, adults willing to listen, and environments in which they feel safe and comfortable'* (Lansdown, 2005).

Though Lansdown was talking about children, there are also many adults in society, particularly those living in vulnerable situations who also have a right to be heard and to participate in decisions affecting their lives. As Tomlinson wrote in his article in issue 2 of the *Learning for Well-being* magazine, *'The processes and tools Synergos uses recognise that for many of the participants in our initiatives, this is often the first time they are being asked to observe the system they are seeking to change, step into the shoes of others, and reflect individually and collectively on what they have learned – and then experiment with solutions they own'*.²

This brings us to the opportunities for scope and quality of participation which are powerfully illustrated by Roger Hart in the figure on the next page:

² <https://www.l4wb-magazine.org/mag02-art09-tomlinson>

Roger Hart's Ladder of Young People's Participation



We can see how easy it is for participation to be tokenistic, even just manipulation, however genuine the original intentions may be. The types of 'engaged participation' illustrated by the articles in this issue of the magazine probably start somewhere between rungs 5 (consulted) and rung 6 (making decisions.) This ladder provides much food for thought in the ways we engage with both children and adults and the range of possible outcomes. The testimonial below taken from the 2012–2013 Annual Report of Funky Dragon (the former [Children and Young People Assembly for Wales](#) until 2014) gives us an example of the importance of agency, of being able to make decisions that affect one's life, and ultimately a dimension of well-being:

'My time with Funky Dragon taught me lots of things, but probably the most important thing I gained which will stay with me forever is a real understanding of the importance of allowing the people who will be the users/beneficiaries of a service to take an active role in developing that service from a very early stage. Funky Dragon is a great example of how that can (and should) work with young people, but the same is true for everything and everyone – there's no point in trying to second-guess what people want or need, you have to give them the opportunity to voice their opinions and then use that as the basis for going forward.' Erica Borley, 2005–2007

The Articles

This issue contains two Viewpoints and eight Articles which are presented here briefly. We start off with two personal perspectives written by Ted Simonds (*'The tempting range', Middlemarch, and me*) and Polyxeni Papageorgiou (*Why I've become involved in organisations and activities based on children's rights, in particular the right to participation?*). CATS ([Children as Actors for Transforming Society](#)) is an 'international learning community of children, young people and adults that collaborate to explore and improve ways in which children, with all their diversity, participate in decisions impacting their lives' (Paz and Pinto, 2016). The annual, international forum brings together about

300 participants every year: delegations of children's and youth organisations from many countries (frequently involved in advocacy for children's rights), as well as families and individuals. Following the 2015 forum young people made a proposal to the CATS partner organisations to integrate more young people as partners in the governance, planning and delivery of CATS. The group decided to call themselves MEOW – Making Earth Our World. The two Viewpoints were written by members of MEOW reflecting on why they had become involved in children's rights organisations and the importance of participation for them.

Moving on to the articles, the first one, *Quest for Inclusion: a Story of Active Participation*, written by Jacqueline Tordoir, is based on an interview with drama teacher, Carl Robinson, who works at the International School of Brussels. The article centres on how his pedagogical approach encourages the inclusion of all pupils in activities proposed through trust building, and creating safe environments where risk-taking is encouraged. The article followed his school production of *The Jungle Book*, and the experience of one student, classified by the school as a 'special education' student. The article recounts how the young person ended up feeling part of the whole group during the process of rehearsing and performing. It centres, in particular, on ways in which this teacher, whose conviction is that difference is not just acceptable but something to be cherished, manages to make pupils feel that they all have something unique to contribute.

The second article, *Strategies for discussing and managing power dynamics in intergenerational groups* by Bijan Kimiagar and Aysenur Ataman of the Children's Environments Research Group, offers specific tools and activities for working with groups of diverse ages and backgrounds. Just as importantly, Bijan and Aysenur provide the rationale, challenges and keys for effectiveness in implementing these activities with groups of adults, youth and children. Their methodologies support participation of children in all groups. While they are particularly focused on using them with civil society groups as essential elements for a democratic society, they argue convincingly that these same methodologies support all groups in dealing with explicit and implicit power dynamics.

In the next article, *Hearing All Voices – Transforming the Lives of Vulnerable Youth: The power of participation*, the authors (Carolyn Conway, Grazyna Bonati, Liz Arif-Fear and Tricia Young) focus on how the process of young people's participation has transformed the lives of the young people and adults who participated in 'Child to Child's Hearing All Voices' project in London schools from 2013–2016. At the start of the programme all the participants were considered at risk of becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training), some were low academic achievers and many were highly disengaged. The article describes the project activities and, in particular, how the young people gradually became more active and engaged. It discusses impact, highlighting significant transformation evident at multiple levels. The authors conclude that the benefits were substantial for both adults and young participants and they emphasise the importance of introducing such initiatives in schools with younger children to enhance their life chances before the process of disengagement and consequent marginalisation from their education and communities begins.

The next two articles focus on participation of young people through news media. In *Making the youth's voice heard: The story of a child can change the world*, Tako Rietveld, formerly a reporter and presenter for the Dutch National News television, shares his personal stories on recognising the importance of listening to and allowing young people to express their views. Tako has established himself as 'the first children's correspondent in the world' and describes how he is establishing a network of youth correspondents. His focus is on both the benefits for youth of finding ways to express their thoughts and feelings, and on the different perspective their views offer to adults.

Publisher and children's rights activist Elise Sijthoff describes her engagement with children and the news media in her article, *Children's natural curiosity – the basis for the Children's International Press Centre: Engaged participation from the home and the classroom to the world around*. Through compelling stories of children, Elise describes two levels at which the Children's International Press Centre is operating: one level is through opportunities for youth to function as reporters and interviewers on national and European political institutions; a second level is through methodologies developed for classroom teachers to integrate children's questions and news into their learning. In both instances, the effort is to foster a two-way flow between children's everyday lives ('news') and the political decisions ('News') that impact their lives so that young people are engaged in their societies and sharing their perspectives freely.

The article by Marie-Thérèse and Jean-Guy Dufour, entitled, *Another world is needed; together it is possible: The experience of the Social Forum in Ivry sur Seine (France)*, presents briefly the history of the World Social Forum and then goes on to look at how and why a group of activists established a Social Forum in Ivry sur Seine, a suburb of Paris. The article discusses some of the very significant experiences they have had over the last 13 years in seeking to move forward their objective that is: *Help the maximum number of people in our town to flourish as citizens with the desire and feeling that they have the capacity to contribute to building a more human society, which is increasingly needed; and to understand that this society of 'well-being' will not emerge without their contribution and that they will never feel good in themselves if they feel disinterested or powerless.*

In the next article, *Khulani Nande – Grow More*, Carol Gorelick describes her experiences in bringing organisational learning approaches to two under-resourced community schools in South Africa as part of a four-year action research project. Carol, a systemic change facilitator, was part of the ABC Connects team that worked with the local communities to help them envision priorities for the school and to use their own resources and local entrepreneurship to implement positive changes. The successes, as well as the challenges, of community participation are highlighted.

The final article, by Adrian Hristescu, a youth worker in Romania, is entitled *Not another article on social inclusion: youngsters with disabilities, the hidden gem of youth work*. It examines issues of participation in the context of youth work and working with young people with a disability. He starts off by telling the story of his and the other youth workers' experience of initially feeling stressed about working with visually-impaired young people due to their own misconceptions. The article then examines, in the light of these

experiences, how peer education, in this case among youth workers, can be used to tackle these misconceptions and fears, making youth workers more open to being inclusive in their work.

We hope that you will enjoy this issue and that it will stimulate you to go out and engage!

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