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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).

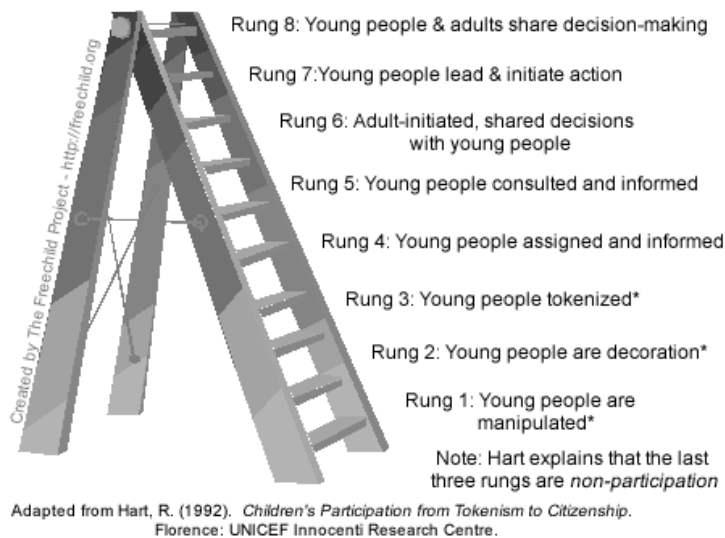
'In other words, children, from birth, start to develop the skills and competences for participation. However, the responsiveness and respect they receive from caring adults and their surroundings will enhance and support the development of these competences and characteristics.' Respecting their right 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 Ayşenur 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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Viewpoint: 'The tempting range', *Middlemarch*, and me

By Ted Simonds

Preamble

As a student of English Literature, I am well aware I read more poetry, novels, and plays than I do much else; yet while my life revolves around literature, it doesn't mean my discipline and I aren't already linked to the rest of the world. For me, to study literature in any sense, to merely *read*, is to open one's mind to the lives of others living in other times and other places. To read is to learn, to widen your perspective. It is what George Eliot called the 'unravelling of human lots'. It is what I have gradually come to appreciate through my participation in youth-led projects, and has become a cornerstone of my personality and a guiding principle of the path I hope to take through life.

It begins

At the age of 11 I became a member of my county-wide Youth Council. The youngest from my school, I would attend bi-monthly meetings with other young people from other schools and groups in my county. We would set ourselves annual goals, on which we would work, from ways to encourage young people to use the Welsh language locally, to making sure looked-after children were engaged in changes to Council procedures. I was able to meet professionals, and make friends with people whom I would never have met, and work with them towards a common and, importantly, self-decided common good. Councillors, youth workers, and health professionals were there for us and with us. I was exposed to a world that lay under the machinations of the world I lived in. Vitally, it marked the point in my life at which I started to think more widely about my place in the world. There were people beyond my family, and beyond my high school, for whom I could improve things.

This was most powerfully brought to my attention when I was working with a group of looked-after young people (meaning they came from care and foster situations) with whom I worked in redrafting their 'Corporate Parenting Plan', to make it more accessible to those who were impacted by it. This document was huge, unwieldy, and heavy. Never before had I been made to address my underlying privilege in having been born into a family. This is not to say that the kids I worked with were inherently down-trodden. They were just like me, but where my relationship with my parents was unspoken, theirs was codified and over 40 pages long. The Local Authority was their parent, and the parameters had to be written down. Looking back, this experience is one I think of, among many, that is emblematic of the time I came to question the parts of myself that I was given, that other people have to work for. These weren't problems that I had ever been made to think about, it wasn't some distant land, it was my town and my county.

What lay beyond the bounds of my own context? It was seven years until I left the Conwy Youth Council, my work with them was formative not just in establishing the Youth Council's place in the County, but for me as an individual. It was when I was beginning to realise my own privilege, and potential to influence improvements that could have real life impacts on people.

At the age of 15, I was chosen to represent my local youth council at the National Youth Assembly in Wales. Not only was this a bigger organisation, but the capacity to influence change was national rather than regional. The biggest project I was involved in during my time on Funky Dragon (the name of the youth assembly) was my involvement in CATS.

CATS

Just after I was elected, I was chosen to form one of a group of young people who had been invited to participate in a conference in Switzerland called CATS – Children as Actors for Transforming Society. This was the culmination of all my previous experiences, and a moment where the speed at which the web of human lots was unravelled at its fastest. I arrived there and was met with a week of work and experiences unparalleled in my previous experiences. I will take just a few moments as illustrations.

In my community group there were ten young people (my 16-year-old self included). Four from Wales, two from Nicaragua, three from Peru, and one from Latvia. The only people who spoke English were those from Wales and Latvia, and the only ones who spoke Spanish were from Nicaragua and Peru. It was chaos, trying desperately to communicate and share our experiences of youth participation. In another way it was eye-opening (as any of us can attest) to see how much we seemed to understand each other.

A young boy from Peru managed to tell us about how his village flooded every year, killing more children than any other demographic. He'd worked with a group of other children to raise awareness of this problem. This was real life. It made us all think. Yet it wasn't just these cataclysmic differences of nature that provoked thoughts, there was a more nuanced cultural difference that is etched on my mind. *Usó Mi Voz Contra El Maltrato Infantil*. I saw these words written on the t-shirts, badges, bags of the children from Nicaragua, but I

couldn't speak Spanish. It was only after an attempted forum theatre that I realised the words had a saddening and empowering meaning. Child abuse is one translation, *maltrato* means mistreatment or maltreatment, so *el maltrato infantil* may not carry the same weighting as child abuse does in the UK, especially in the wake of the wave of historic *child abuse* cases of the past few years.

In the activity, we had to recreate an act of classroom advocacy: in our Anglophone conception it was about school councils, representation, and *Article 12*. In the Latin-American conception, it was the teacher who struck the child. *Golpear* was another word lost on me. Accompanied with actions of a fist (or an open hand) it all made sense. The commonality of the mistreatment of children was something institutionalised, in the family, school, and beyond – a far cry from the kind of experience I had ever had. It caused us to look at each other with mouths agape, but to them it was so normal it was pastiched with pantomime joviality. It was so normal to them. It was a process of learning that a different reality existed beyond the scope of my own.

I then went on to get involved in the running of CATS, something I still do. To me, CATS is a space for children to work together, united by an underlying sense of what they want to do while learning about the different lives they live.

Beyond my lot

Here, I return to George Eliot and her assessment of our capacities to understand other people's lives, of which she says in her novel *Middlemarch* (arguably my favourite) that in 'unravelling certain human lots... all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, [meaning her lot] and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe'. This is where I depart from Eliot, whose project was a novel. I am not writing a novel, and that 'tempting range' is particularly alluring. My life and experiences have led me to peer out from my own particular web to catch a glimpse of that which can't be caught in literature. I want to be part of the machinations of the world I want to see, rather than merely be an observer.

Author

Ted Simonds is an English Literature undergraduate at the New College of the Humanities in London. Aged 20, he is also a core team member of CATS (Children as Actors for Transforming Society). Before this, he studied in North Wales alongside being the Chair of Conwy Youth Council for seven years, and a member of the Welsh Youth Assembly.

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Viewpoint: Why I've become involved in organisations and activities based on children's rights, in particular the right to participation?

By Polyxeni Papageorgiou

When you are considered to be a child, you are meant to have a specific mindset followed by certain characteristics. Children are often treated as if they are incapable of contributing to society in an effective way regardless of the fact that they are part of it. An example told to me by a wonderful woman was that, people often ask adults how to build a children's park without asking children themselves how they would prefer it. In other words, there is this mentality of adults thinking that children cannot have a say or that children cannot understand or *vice versa*, and therefore there is a huge gap between the two.

My little 'excuse' for participating and getting involved in organisations and activities that are based on children's rights and participation is the fact that they make me feel a sense of equality and determination for a better future. It works as a way of appreciating life and feeling accepted and appreciated by society. It is very important to be able to express yourself freely to anyone and know that they hear you and value your opinion. Personally, I believe that if children and adults worked together there could be some great results in our societies along with greater respect towards each age. Children might not be able to explain what rocket science is or how the common market works, but they sure can tell us their opinion about what they think of matters that affect them, such as education and entertainment.

I was keen to realise that there are so many organisations, delegations and forums that focus exactly on children's rights and participation and whenever I have had the chance to

I tried to get involved. Cyprus Children's Parliament was something I experienced for two consecutive years. Not only did it increase my knowledge on my rights as a child but it also helped me develop as a person and think about how we as children can make a better future and become active members of society. I have also been involved with CATS since 2014. CATS stands for Children as Actors for Transforming Society; it is an international forum held yearly in Caux Palace, Switzerland. It started in 2013 and every year gathers people of all ages, origins and 'social classes' to work for a week on children's rights and participation, have fun, get inspired and adapt with the Spirit of Caux. I could write pages and pages on how this forum has inspired me, changed me and educated me as a person. Each year has a different theme, people, vibe and outcomes. What is most important about it though, is the fact that we all come together and work together and share ideas and thoughts about children's rights and participation in society as a team without adults or children. Only with People.

As I said previously, I could write so many things about CATS and Cyprus Children's Parliament and why for me children's rights are important. In my opinion, everyone should be able to feel important and be able to share their thoughts, concerns and ideas with people. Why should this be a limitation for children? It is very important to feel accepted by society, and feel like you are being taken into consideration and matter as a human being. It is even more important to feel okay in your own skin regardless of colour or age or origin. We all need to understand what falls under the umbrella of Equality and its importance. To sum up, these were some of the reasons why I love being involved with such matters. I myself am not old, neither am I young. I am an 18-year-old girl who doesn't need to be categorised in any section of the two. Each age has its grace and needs to be respected and appreciated. Getting involved in such activities reminds me of what is really important in life and gives me strength and energy to work for a better me and a better future for this world. For me, it does not matter what your age or background is. Everyone is important and children's rights and their right to participation should be taken into full consideration when thinking of the future of this world. Simply because they are the future and they deserve a world based on the right rationales and principles.

Author

I was born on 19 February 1998 in the beautiful Island of Cyprus where I was also raised along with my 3 brothers and sister in the coastal town of Limassol. I was always interested in activities that helped me broaden my horizons and expand my knowledge and by 2013 I was a member of Cyprus Children's Parliament. In 2014, I visited CATS for the first time with 3 more members of the CCP, and then in 2016 I was a part of their Core Team. Currently I am a first-year Law student based in Aberdeen, the 'Granite City' of Scotland, UK.

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Quest for Inclusion: a Story of Active Participation

By Jacqueline Tordoir

Challenge

Last year, our daughter Daniela (14) went to the International School of Brussels (ISB). The mission of the school was: 'everyone included, challenged and successful.' Of the three mission components, 'challenge' is the one Daniela has been covering since she was 3, when she was diagnosed with a brain tumour. Although her one-year intensive hospital treatment is now a distant memory, Daniela's learning difficulties continue to be a daily challenge. Naturally her challenge is shared by all those who surround her, Mum and Dad, sister and brother, friends and family, teachers and peers. We are all on Daniela's boat, navigating with her through the choppy waters of her education journey. Together seeking her well-being as her destination, we work in the hope that each twist and turn will empower her to increasingly take the helm of her own life.

Inclusion?

Daniela has an atypical profile with many strong social skills and some very pronounced specific literacy and numeracy challenges arising from her medical treatment as a young child. At ISB, Daniela was enrolled as a pupil in the ISB's 'Special Education' section, where she spent most of her school hours in a small class of 6 children all of whom had significant learning challenges. Daniela (who is Dutch and Irish) can only participate in lessons in the mainstream Middle School in Dutch and Drama. While relishing her periods in the mainstream, Daniela found it hard to have the label 'special education kid' attached to her and often wondered why she could not, just like her peers be a full-time mainstream student without any such label. The gap between the education levels at both sections was large, with Daniela hovering somewhere in between, intellectually, emotionally and socially. It was tough. Our quest as parents was to see where 'inclusion' and 'success' could become a reality for her at this school.

Most Success!

As in every journey, sometimes the most rewarding moments happen unexpectedly beyond the planned itinerary. Our experience of a school play brought such an unexpected moment of enlightenment: As spectators of the school's *Jungle Book* production, we witnessed 'inclusion, challenge and success' performed by Daniela impersonating 'Wolf 3' in the play. Pacing up and down on the stage, with the purpose and quiet determination of a wolf confident in her fur, she howled and scowled and showed herself as an established part of the pack. For the first time: she looked and felt like she belonged: The quality of her focus and participation surpassed all our expectations and were unmatched by any of her previous stage acts. What led to this success? To find out more, I decided to speak to Carl Robinson, the school's drama teacher and the *Jungle Book*'s Theatre Director, although preferring to be referred to as the production's 'facilitator.'



Building trust

Conscious that inclusion is a key component to Daniela's learning, I set out by investigating this aspect first when I interviewed Carl. When rehearsals started I had noticed that it took Daniela a while to get into it. She showed no particular enthusiasm for attending rehearsals. Carl confirmed that at the start she had been withdrawn and frightened to make her voice heard. She would cower in a corner rather than step forward, whisper rather than speak up or shout out. He recognised her challenge: She was the only special education student in the group and by far the youngest. However, Carl's experience is that very few children will

feel entirely confident at the beginning of rehearsals for a play. Nearly every child suffers from a lack of confidence in one way or another.

As self-confidence is very closely linked to trust, Carl starts off any theatre production by building trust in the group. He works on trust by tapping into a large repository of exercises. He aims to make everyone feel part of the whole, to get everyone to feel that they have something unique to contribute to the group and that difference is not just OK, but something to be cherished. Through trust-building exercises, children eventually end up trusting themselves and each other. In Carl's approach, trust does not stand alone, building group cohesion and engagement form an integral part of trust.

Trust games

One classic example, also often known to be used in team building is 'trust falls.' A person stands behind you and you say 'I'm falling' and you lean back and they catch you. Carl: 'There is a good reason for those kinds of activities being so successful in business, team building and drama, because we equate trust in other people with physical trust. That maternal feeling that somebody is going to hold you and carry you. I think establishing trust through physical contact can be a really powerful way of engaging students. If you know someone can catch you, then you're likely to trust that they support you in an idea as well.'

Linking trust to building group cohesion and engaged participation by every member of the cast, Carl draws his inspiration from Augusto Boal,¹ the Brazilian founder of the 'Theatre of the Oppressed.' Carl: 'I like Boal's exercises as they are built on building communities, building a sense of trust in a team and the people around you. In his 'Space Walk' exercise, one person is in the middle of a group that forms a really tight circle around him/her. If that person lifts their arm, then the group fills the space created between that person's arm and their body with their bodies; with their hands, with their shoulders, with their backs. If that person sits down, then a seat is formed beneath him, if he lifts his foot then that is supported. All the way through, in whatever way the person is moving, he is supported, not just by a single individual but by an entire group. It takes courage to be the one that has to trust other people. The game creates huge excitement, fun and play and is a very powerful exercise expressing community support for an individual. I do lots of activities like that to make people feel part of the group, which is often why people turn to drama. Some might find it hard to be part of other communities, but you can form tight communities in drama.'

Building Engagement, role modelling success and failure

After building trust and creating a strong sense of community, both in his theatre productions and in drama-lessons, how does Carl manage to get everyone of his students to stay engaged? Carl: 'The root of engagement in my classroom comes from the student-teacher relationship, the lack of a hierarchy. I come from a background in theatre where collaboration was at the forefront of making art, not the Director-Actor relationship. I

¹ Games For Actors and Non-Actors (London: Routledge, 1992; Second Edition 2002).

brought that experience into my teaching and ever since I started teaching, that's always been my focus; to try and establish a working and a learning environment where the students are as much as possible on the same level as me; on the same level of contribution. Now of course I have a large hand in choosing the activities, the acting modules and guiding the course, but when it comes to running those activities and to participating in all those activities, I have an equal share. When we play improvisation games for example, I would go up as many times as everybody else in the room. The effect on the children is that I show that I am also capable of success and failure. It shows that I am willing to try an activity at which I might not be the best person in the room. Students might have better ideas in that situation or their ideas might simply work better than mine do. Take improvisation games where the purpose is laughter; it is often a good gauge that I might not get as many laughs as one of the students. And it shows that it is OK to fail, it is OK to try things out, to experiment and not always get it right. That philosophy has always driven me as a teacher. So that's one aspect of engagement.'

Building engagement, being brave

Reflecting this back to students' participation Carl said: 'At the start of my courses I talk about the difference between confidence and bravery. Confidence is the attitude, "Yes I can do this no problem!" Bravery is: "I am not sure I can do this, but I'll try". Students that seem to be the most confident in the room are not necessarily the most confident, they are just the bravest at that moment; they are just taking that chance. So we do an activity and 50 % of the students get up and give it a go and the other 50 don't, let's say. Then we reflect and some of the students that gave it a go, might say: "well I was nervous before I went on stage, but once I was on stage my nerves started to go away". Accepting that nerves are OK in front of your group is important and having nerves is fine, it is not that everyone is confident all the time, we all have nerves. The other 50% then see that it is OK, they survived, the others were successful and even if it was not funny or exactly what they expected, they were no worse off for it. The engagement increases as students will follow the example of others giving it a go. As you build the confidence in the students to experiment, to fail and to try, they are more likely to try more things out and will stay engaged.'

Carl then explained that he finds activities that are about getting to know a person or getting to know other sides to them also quite effective for engagement. Carl: 'One such activity is to put people in pairs with each person standing on opposite sides of the room and the aim is to get the other person closer to you. The way you get the other person to move is by making guessing statements about that person. If the fact is correct, the person takes a step closer, if it's not correct, they don't move. Some are obvious facts such as "you're a woman," others are guesses such as: "you like going to concerts." Gradually you're trying to guess things that make the other person move closer towards you.' In this game, Carl encourages his students to find out unusual things about the other person. A variant is to say true statements about yourself and when it is true for the other person, they move closer towards you. Again unusual or personal statements such as 'I love my Grandad' or 'I get upset when I think about homeless people' are encouraged. After, there is usually a reflection on the whole exercise. Why did people move or not move at

different stages? What can they add about their personalities in the context of true or false statements made? The purpose is to explore what things they have in common and where they differ. Carl: 'Students establish an understanding of each other and that's so important in drama because to know a person's interest, his passions, what they're good at, can help you collaborate with them, or draw the best out of them.'

(see also Carl's Blog: <http://workingperformance.blogspot.be/>).

Creating safe environments for risk-taking

After trust and engagement building, Carl's next step is usually to create a safe environment in which children are encouraged to take risks and to reflect openly on each other's performances through giving critical, non-judgmental feedback. Children thrive by sensing that none of the feedback given is ever personal, that each comment serves the purpose of increasing their skills and the quality of the group effort as a whole. Risk-taking is cultivated by giving children exercises to stretch their imagination, asking them to perform the impossible. Everyone takes part no matter how hesitant they feel about taking risks. The secret is in the approach. How can you not take a risk when you are asked to work out a way to turn yourself inside out, or to find a way of seeing the back of your own head? Carl avoids large group work at the beginning. Encouraging small groups, small interactions where there is much less 'perceived' risk for the participants. Carl: 'Group work can be really scary, getting on a stage can be really scary, so performing anywhere but on the stage initially helps. Initially getting students to work in pairs, getting the pairs to share with another pair and build up slowly to 4, group work and performing in a small group in front of a big audience is how I get around stage-fright.'

Making art through collaboration

Carl's vision on theatre is one where everyone actively participates in building it. For his productions, Carl sees his role as a facilitator rather than a director. He uses the creative input he gets from the children to build the play. There might be a script, but it is flexible. Carl: 'Children have excellent ideas; I would be mad not to take them on. The process is more important than the end-result.' All the children in *Jungle Book* were active agents in building it, they were treated as competent partners in shaping the process and the end-product.

For Carl, collaboratively devised performances make for an egalitarian process in the way people participate in the group, valuing each and everyone's idea. Inspired by Roland Barth's essay 'The death of the Author',² Carl sees the actors as having an equal share in

² 'The Death of the Author' (French: La mort de l'auteur) is a 1967 essay by the French literary critic and theorist Roland Barthes. Barthes' essay argues against traditional literary criticism's practice of incorporating the intentions and biographical context of an author in an interpretation of a text, and instead argues that writing and creator are unrelated.

the making of theatre and in some cases even the audience. This approach encourages diverse perspectives and celebrates difference. But strategies are needed to bring different perspectives together. Carl: 'When making a piece of theatre, I don't start with the idea for the final piece the final story, because when you are working collaboratively it is very difficult to agree on what is the right starting point. This is why I start with taking everybody's ideas, allowing everyone to respond in different ways and instead of discounting anybody's idea as false, I build on children's ideas. We swap ideas. So maybe we start with a photograph of a calm sea; someone responds to that calm sea with a song, a gentle soulful melody and then I might respond to that with a poem. Then we swap, and both do something with each other's work, the ideas from the other person become the new stimulus, and you create maybe another song or poem, or add more verses, create a dance, add lyrics. Then you swap again. We gradually build up the ideas independently and then at some point we try to combine my poem to which someone else had added some verses to the music and the dance and we bring everything together. Now we have a performance that is a combination of everyone's ideas interwoven together, which is richer, more complicated and more stimulating than if we had simply decided to follow a script about some people lost at sea. This form of theatre is about encouraging diversity and creativity.'

'Scripted theatre gives opportunities too but tends to be more skills-based. In the *Jungle Book*, because of my relationship with the students and the way that I approach working with the script, I was always asking for feedback from the audience (the children that were not on stage at any particular time), instead of me just giving notes to the cast. The children were encouraged to self-direct their scenes. You allow students to inquire and discover. Students then feel engaged as they have a stake in the making of it. '

The world's a stage, how about our schools?

So where was Daniela in all this? Her initial apprehension had been noticed by Carl, so he involved her, just like all the others in the trust-building exercises. When these did not have an immediate effect, or at least not as much as was required to make Daniela an active participant in the process, Carl intervened. A small push did the trick. He took Daniela aside and told her that she needed to be brave. That without her taking action herself there would be no reaction. That she should give the others the opportunity to learn from her, from her energy, from her physicality and that they in turn could help her with remembering her lines and 'prompt' whenever it was needed. Messages for trust and risk-taking with a safety net supplied, it worked. Buoyed up by the feedback she received when acting out an angry wolf, Daniela continued to develop her role from strength to strength. No prompting was needed at any stage during the performance, Wolf 3 had become Daniela's own creation....

Little did we know, that when we signed our daughter up for *Jungle Book*, she would be benefiting from an approach that covered trust building, active engagement, community building, risk-taking strategies and collaborative theatre making. She learned and acquired a large range of transversal skills essential to building independence. Its effect on Daniela

raises the question why theatre or at least theatre-making practices do not form a larger part of school curricula.



If it's true that 'all the world's a stage',³ Carl found a way of bringing the stage into Daniela's world and answered our quest for inclusion, challenge and success. More schools should follow the act.

Author

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³ William Shakespeare – *As You Like It*

⁴ <http://l4wb.org/#/en/home>

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Strategies for discussing and managing power dynamics in intergenerational groups

By Bijan Kimiagar & Ayşenur Ataman

Introduction

Civil associations are critical to the successful functioning of democracies. Civil associations provide the 'networks of civic engagement' within which reciprocity is learned and enforced, trust is generated, and communication and patterns of collective action are facilitated (Putnam, 1995). However, some individuals experience greater challenges to engage in civil and political activities, to freely express their views, and to contribute to decision-making on matters that affect them.

The question of whether or not certain people have the capacity to take part in different levels of governance has been debated since the birth of democracy. Although the range of people taking part in democratic processes has widened, children are still denied opportunities. An obvious example includes age limits on voting, which is a minimum of 18 years of age in a majority of countries, and 16 years of age in a small minority.¹

Global recognition of children's right to form associations is of fairly recent origin with the nearly universal ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; UN General Assembly, 1989). Since its adoption in 1989, it has been ratified by all members of the United Nations except the United State of America, making it the most widely and rapidly ratified international human rights treaty in history. The UNCRC is a legally binding instrument setting out the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of children. It is a global tool created to ensure that children are protected and can freely

¹ In Austria, Brazil, Cuba, Guernsey, Isle of Man, Jersey and Nicaragua, the voting age is 16. See <http://chartsbin.com/view/re6>

voice their concerns (Alaimo and Klug, 2002). And it has brought ‘a qualitative transformation of the status of children as the holders of rights’ (Alston and Tobin, 2005).

The UNCRC brings attention not only to children’s nurturance rights, but also to their participation rights. For instance, Article 15 of the Convention states: *State parties recognize the rights of the child to freedom of association and to freedom of peaceful assembly*. Presumably, children exercise this and other participation rights, such as freedom of thought or religion, in ways appropriate with their age (Helwig, 2006) and evolving capacities (Lansdown, 2005). Working children’s unions and child rights’ clubs around the world are excellent examples of groups of children who come together to address mutual challenges that they face (Kimiagar and Hart, 2016). These children’s associations represent part of a larger spectrum of settings where children come together to address their needs, some with greater and lesser degrees of adult involvement and power sharing (Kimiagar, 2016).

Although some children’s associations operate autonomously from the influence of adults, many include partnerships with adults and are, in fact, intergenerational. These intergenerational associations have complex power dynamics because the challenges of creating equity across age groups intersect with other aspects of social power, such as gender norms and class/caste dynamics. In some instances, adult power holders may even hinder, rather than foster, younger group members’ meaningful participation through opaque decision-making processes. For example, adults might have fiduciary responsibilities that young people are legally barred from having, therefore, adults will need to fulfil the challenging role of negotiating how to inform and involve young people in appropriate ways.

Below, we highlight some tools and strategies intergenerational groups may use to critically evaluate their participatory qualities. We draw examples from our experiences conducting workshops with intergenerational participants using activities from the Article 15 Resource Kit (crc15.org/kit).

Article 15 Resource Kit

The tools in the Article 15 Resource Kit were co-developed by members of child and youth associations around the world alongside researchers and practitioners from the Article 15 Project, a global partnership between members of [Save the Children](#), [World Vision](#), [UNICEF](#), and the [Children’s Environments Research Group](#), which was the coordinating partner. The purpose of the Article 15 Project is three fold: (1) raising awareness about Article 15 of the UNCRC; (2) developing tools for the establishment, management, and sustainability of child-managed groups; and (3) supporting children and adults to work in partnership by designing a process that strengthens their understanding and respect for one another.

The Resource Kit is made up of over 20 activities organised into 11 modules. The activities are highly visual and tactile, and embody methods to generate data about group

functioning. Some incorporate drama and movement, and others are adaptations of well-known methods, such as body mapping (Hart, Rajbhandary, and Khatiwada, 2001; Feinstein and O’Kane, 2005; O’Kane and Feinstein, 2008). Below we provide an overview of three activities we recommend as an entry point for groups to discuss power dynamics: the *Good Group/Bad Group Drama*, the *Organizational Diagram*, and the *Decision-making Chart*. These sketches provide only an overview of each tool. Step-by-step instructions are available in the modules of the resource kit.

Good/Group Bad Group Drama (Module 3, Tool 3)

Theatre allows group members to express feelings and ideas that are sometimes difficult to explain during group discussions. The *Good Group/Bad Group Drama* activity invites participants to think and act creatively about what it means to organise a group in ways that are effective, inclusive, and fair, as well as ways that are not. Group members divide into two or more smaller groups. At least one small group performs a brief skit about how a ‘good group’ manages itself. Another small group creates a brief skit about a group that does not manage itself well, a ‘bad group.’ Each group performs their skit for each other, and there is a collective discussion among all the participants after each performance about what made the group in the skit either a ‘good group’ or a ‘bad group.’ We recommend recording the key messages from this discussion on one or more sheets of flipchart paper and displaying each (for the remainder of the workshop or indefinitely) for all group members to see and reflect on.

The Organisational Diagram (Module 6, Tool 10)

In the Organisational Diagram activity, participants think about the structure of their organisation in terms of group roles and how members of their group communicate. Participants use small pieces of coloured construction paper with printed silhouettes of gender normative feminine and masculine figures (see Figure 1). There are four feminine figures and four masculine figures representing different generational categories: child, adolescent, youth, and adult. There are no specific ages associated with these four categories, but participants typically use the following ranges: 12 years and younger for children, 13 to 17 years of age for adolescents, 18 to 25 years of age for youth, and 26 years and older for adult women and men. The silhouette figures are printed on brightly coloured paper so that the age and gender differences may be seen a few feet away. The activity invites participants to arrange the figures in a way that represents how the group organises itself and to draw lines with arrows that represent relationships between members, such as who coordinates with one another, who provides instruction for tasks, or who is responsible for group finances (see Figure 2).

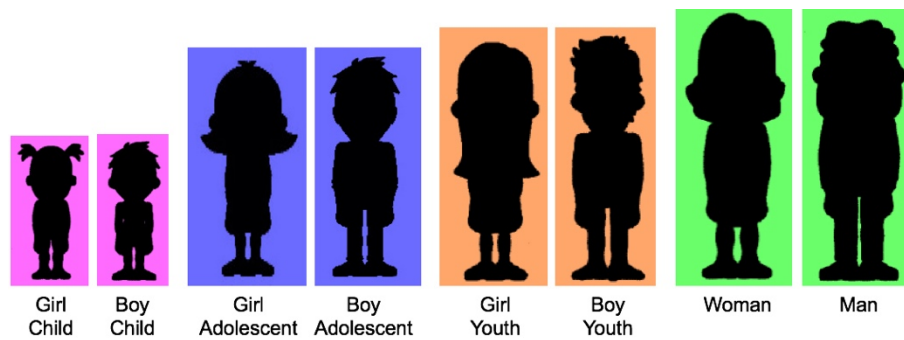


Figure 1. Colour-coded silhouette figures

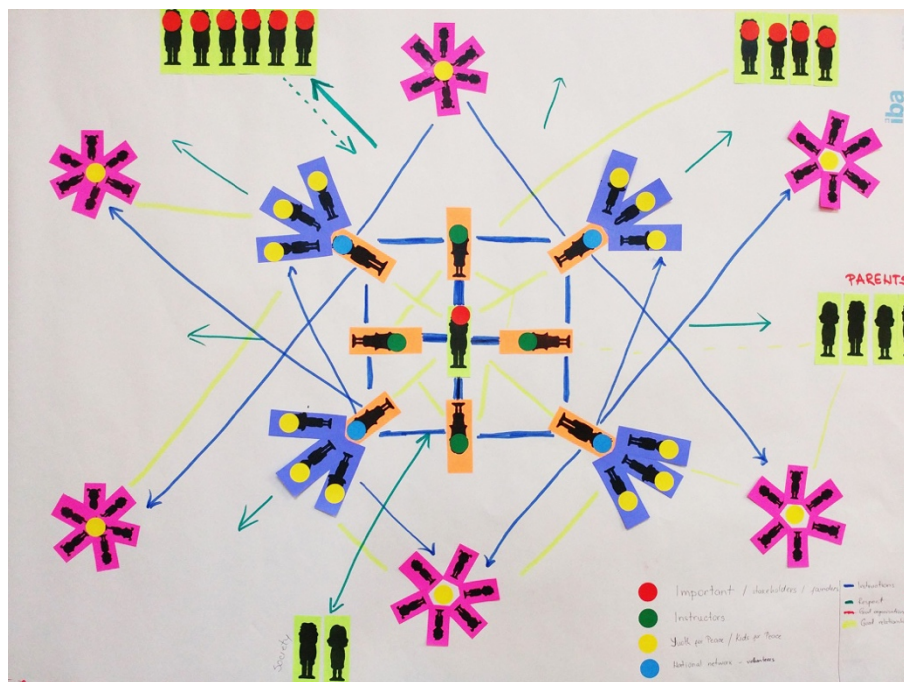


Figure 2. Organisational Diagram Example

This activity is beneficial to intergenerational groups because it generates a visual representation of the invisible structures of power according to age, gender, and other factors. These power structures are known and felt, but may not be discussed in explicit terms. The diagram is a census of the group and allows for making the power structure explicit in a way that minimises potential conflicts when discussing power imbalances. This is because the discussions are based on data about the group and not only members' opinions. For example, if all of the elected leaders of a group are boys and men, but there are also many girls and women in the group, then there are clearly unequal outcomes based on gender. A group may conduct similar analyses based on age groups or other factors relevant to a particular group.

The Decision-making Chart (Module 6, Tool 11)

The Decision-making Chart is a way to visualise the level of influence members have on specific group decisions. Group members might examine numerous questions, such as:

'Who is in charge of group finances?' and 'Who decides the group's activities and agenda?' The chart is a simple matrix with these questions in the row headings, and the different demographic subgroups in the column headings: young girls, young boys, adolescent girls, adolescent boys, youth girls, youth boys, adult women, and adult men. Participants may, of course, modify these column headings in ways that are appropriate for their group membership, and they might even decide to include columns for specific people or groups, such as an external organisation that provides material, financial, or human resources. Group members then discuss how many individuals in each subgroup participate in the decision listed in each row, and they place small, round, coloured stickers in the box according to a colour-coded system. Red stickers signify that no one in this age and gender group participates in making this decision. Yellow represents that some members participate in the decision. Green represents that all members participate. And blue represents that leaders in this age and gender group have particular influence in this decision (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Decision-making Chart Example

The activity generates a visual representation of group decision-making in a relatively short period of time. Group members can quickly analyse which decisions are more or less inclusive, as well as identify which members of their group have more or less influence in decisions. The interpretation of data is tailored to the context of the group, which means there are no correct or incorrect answers. For example, while a diagram might show that adult women and men do not participate in many decisions, such as making an agenda for weekly activities, this may be preferred if the group strives for younger children to develop their agenda autonomously. However, if this is not the goal, then the same data highlight an area for needed improvement.

Strategies for using these tools with intergenerational groups

Setting the scene for thinking about internal structures of groups, having discussions about the internal power dynamics of groups is not a common practice. In fact, many of the dozens of groups we have trained to facilitate these tools tell us that our workshop was the first time they have reflected on the internal power dynamics of their group. This is not surprising to us. Groups often focus on achieving their members' collective goals rather than discussing how their group's power dynamic lubricates or hinders the decision-making process. For this reason, it is crucial to offer an opportunity to get participants in the mindset of reflecting critically and constructively on aspects of the internal functioning of a group before discussing underlying power dynamics.

In our experience, the most effective way to get into the mindset is through a drama activity, and we recommend using the *Good Group/Bad Group Drama*. This activity is especially useful for balancing intergenerational power dynamics because it puts everyone into an equally powerful and vulnerable position of performing in front of an audience.

In this activity, participants who perform what it means to be a 'good group' often depict scenes of members listening to one another, inviting marginalised members of society to join their meeting, and providing support to group members who need help. Performers of 'bad groups' typically depict chaotic meetings with members shouting at one another or even display verbal or physical violence. Interestingly, audience members identify both good and bad qualities in both 'good' and 'bad' groups. We have seen, for example, a 'bad group' with an authoritarian leader. Fed up with the leader's behaviour, the 'bad group' members collectively decided to walkout and form a new group. While the 'bad group' actors may have intended the dissolution of the groups as a failure, others might see the collective rejection of unfair power dynamics as a success. In this light, it is possible to see how the line between a 'good group' and 'bad group' may be blurred. Such scenarios set the scene to discuss the disorderliness of a group's internal power dynamics.

Working in teams and presenting to one another

The tools in the Article 15 Resource Kit are most useful for critical self-reflection in groups, meaning all members of the group participate in the activities together. This becomes challenging for groups with many members. In these situations, it is best to divide the group into smaller teams to complete the activities. The divided teams can be created randomly or intentionally for comparing the perspectives of different types of group members. For example, groups might work in small teams according to gender (girls/women versus boys/men), age (younger members versus older members), or roles (executive members versus general members). Ideally, these teams are made up of no more than 10 people.

There are at least two major benefits of dividing group members into smaller teams that create their own drama, diagram, or chart. First, it provides greater opportunities for more members to have their voice heard in discussions. Second, splitting groups by gender, age,

group roles, or other demographics allows the perspectives from these subgroups to coalesce before presenting to others.

An effective strategy for sharing Organisational Diagrams and Decision-making Charts is to display them on all the walls in a room, like an art gallery, and allow time for participants in the activity to visit with each. At least one representative stands next to the diagram or chart that their small group created, and the remaining members of other groups wander around the gallery and ask questions (see Figure 4). The diagrams and charts provide a physical reference point for discussion, and through this process of asking questions, organisations discover ways that their group could be more inclusive, transparent, and fair in sharing information and decision-making.



Figure 4. Organisational Diagram Gallery

Participation barriers based on language and ability

Typically, group members share a common language. However, we have also modified workshops at international meetings for participants who speak different languages. The best strategies for handling interpretation will vary according to the time and human resources available. Interpretation is not just about translating from one language to another. It involves careful attention to the perspectives of the speaker. We highly recommend providing professional interpretation services when conducting a workshop on these tools with participants who do not share a common language. And for brief activities during multi-lingual workshops, we even discourage participants from using spoken language at all. There are a number of warm-up activities that facilitators may use that explicitly prohibit speech. For example, we have asked groups of about 30 people to organise themselves into a line or circle alphabetically according to their first names or chronologically according to the month and day or their birthdate. It is surprising how quickly a group discovers ways to accomplish this task without words. It is not without a challenge, but it is this challenge that puts everyone on a more or less equal level of capacity to convey the same type of information. The key, here, is to use this task not only as an energising activity, but also as a connection to discussions about intergenerational group dynamics. Groups with members of different ages inherently represent a range of

capacities. The goal of a speechless activity is to focus participants' attention on our personal privileges and disadvantages when we enter into a shared space. This goes beyond language and includes different mental and physical abilities as well. With the exception of some of the visual components of the methods we have described above, all of the activities may be modified to more appropriately address a group's range of capacities. It is important for group facilitators to be sensitive to participants' needs and collaborate on finding appropriate ways to adapt the activities.

Adapting activities for groups with varying levels of management by children, youth and adults

The activities in the Article 15 Resource Kit were co-developed with and for members of child and youth associations. Therefore, the instructions for the activities are tailored to groups managed by children and youth in partnership with adults. There are varying degrees of how a group might be managed by children, youth or adults, and it is not necessary that a group be a specific type in order to use the tools. We have seen school teachers use the tools to visualise and evaluate school administrations. In fact, we have even seen examples of adult workshop participants adapting the tools to examine the organisational structures and decision-making practices of groups entirely comprised of and managed by adults, such as an industrial design team at a college. In these situations, it is critical that participants document the ways they adapt the tools to fit their particular needs. In most cases, this means including information to help others interpret the silhouette figures and symbols they use, similar to a legend on a map. The tools may not account for all the needs of all groups, but they are flexible and bend to creative redesign.

Conclusion

In this article, we have shared our views about the important roles of international civil society associations, especially those tailored to children and youth, in a larger fabric of a vibrant democratic society. Systematically studying intergenerational groups is essential for addressing issues that affect all members of society because these groups are not exempt from the social norms that shape prejudices based on age, gender, ability, class/caste or other demographics. In fact, these settings have the dangerous potential to reproduce harmful power dynamics that may even contrast a group's formally stated vision of inclusion and non-discrimination. We conclude here with three recommendations for the frame of mind that groups should utilise when embarking on a journey of identifying and resolving harmful power dynamics in intergenerational groups.

The need for continuous self-reflection even in the best groups

An essential group characteristic required to engage in the process we outline above is openness to self-criticism. A dangerous group quality is a sentiment that the group is operating optimally and there is no need for improvement. Even if this might be generally true, continuous monitoring and evaluation of a group's governance is necessary since group goals and activities invariably change over time. Even when most members are content with the strategies they have developed to ensure that all members' opinions are

considered in matters that affect them, new members or younger members may not be well-informed about the organisational structure and decision-making processes of a group. Regular checkpoints, either through open-ended discussions or, preferably, facilitated use of the activities we share above, will help identify and resolve issues as they arise and before intractable conflicts between members develop.

The need for adults to recognise their role in groups, even if they are mostly child-managed

There is a tendency for adults to downplay their role in groups that are mainly managed by children or youth. While this may be well-intentioned humility, it may also be dishonest and obfuscate the true group power dynamics. There is nothing wrong with adults influencing the organisational structures and decision-making processes of child and youth associations, as long as this influence is welcomed by the young people and to a degree that is previously agreed upon. In fact, our experience has been that it is within child and youth associations that young people have meaningful and supportive relationships with adults who are not authority figures in other realms of their lives. This creates incredible opportunities for intergenerational exchanges that build mutual respect and understanding. The key is an unflinching honesty about the balance of power between the younger and older members of a group.

The need to recognise child and youth associations as vital threads in the fabric of civil society

We conclude with the same argument with which we began our discussion: civil associations are a critical component in the fabric of a vibrant, democratic society. There is a need, however, to ensure that adult-managed associations and institutions view child and youth associations as vital threads in this fabric. The distinction between adult associations and associations managed by and for young people is not always clear. There are, at times, pathways from associations of young people into counterpart adult-managed associations. There are also intergenerational associations that strive to be inclusive of a wider range of ages. Whatever the situation, as long as harmful social norms about gender, age, and other demographic statuses persist, every member of a group must be invited into discussions on how best to organise themselves in these civil associations. It is only with a recognition of the inherent power imbalances between generations that these associations might be more effective at accomplishing their goals.

Authors

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Hearing All Voices – Transforming the Lives of Vulnerable Youth: The power of participation

By Carolyn Conway, Grazyna Bonati, Liz Arif-Fear, Tricia Young

Introduction

Through the power of rights-based, participatory, student-focused learning, disadvantaged¹ and vulnerable teenagers at risk of becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training), significantly transformed their lives for the better. Child to Child's London-based project [Hearing All Voices](#) worked in secondary schools and Colleges of Further Education² with young people from a range of marginalised groups. These included migrants, asylum seekers and refugees (MARs), students with disabilities and special educational needs (SEN), low-achievers and those from low income families. What they shared in common, was a sense of disengagement from parents, teachers, classmates and wider communities. *Hearing All Voices* enabled these students to take more control over their lives and build a better future for themselves. The project led to substantive transformations academically, socially and emotionally, equipping students with the 'soft skills' more likely to lead to employment and improved life chances overall. Teachers' professional practice was also positively impacted as they were supported to deepen their understanding of how to facilitate meaningful participation of young people and see for themselves why working in this way unlocks potential.

¹ The definition of disadvantage in the UK education system is any child who qualifies for free school meals or has done at any point in the last six years. However, for this project, disadvantaged students are identified as: migrants, asylum seekers and refugees (MARs) and those at risk of becoming NEET.

² Further education (FE) colleges in the UK offer education in addition to that received at secondary school often with a vocational focus. They also provide ESOL (English for speakers of Other Languages) classes for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

Hearing All Voices offers insight into what can happen when there is a radical shift in the relationships between adults and young people, a shift which disrupts the traditional power dynamics typically found in educational settings.

Meaningful participation of children and young people

Meaningful participation is central to the ethos and success of *Hearing All Voices*. It is a right set out in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)³ which calls for adults to listen to young people and to take their views seriously in all matters that affect them. In order to fully engage children and young people in meaningful forms of participation, they must be included and actively involved in decision-making and power-sharing processes and structures. The greater their involvement, the greater the benefits and simultaneously the impact of learning.⁴ Activities which simply involve children *taking part* or those where children are *manipulated* to represent adults' views or fulfil adult agendas are not considered genuinely participatory and would not produce the same results.⁵ There is considerable evidence to suggest that the role of the adult facilitator is central to the achievement of quality children and young people's participation.⁶ *Hearing All Voices* equips adults with the vital competences to successfully support quality participation.

Participation in practice: *Hearing All Voices*

By promoting students' voices through meaningful participation, *Hearing All Voices* (HAV) aims to engage young people as active citizens. In so doing, it increases academic achievement and enables them to develop 'soft skills' that enhance employability – Agency, Communication and Teamwork (ACT) – thus ultimately improving their life chances.⁷ In this way *Hearing All Voices* is designed to directly tackle the growing inequality in life chances for disadvantaged young people and the culture of low expectations they routinely experience.⁸

3 UNCRC Article 12 (respect for the views of the child) states that: 'Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously'. Available at: https://353ld710iigr2n4po7k4kgvv-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC_summary.pdf

4 Hart, R. (1992). Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship UNICEF

5 Skelton, T. (2007). 'Children, Young People, UNICEF and Participation', *Children's Geographies*, 5(1-2), pp.165-181.

6 Wyness, M. (2013). 'Global standards and deficit childhoods: the contested meaning of children's participation', *Children's Geographies*, 11(3), pp. 340-350.

7 See The Sutton Trust-EEF Teaching and Learning Toolkit available via:

<http://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/toolkit/> for an accessible summary of research outlining the evidence for the positive impact of social and emotional learning on improving achievement and life chances of disadvantaged students.

8 Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (October 2014): 'Cracking the code: how schools can improve social mobility'. Retrieved from <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/pdfs/2014-soc-mob-child-pov.pdf>

Project activities were piloted over three years (2013-2016) with eight groups of 13 to 17 year-olds, a total of 126 students. Each group met once a week for approximately 18 weeks. It became abundantly clear over the course of the pilot that both adults and young people found meaningful participation extremely challenging. Teachers struggled to create participatory spaces and adopt appropriate skills and attitudes to effectively support participatory processes. Young people initially lacked both the *hard* and *soft* skills needed to maximise their participation and also displayed a deep-rooted mistrust of adults' promises to listen to them and support them to take action. As one 16-year-old participant put it:

'We expected just a 'normal' project – to talk about it. Not to actually DO anything!'

To address these issues, a two-phase approach was adopted. The first phase focused on equipping adults with non-directional coaching skills to enable them to facilitate and support meaningful participation; in the second phase, the adults used these new skills to facilitate students' participation in a cycle of Child to Child's Step Approach, participatory action research intended to bring about positive social change. Training materials to support these phases were co-produced in partnership with adult and student stakeholders.

Phase 1: Prepare to ACT – adults were trained using specially developed HAV training materials. These materials contained reflective professional development modules on applying non-directive coaching techniques in the classroom, which aimed to improve teachers' ability to work in partnership with young people and enhance levels of participation. Teachers were immediately able to apply their newly acquired skills in supporting young people to *Prepare to ACT* and develop their Agency, Communication and Teamwork skills. This initial stage provided both adults and young people with the necessary *ACT* skills to implement Phase 2 of the project.

Phase 2: The Child to Child Step Approach. Students took part in one cycle of Child to Child's award-winning participatory action learning approach.⁹ Following the steps shown in Figure 1, young people select an issue of concern, take action to address it and bring about positive change in their lives, schools and the wider community.

⁹ UNICEF awarded Child to Child the *Maurice Pate Award for Innovation in Education* describing the Step Approach as a revolutionary way of enabling communities to improve their lives by engaging children. It has been used successfully over the last 30 years impacting thousands of children in over 70 countries.

CHILD TO CHILD STEP APPROACH

Living Place

(school, home or community)

Learning Place

(classroom)

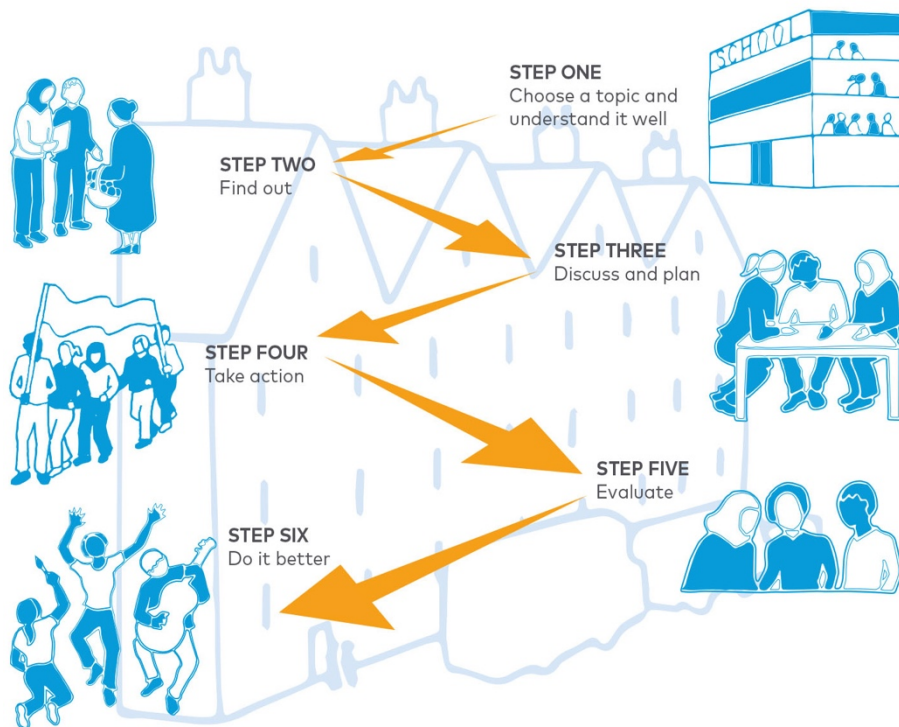


Figure 1: The Child to Child Step Approach

In addition to utilising and building on students' ACT skills, the process also developed a range of other skills: language skills; learning skills such as researching, reasoning, coming to conclusions; and life skills¹⁰ such as problem-solving, decision-making, critical and creative thinking, empathy, self-awareness, negotiation and building relationships with others.

Teachers drew on the bespoke training materials, which contained ideas for activities for each step in the process.

Each group of students created their own journey following these steps:

Step 1 – Choose a topic

School staff conducted a range of participatory activities to help students think about the issues directly affecting them and the wider community, both locally and internationally. This produced a great deal of interesting discussion, even among students who had previously struggled to communicate effectively in a school setting. It also provided staff with real insight into the views and lives of their students.

¹⁰ Life skills have been defined by the World Health Organisation as "abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life'."

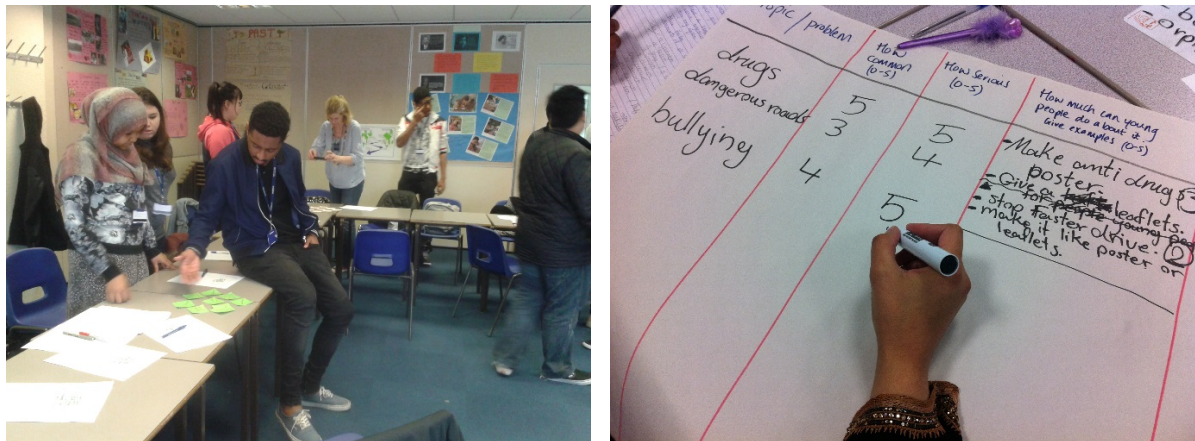


Figure 2: Students discuss their choice of topic and rank ideas

Students identified and addressed issues such as: knife crime, safety on the street, bullying, homelessness and the challenges faced by Ebola-affected orphans in Sierra Leone.

Step 2 – Find out

Students conducted desk-based research and also designed and carried out surveys in their schools and in the community to learn more about their chosen topics.



Figure 3: Year 8 students (12–13 year olds) conduct street surveys to gather local residents' opinions on street safety in their area

By this point in the project, students were becoming much more committed and enthusiastic as they began to trust that what they were doing would have an impact in the real world. This had a positive knock-on effect on their relationships with their teachers and support staff as they became more trusting and increasingly more confident. It was the first time most of the students had ever interviewed members of the public. It was a nerve-racking but enjoyable experience!

Step 3 – Plan action

Students shared the information they had collected in Step 2 and together developed action plans to address their issue. Students further developed their ACT skills as they found they needed to compromise and cooperate with each other when working together. They demonstrated team-working skills well beyond their capacities at the start of the project. The young people came up with a vast array of inventive and creative ideas to address the issues they identified.

Step 4 – Take action

Some of the actions taken are described below.

- Homelessness

After learning about the needs of rough sleepers at a local charity, students raised over £100 through a film screening at their college and selling homemade refreshments. They also collected and donated 20 bags of second-hand clothes for service users.



Figure 4: Delivering clothes collected for a local charity supporting rough sleepers in London

- Bullying in schools

On discovering that bullying was extremely widespread among their peers at college, three groups set out to address this issue by creating Facebook pages with original and found material and launching awareness-raising poster campaigns. One group also designed and delivered a successful interactive anti-bullying workshop for their college.



Figure 5: Anti-bullying poster designed by students

- Children in difficult circumstances (Ebola-affected orphans)

Students from migrant and asylum-seeking backgrounds, some of whom have come to the UK as unaccompanied minors, decided to focus on an issue that resonated with them: the challenges facing Ebola-affected children in Sierra Leone – ‘because they’re less well-off than us.’ Through the Child to Child (CtC) [Pikin to Pikin Tok](#) project, they learned about an orphanage in a remote area of Sierra Leone. They discovered that all of the 59 children living in the orphanage (all of whom had lost parents/caregivers to Ebola) wanted above all else to go to school and, if possible, have running water at the orphanage. The students launched a fundraising campaign, holding a raffle, requesting donations for raffle prizes from local shops and selling tickets at the college. They set up a stall at the college International Day, selling homemade food and drink, giving manicures and engaging people in a presentation about the plight of these orphans. They also designed a logo and T-shirt and made a video with messages of support for the children. Raising a grand total of £750 they were able to pay for a full year of schooling for the children and have sparked interest in other schools regarding fundraising to build a well and improve the orphanage buildings. The children in Sierra Leone subsequently sent back a video to thank the students for their efforts.



Figure 6: Fundraising for the orphanage (left) and children at the orphanage in Sierra Leone (right)

All of the students were immensely proud of their achievements – which certainly surpassed the expectations of often sceptical teachers.

Step 5 – Evaluate

Various reflective activities were conducted to help students evaluate their work, their level of participation in the project and to decide if they needed to take more action.

Step 6 – Do it better

The students supporting the children in Sierra Leone were concerned about the project's lack of sustainability and wrote a letter to a number of international aid organisations operating in Sierra Leone requesting funding for the orphanage.

*Impact – the difference **Hearing All Voices** makes*

Although students came from diverse backgrounds, each student's level of personal growth and success was clear to see, in addition to the enormous change in teachers' attitudes and practices. Changes were evident on multiple levels:

Transformation in young people's lives

At the outset, some of the participating students were extremely disengaged, with low levels of attainment, negative attitudes and poor life and employment prospects. Participating in the project enabled them to become more confident and resilient and to develop a sense of agency. One teacher noted:

'Some students seem completely changed characters.'

Learning and study skills improved, as students became more involved in their projects, developing IT, literacy, numeracy, research and business skills as they set up Facebook pages, sold raffle tickets and food, designed logos, slogans, posters, leaflets and T-shirts. Students became more engaged in and committed to their studies. One student realised he had not been applying himself at college and re-enrolled for the following year.

As students became increasingly involved in project activities, they also developed a range of *life skills* – communication, decision-making, problem-solving, critical thinking and creative thinking, enabling them to achieve greater levels of participation and ownership as they selected their own topics, conducted research, made their own decisions concerning what action to take and gradually assumed more responsibility for what they did – once again boosting their self-confidence and sense of agency. Students realised that they were capable of more than they had thought and both students and teachers were amazed by the change and development in the students' abilities and attitudes towards work. Most evident of all, was students' increasing levels of *resilience* and *confidence*:

'They are starting to believe in themselves and that what they have to say is important enough to express openly. Their self-esteem has increased greatly – they are feeling good about themselves.' (Teacher)

'Everything is possible if you try hard ... don't give up. We are more confident.' (Student)

Changes were particularly noticeable in female students who were initially side-lined in the group:

'Girls started taking an active part, contributing their own ideas, both in all-girls and mixed groups.' (Teacher)

There was also greater inclusion and marked impact on learners with special educational needs. A student on the autistic spectrum worked cooperatively with others to design the poster in Figure 5. Two students --twins – with multiple health issues and learning difficulties, attended and contributed to a great many sessions despite generally poor attendance at the college. They cited the project as the only reason they continued to attend after their exams had finished.

- *Transformation in young people's relationships with each other*

Improved communication and team working skills are the central focus of the first phase of *HAV: Prepare to ACT*. The way in which students utilised and developed such skills was evident throughout their implementation of the Step Approach. Relationships improved in even the most challenging of groups as individuals pulled together to achieve a common purpose. Many students initially found it very difficult to express an opinion and listen to others but the project helped to develop their abilities to express themselves. One teacher noted:

'This was initially a very hostile group. ... They would not speak to each other at first, but this term they have really changed ... they became delightful, with greatly improved communication skills, much greater collaboration and improving sense of agency.' (Teacher)

Students were able to work together more effectively, using and improving their newly developed communication and teamwork skills.

- *Transformation in young people's relationships with adults*

Students moved from being highly dependent on teachers and adult facilitators to becoming both significantly more autonomous and able to work collaboratively, only seeking assistance from adults when necessary. Students were aware of this shift in autonomy. Intergenerational relationships became more trusting. This had a substantive impact on behavior in the classroom:

'(I learned how to) get support and help when I need them.' (Student)

'I am freer, more relaxed about student behaviour – I can maintain discipline without being so controlling.' (Teacher)

- *Transformation in attitudes of adults to young people*

Adults' attitudes towards their students changed completely. They developed greater appreciation of the capacities of young people and were more willing to listen to their students and take their views seriously. Greater mutual respect was evident. After some resistance to allowing students more autonomy in one session, a teacher commented with some surprise: *'They are actually quite skilled!'*

- *Transformation in teaching practices in the classroom*

Even very experienced teachers became aware that creating more participatory environments and facilitating participatory activities demanded a significant change from their usual practice in terms of their own attitudes, behaviours, skills and techniques in the classroom. Over the course of the project profound shifts in all these areas were achieved. One college trainer noted:

'Teacher X has changed completely – this project has affected the rest of his teaching – his approach to the students and teaching has changed. He is more confident, more willing to challenge them – more comfortable with them and a much better teacher. He communicates with them better. Their expectations of what they can do have been raised. Teaching style has changed from teacher giving out information to sharing working in partnership, exploring things in common.'

The greatest change in teachers' techniques was in being less *directive* and more willing to share power with students:

'I've learnt to step back and let students drive the process.'

'I have become less controlling, allowing the students to participate more.'

- *Transformation in relationships with the wider community*

An especially valuable change was the experiences students gained communicating with *members of the public* outside the classroom and a greater *sense of empathy* towards others. Not only did teachers notice students being '*nicer and more caring towards each other*', but students started thinking about helping others more vulnerable than themselves outside of their own college:

'I liked to help the children. I learnt not to think about myself but to think of others – the poor.' (Student)

In addition to the beneficial impact felt within educational institutions as relationships strengthened between students and educators, relationships with the wider community were strengthened through greater engagement both locally and internationally. Students became more active as citizens through their involvement in the project, whether engaging with local issues such as safety on the street or the plight of rough sleepers, or international issues such as supporting Ebola-affected children/orphans in Sierra Leone. Several of the adults who engaged with participating students commented on how impressed they were with the students' levels of professionalism and desire to seriously engage with the selected issues. The long-term benefits of the project were wide ranging:

'Negotiation skills, overall confidence dealing with people, respect for others, teamwork, awareness of charity work and contribution to society ... and an unforgettable experience!' (Teacher)

Conclusions: the way forward

Hearing All Voices demonstrates what can be achieved when staff and students have the skills, will and confidence to engage students in meaningful participation. It highlights the impacts that such activities have on students' academic, personal (social and emotional) development and well-being and on teachers' professional practice. Children and young people are equipped to become active citizens capable of making a real difference to their own lives and the lives of others. As one teacher summarised: '*Great concept. What education needs! It prepares them for life!*'

If participatory programmes such as *Hearing All Voices* were introduced at an earlier stage in education, could they prevent children from becoming disengaged in the first place? This is a question we should consider. If – as the evidence from *Hearing All Voices* would suggest – such participatory approaches are so successful, what impact could they have on younger children?

Proactively adopting early interventions such as *Hearing All Voices* could enable society to cut short – or ideally, prevent entirely – the cycle in which many young people find themselves trapped: emerging from schooling without the necessary skills to enter the labour market and/or becoming involved in anti-social and even criminal behaviour as a consequence of having become so marginalised by their experiences. As educators, citizens and duty bearers with a responsibility for upholding children's participation rights, we must

ensure that children can influence and play an active role in decisions which affect them. We have an obligation to fulfil our duties towards children and young people to enable them to find and use their voices, gain the skills they need and become fully engaged active citizens now in preparation for adulthood. In this way we might break the pattern of disengagement and disadvantage, unlocking the potential of all students and enabling them to fully realise their rights.

Authors

Carolyn Conway designed and manages the *Hearing All Voices* programme. She has been working to promote the rights and participation of children and young people since 2006 when her association with [Child to Child](#) began. She is especially committed to transforming working practices in schools to make them more participatory environments in which young people have a voice.

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Making the youth's voice heard: The story of a child can change the world

By Tako Rietveld

Children changed my life

Children changed the life of journalist Tako Rietveld (37). Since last year he is the first correspondent exclusively for children. He travels the world to make their voices heard. 'They know how the world should be. Listen!'



With children you can expect the unexpected

The sun sets in Catania, Sicily, Italy. Ayuba (14) gives me a hug. 'Thank you Tako. Thank you for listening to me.' The boy arrived in Europe by boat from Libya. Alone, like thousands of other children and teenagers. Fleeing from war, looking for a better future. We see them in

the newspapers every week, every day. We see them in the headlines of the TV-news. Hardly ever do we hear them telling their stories themselves. 'Thank you for hearing my voice', Ayuba continues. 'More people should be talking with us, instead of talking about us.' Goosebumps all over my arms and back. This is exactly why I started my job as a children's correspondent. Bam, a football hits my head. 'Pay attention', Ayuba laughs. He continues playing soccer with his friends. This is why I love children. You can expect the unexpected.

Children look at the world from a different perspective. Not only because of their height, mostly because they are open-minded, positive and uncomplicated. Their views, their opinions, their unique thoughts make a difference. Then why is it that the world is not listening to children? Why do we see children as cute, ignorant creatures that only like to play? Why do we constantly underestimate them and treat them like secondary citizens?

We can learn so many things from young people. For example, from their brightness, creativity and curiosity. From their honesty, humour and playfulness. And most of all from their positivity, pureness and spontaneity. Children changed the way I look at things. Children changed my life. I know their voices can change the world if we start to see them as competent partners.

Children focus on possibilities

The children's wisdom came to me working as a reporter for the Dutch national children's news called 'Jeugdjournaal', where I started in 2001. Meeting children, listening to them and speaking with them about the world news, that was my every day job. Over those years I met hundreds, maybe thousands of children, mainly in The Netherlands. They surprised me, made me laugh or think. The more I spoke with them, the more I realised their voices make a difference. Speaking to children became a specialty in the almost 15 years I did this amazing job.

A perfect example is my one hand. I was born with a left and without a right hand. With a short arm and a long one, I tell children. Adults usually react with pity. They assume it must be very difficult and ask if I can drive a car or work on a computer. The answer is 'yes' by the way. Children mostly react with curiosity. They want to see and touch and ask if I can put a 3D printed robot-hand on my arm, like Ironman... Children focus on possibilities, while adults look at problems. Another interesting survey was done by asking the question: if you could change one part of your body, add, remove, make it bigger or smaller, what would it be? The adult answer is mainly about belly, breast, nose or ears. Children would like to have wings, spit fire like dragons or run like a cheetah. Still we don't see what children could add to our world.

I remember the world talking about children after hurricane Haiyan in the Philippines. More than half of the victims, hundreds of thousands, were children. Everyone showed their pictures and images. But literally, and I looked everywhere, not one single Filipino child told his or her story. No one asked them a question. It didn't feel right. So I went to my boss and asked him: Why don't we let children all over the world tell their stories? Hear their ideas

and opinions... He told me: 'Great idea Tako, but that's not what we are here for. We are the Dutch News Agency, with a news programme for children. It's not our priority to let them tell their stories.' What could I do?

Everything changed for me in December 2013. I got the chance to go to South Africa, to the funeral of Nelson Mandela. There, in the small village of Qunu, where Mandela grew up, I met 13-year-old Vuyo. He was helping his father with the preparations for the funeral. This South African boy spoke so passionately about being in this place on this day, I was touched by his dynamism, by the sparkle in his eyes. Vuyo showed me the place where Nelson Mandela used to play when he was young. The sliding stone. Mandela later said his time here, as a child, was the happiest time of his life. While I was watching the children play and the world leaders arrive for the funeral, Vuyo said something to me that changed my life. 'There are so many journalists here. Hundreds of reporters, correspondents, from all over the world. You are the only one listening to us. No one else is taking us seriously. Why isn't there a special reporter for us children?' When I realised what this young African boy was saying, I decided to quit my job. To become the first correspondent exclusively for children in the world. Vuyo was right: these bright boys and girls need a voice.

'Why should we listen to children?' is a question many adults ask me. 'Children have to listen to us,' they say. 'We have the experience, the education, we know how things work.' And: 'Children have to listen to us. To learn from us.' Fair point. It's totally acceptable, biological reasoning. We humans are very hierarchical. Like monkeys. The experienced adults are the leaders. The little ones just have to watch and learn. So why should we listen to children? Because we are humans, is my answer. It's called civilisation. Because children are part of our society. A very important part. More than half the world's population is younger than 25 years old. It's the largest generation of youth in history. And you wonder why we should listen to them? It makes me very angry. I call it discrimination.

Let youth know their voices matter

Working with children all over the world is a privilege. They are not separated by colour, religion or by being a boy or a girl. They know everyone has the same needs. In a recent world survey children put 'happiness' as the most important thing in life. The world needs to hear these young voices. We need to hear them. And we need to let the youth know their voices matter. Children don't talk about politics, benefits or profits. They speak with their hearts. They are not restrained by the adult way of life. Children are the best free thinkers of the world. They don't have to attend expensive seminars to think 'outside the box'. They are not even in it. The youth communicates in different ways than we did five, ten or twenty years ago. They learn in different ways, they study in different ways and they will work in different ways. That's why we have to start to listen to them now.

'Children in our country don't speak that much,' a journalist from Ghana told me during the course I gave to him and his colleagues. 'They don't have an opinion yet.' We went to a school and he asked the pupils their opinion about how people are treating the environment. No one dared to give an answer. So I stopped him and started to give an introduction in class. 'Hi everyone! I'm Tako from Holland and I'm here to help these guys

from Ghanaian television make a report. We are speaking about the environment and we would like to hear from you what you think about it.' Their faces turned to smiles and they started talking about garbage in the streets, plastic and how they thought their government could change that. With the proper intention, genuine interest and the right introduction, children will share their thoughts, opinions and stories.

An unwritten rule for journalists is, we leave children alone. Unbelievable! You film them all the time, but you cannot talk with them? It makes me so angry. Most journalists, most adults in general, don't have the time, skills and decency to sit down with a child and listen. We speak about the youth all the time. About education, care and protection. We speak about it with specialists, politicians and leaders. But the real experts are the children and youngsters themselves. They have the daily experience and know exactly what's right and wrong. They know what they need, what's best for them and the people around them. Children are specialists in understanding the adult world. They know how the world should be. It's time to really start listening.

Ayuba and his friends are going for an ice-cream after the soccer match in Italy. 'I hate it when people call me refugee,' Ayuba says. 'When someone from Australia comes to Europe, they call him a student and all doors open. Just because I was born in Africa, I have far fewer possibilities in life. It's not fair.' They boys can't believe I came to the south of Italy just to speak to them. It makes them feel important, heard and taken seriously. I tell them my story, why I became the children's correspondent. They share their stories. How they left their countries, how they travelled on big trucks through the desert, how they arrived in a warehouse in Libya. How smugglers with guns took everything from them, how they were stowed on a small ship. Locked up in the hold, so they wouldn't cause trouble. 'There was no drinking water or toilet. Children were crying and throwing up. Everyone was afraid because no one knew how to swim. The boat was rocking from side to side in the waves. There was place for 80 people, but we were with 500 on board. After a few hours the engine broke, we thought we were going to die. Then our boat was discovered by a helicopter and we were rescued. Most people are paying a lot of money to make this trip. An airline ticket is cheaper, but we are not allowed to fly. I don't know who invented these rules. I think it could be a lot less complicated.'

The story of a child can change the world

The story of a child can change the world. There are hundreds of stories about World War Two, for example. One story is the most famous of them all, and that's the story of a child. Everyone knows *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Her story shook the world. It still does. What about other children? In Syria, Gaza, South Sudan... They have stories to tell too. Today's Anne Frank is still hidden.

Everywhere I come children and youngsters are happy to talk to me. In Sierra Leone, in New York and in Lebanon. Society puts children on the side. It's so wrong. This week I was at a primary school, talking with 11-year olds about the refugee crisis. 'It's not a subject to talk about with children,' some adults say. Wake up! Children that age see the news, read the papers, get the reports on Facebook and Instagram, they see the pictures of dead

bodies on the beach. And you don't talk with them about that? If children don't talk about these things with their parents, or with other adults, if they feel no one takes them seriously, who do they go to when they are facing real problems. When they are being bullied, when they are a victim of child abuse...?



Tako interviewing children who work on the fields in Lebanon, with Syria in the background.

By listening to the youth we get to look at things in a different way. We also teach them how to put forward their thoughts and feelings. They gain confidence and develop their identity. If children learn all this at a young age, imagine what that will bring them for the rest of their lives. Imagine what it will bring them, imagine what it will bring you, imagine what it will bring the world. Children force us to think. To explain things in an uncomplicated way. You know how they always ask questions. Why? How? What? And the famous 'why not?' It sometimes drives us crazy. But they force us to cut to the chase, to get to the core. And many times while explaining you realise, 'hm, maybe the kid is right.'

This is why I started to let children all over the world tell their stories. And it's just the beginning. This year we launched [The Youth Foundation](#) with a small group of journalists and other specialists. Our goal is to have a youth correspondent in every country of the world. We exchange stories and bring the youth's voice forward in the media. We teach journalists how to let children tell their stories and we help adults, governments and organisations to listen to the youth.

To wrap up, the world is coping with many problems. Its obvious adults are having big trouble finding solutions. I'm not saying children have all the answers, but I do know they come up with the brightest ideas. I will do everything I can to let the youth tell their stories and let the world realise it's time to listen. Being a children's correspondent is the most beautiful job in the world and everyone I meet, in New York, Brussels or Qunu, agrees it's important. Unfortunately no government, NGO or other organisation is funding us or

paying a salary. Starting this initiative is hard work, a struggle, but it won't take long before the world realises what we are bringing. Of course you can support The Youth Foundation or share this message. And if you think we can help your organisation by bringing in the youth's voice or opinion, you can always contact us. Most of all I'd like to ask you only one thing. It doesn't matter if you're a manager, a politician, a president or a parent. If you speak about children, don't forget to speak with them as well. Please listen to the youth.

Author

Tako Rietveld (37) is a Dutch journalist and the first children's correspondent in the world. He used to be reporter and presenter for the Dutch National News television, now he lets children and teenagers worldwide tell their stories. He also is the founder of The Youth News Foundation.

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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

By Elise Sijthoff



Introduction

Children's vibrant curiosity about the world around them becomes evident – in their exploring fingers and rapt gaze – even before they can speak. Once the words begin to come, questions and observations tumble out at a tempo that adults find hard to keep pace with.

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

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Young children are keen on asking for news – ‘Does Grandma’s new puppy still make puddles on the carpet?’ – as well as eager to share news (‘Our neighbour now walks with a stick’), and often do both at the same time: ‘Why does he walk with a stick? Do many people walk with a stick? Will I walk with a stick one day? Will you? When? Why?’ Adults find it difficult to deal with this stream of ‘news-with-a-very-small-n’ at the same time that they try to protect children from much News-with-a capital-N that appears on television – scenes of bombing, the ravages of natural disasters, starving children in a famine area, reports about maltreated children... The two kinds of news can compete with each other, as when the parent is following the national news on the radio or television in the form (for example) of a new law that has major implications, at the same time that the child pleads, ‘Please don’t listen to that boring stuff, listen – I made a paper aeroplane in school!’ Young children then are engaged with the ‘news’ within their immediate surroundings, whereas adults see this as trivial and ‘childish’ when juxtaposed with ‘News’ of the world and the nation. How can ‘news’ and ‘News’ engage with each other? How can children gradually integrate the two as they gain in years and experience? How can they participate in their local world as well as in the wide world beyond, through such integration? This stream of questions is similar to the flow of queries that children direct to their significant adults, and are the questions that the Children’s International Press Centre addresses.

The Children’s International Press Centre

This unusual Press Centre came into being after the Presidency of the European Union moved – as it does every half year between Member States – to the Netherlands, in January 2016. An Amsterdam-based publisher on children’s rights saw that the Presidency office was located at a historical site in the heart of the city and yet did not reach out in any way to the children in the many schools that were within an easy walk of the site. Surely this was an opportunity for children to engage more closely with decisions that were being made, especially decisions that would affect young citizens like themselves both in the Netherlands and across the European Union?

A class of 11- and 12-year-old children in the final year of a primary school that was located in the lively centre of Amsterdam were mobilised with the active cooperation of their class teacher. The teacher had herself observed with dismay – on her return to work after some years of parental leave – that the educational system had shifted towards a preoccupation with standardised assessment and she was determined instead to continue her focus on each child’s flourishing. Rather than see the emergent Press Centre as an unwanted distraction for her pupils who would soon face the school leaving exams, she felt that the Press Centre would help them maintain the necessary broad orientation and engagement with the world beyond the exam curriculum.

One morning about a month after the Presidency office had opened in Amsterdam, this group of 11 and 12-year olds walked along with the activist publisher and their teacher (as well as some other supportive adults) to the Presidency office where they were only allowed access to the visitors’ centre with the limited information that this provided. (See the press release below.) However, via the publisher who accompanied them, the children received

an encouraging message in the form of a video clip from a woman Member of the European Parliament who told them that she would like to be the first 'children friendly' MEP and asked them to formulate their priorities for MEPs more generally. The children did indeed do this in the months that followed, as will be described later.

But first – and immediately after their walk to the Presidency office in Amsterdam – two of the 12-year olds climbed into a car with the publisher and their teacher and headed for Brussels, to represent their classmates when an office room was selected in the Residence Palace (where many international press agencies are located) to house the Children's International Press Centre. The children weighed the pros and cons of various offices, for example size of office against high rent, and gave their advice in favour of a smaller room that would cost less. During this process, they regularly produced news bulletins for their classmates at home, also by interviewing adult press correspondents and requesting 'tips.' Questions from the children mostly evoked friendly responses, and adults seemed disarmed and 'humanised' by such contact.

Lessons for engaged participation immediately became clear: children of this age are very comfortable behind a microphone, when they have a clear picture of whom they are addressing – in this case their classmates – and when they are supported by trusted adults, here their teacher and the publisher. These two 12-year olds effortlessly adopted techniques that they had seen television journalists use and adapted these techniques to their own purpose and style. Working alongside a familiar friend of the same age or paired with a familiar age mate was a significant part of the process.

These lessons were further underlined when, in the months that followed, the class of 11-year olds formulated their priorities as the woman MEP had asked them to do. They divided into small groups that emphasised, for example, the need to welcome refugee children or the imperative to be protected from drug dealers who moved around the city centre on scooters. They made relevant video clips for the woman MEP, addressing her by name and giving short crisp presentations in the manner of newsroom reporters. They spoke to her in English rather than their native Dutch, thereby entering into a conversation that was European and not national.

A group from the class, accompanied by the publisher, went again to Brussels some months later to attend the launch of an international report on the health behaviour of school-aged children and to interview some of the experts at the event. When reading through the report, one boy was concerned at the findings about maltreatment of children and he investigated the subject further. He and a classmate were later invited by the Mayor of Amsterdam to meet the national task force against child abuse.

These two children returned yet again to Brussels in November 2016, to represent the Children's International Press Centre at an event 'Building the European Parliament, For Children, With Children,' organised by Eurochild and the Universal Education Foundation in advance of International Children's Day, to draw attention to the right of children to be consulted on all issues that concern them, in accordance with the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child. Two other children also represented the Children's

International Press Centre, as 'child mayors' from two Dutch towns, one, an 11-year-old girl who opposed cyber bullying and another girl of similar age who had drawn up an action plan to include refugee children in town activities. During the event in the European Parliament, these four children interviewed Dutch MEPs and later joined 11 older children – selected by Eurochild from eight countries – in a workshop about children's participation and budgets to support children friendly versions of relevant Parliamentary materials. The four Dutch children were able to use English to take part in the workshop and they enjoyed discussions with their peers from elsewhere in Europe. They were glad to meet the woman MEP who had encouraged their initial efforts and who was now hosting the workshop. They also spoke with other MEPs keenly involved with the European Parliament Intergroup on children's rights. At the end of the day, they were very clear about which people they had met that day had 'really' listened to them. Their confidence in using English was greatly strengthened. (See the photo at the end.)

Many people commented on the 'professional' manner in which the four children interviewed both children and adults present, at the same time that their energy and spontaneity characterised them essentially as children. They worked in pairs and had such a good time that on their way out they continued interviewing people whom they came across, even on the steps leading away from Parliament. They reluctantly put away their microphones when it was time to take the train home, back to school the next day and to everyday life far from the corridors of power. Their parents, who had attended an orientation workshop about the Parliament event in Amsterdam a few days earlier, were waiting to receive them and to hear their excited stories (and one father had accompanied the party as a ready assistant to the young reporters).

The methodology developed by the Children's International Press Centre is embedded in children's daily lives, and is not reserved only for special appearances at the political institutions that make important decisions for much of Europe. The anchoring of the Press Centre in day-to-day realities will be described next.

Grounded in the everyday lives of children

When children return to their classroom with thrilling reports about a visit to the European Parliament, interviews with MEPs, discussions with peers from other European countries and efforts to make the European Parliament more responsive to all children within the European Union, this is – however unusual – just one example of the stories that children bring to their classrooms and their classmates every morning.

When the teacher enters the room (or if she or he is already there, waiting for the bell to ring and mark the beginning of the 'school day'), she or he feels it a duty to put a stop to the animated noisy chatter and to insist on silence so that the 'real' work of progressing further with the curriculum can begin, in preparation for the next round of standardised assessment. There is no room to acknowledge that the 'news' that children bring with them every day is part of their natural and ongoing learning, and to weave this news into their formal education. In any case, a teacher would be hard pressed to respond individually to 30 children, each one of whom is bursting with news.

The Children's International Press Centre provides methodologies that help teachers to integrate children's questions and news into their learning. A 'Landscape' presents the daily world of children as connected with the wider world where powerful politicians take decisions that affect citizens' lives – including children's lives – as well as the worlds where specialised expertise is brought to bear and knowledge is generated. To bring all this together, the Landscape is divided into four quadrants:



- The lower left quadrant is the child's home, inhabited by his or her family and located in a particular neighbourhood.
- The lower right quadrant depicts the school, and zooms in on the classroom that a particular teacher presides over.

Since these two quadrants are next to each other, it is easy for children to visualise how every morning they move from their homes to their school, and then return at the end of the school day.

The other two quadrants, situated above the first two, help children understand how their everyday lives are linked to local and national decision-making, and to specialised knowledge and expertise.

- The upper left quadrant presents imposing buildings that could be City Hall, or the National Parliament, or the European Parliament, depending on the context.
- The upper right quadrant consists of other buildings that include universities, think tanks, health centres and related locations of experts and specialists.

How does a child put these four quadrants together? Let us take the earlier example of the 12-year-old boy who travelled to Brussels to attend the launch of a report on the health behaviour of school-aged children. This report was produced in the upper right quadrant of the Landscape, by experts and specialists. The 11-year old encountered this through the Press Centre's activity within his class (lower right quadrant). His interest in what the report said about the mistreatment of children led ultimately to an invitation from the Mayor to meet the national taskforce against child abuse (upper left quadrant). Some of the debates in which he has now become involved concern home environments in which children may be vulnerable to maltreatment (lower left quadrant).

Various groups of children – within the class where the pilot activity of the Press Centre took place, as described above – used the Landscape to understand how the different problems that they identified as priorities for MEPs (such as refugee children or drug dealing near schools) should be addressed. The process might instead begin with a problem identified in the home quadrant: 'Our neighbour's brother died suddenly. His son used to play in our football team. How will he come to our neighbourhood sports club without his father to drive him? His mother doesn't like driving and our neighbour doesn't have a car.' Can the problem be solved in the school quadrant, by finding a parent prepared to drive the bereaved boy to football training, even temporarily? Should the problem be taken to the specialists' quadrant, for example to an association of sports coaches who can advise on football teams closer to the boy's home? Or is the next stop City Hall, with inquiries about special funds available for children in difficult circumstances?

MEPs and mayors – or experts and specialists – are not generally found in children's everyday environments, but other important adults are. The Press Centre encourages every child in a class to fill out for herself or himself a version of the Landscape, where the bottom two quadrants of the home and the school are enlarged. Children work on this in groups, in consultation with their parents at home (and a copy of this individual landscape should be pinned up somewhere in each child's room). Who are the significant adults in my life? Whom do I rely on for different forms of support? To whom do we look to for various kinds of help at school? Can we put together a little catalogue of the adults who look out for each one of us, and use this catalogue to allow these adults to help others of us and each other? Perhaps I can sit in when your mother explains maths homework to you, and maybe several of us can take a lift with my uncle to attend the exciting event in the next town...?

These catalogues take the attractive form of the cover page of a 'glossy,' with a large photo of the adult concerned and headlines about what she or he can offer to children in the class. These glossy catalogues can also cover the adults at City Hall whose jobs enable them to support children from all over the city in specific ways and similarly for various specialists within the same radius. The international catalogue corresponds to the 'Forbes 500,' this time covering Who Does What for Children? around the world.

This methodology of compiling children's daily 'news' can begin early on, in a day-care centre for example, where video clips from each child's family can be projected onto a digital white board or – if such a board is lacking – an ever-changing collage of current poster sized photos can be pinned up prominently. As children grow older, and as their

purview extends to the national and international level, they can use a suitable 'news app' to create their own blend of news stories, and then relate this to local happenings and to the details of their own lives.

Conclusion

The Children's International Press Centre is coming to the end of its first exciting year. The class with whom the pilot efforts were undertaken has now moved on to different high schools. In one high school, a new pilot attempt is underway to use the same techniques with young people in their late teens. The plan is for the Press Centre to work with one school in each country that it can reach out to. In these ways, the story of the Press Centre will continue... so keep watching this space!



PressRelease!



February 7, 2016!

On Monday morning, 8 February, at 10 am, 32 pupils from Grade 8 of the White Elephant School – accompanied by their teacher Marjo van Wittmarschen – will walk from their school gym to the Marine-terrein in Amsterdam where the offices of the Dutch Presidency of the European Commission are now located. These children would like to know whether politicians are ready to take into account the life worlds of children. In preparation for this, the pupils have noted each other's special talents and have taken stock of whether all of them have enough trusted adults in their immediate environment to provide support when needed or desired.



By establishing a press centre for children at the Marine-terrein in Amsterdam and in the centre of Brussels, we hope in the coming months to gain insights into the specific talents of various politicians and the priorities that they highlight in their work.





Author

Elise Sijthoff is the activist publisher mentioned in the story and the founder of Fysio Educatief which she describes as a very small publishing house with a huge mission oriented towards children's rights. She also hosts the WISHES network – Working together Internationally for Social development and Health in Every School and family – and in this role she has been invited to organise pre-conferences on children and young people as active citizens at the Second and Third European Conferences on Health Literacy held in Aarhus and Brussels respectively in 2014 and 2015. The Children's International Press Centre is her newest venture.

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Another world is needed; together it is possible: The experience of the Social Forum in Ivry sur Seine (France)

By Marie-Thérèse & Jean-Guy Dufour

Brief history of the World Social Forum (WSF)

The first World Social Forum (WSF) was organised in Porto Alegre (Brazil) at the end of 2001 to send out a cry of hope at a time when it seemed that the world had no alternative but to submit to the law of markets. Following demonstrations in Seattle,¹ the Forum stated that 'another world is possible,' contesting the notion of the intellectual orthodoxy disseminated by the World Economic Forum in Davos.

Calling itself a 'social' and not an 'economic' forum, it declared that another world could and had to be built, not for money and profit but for the needs of human beings. Social Fora rapidly multiplied at all levels – world, continental, national, regional and local with the same objective: this alternative world had to be built by the actions of citizens and civil society. New practices were established based on horizontal approaches and continually seeking unity.

Social Fora are open, horizontal spaces where people can exchange knowledge and experiences, without leaders and without adopting a single, final declaration. Almost all the activities organised are now proposed and facilitated by the participants themselves and only movements, non-profits, NGOs and representatives of civil society are invited to these events. The organisers are not leaders but 'facilitators' of open discussion and meeting spaces. Decisions are made about actions only by those interested in implementing them. At the end of a social forum no one has the right to speak in the name of the gathering.

¹ Protests organised in Seattle against the World Trade Organization meeting in 1999.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1999_Seattle_WTO_protests



Gradually the WSF spread to all levels including to a small town like Ivry (in the suburbs of Paris). At all levels encounters are organised around discussions and actions about capitalism and the alternatives, common goods, migrations, food sovereignty, women's struggle, and now the indispensable and urgent fight against climate change.

What does the future hold for the WSF? The most recent one, held in Montreal ([video](#)) in the summer of 2016 and the first organised in a country in the northern hemisphere, caused a lot of debate. There was an agreement to multiply the organisation of fora, but it was also agreed that the organisational forms have reached their limits and are no longer adapted to what is at stake globally. There is a lively debate in the World Council, a self-designated Assembly open to about 150 representatives of large groupings of non-profits and trade unions from across the world that exchange ideas on the development of the social fora and decide where the next World Social Forum will be held. A lively debate has arisen on the way to implement a horizontal approach. Should the open space be emphasised even more? Or should the activist aspect be strengthened through political debates, decisions and joint actions? The WSF needs to find new impetus.

Origins of the Social Forum Ivry (SFI)

The Social Forum Ivry (SFI) was established in 2003 when the European Social Forum was held in Paris. A total of 50,000 participants from all over Europe were expected and everything had to be organised for them in Paris and the surrounding suburbs. Because Ivry is very close to Paris it was chosen as a centre to accommodate and feed people as well as for organising many debates. The volunteers asked all the non-profits in Ivry, of which there are many, and the trade unions to participate. The municipality, which has been Communist for a long time, provided a large meeting space in the town centre equipped with computers, a telephone and photocopier. The absolute obligation to resolve all the logistics problems enabled the non-profits and unions that were not used to working together to meet, get to know each other and to meet the challenge together. Because the municipality was also engaged, it led to fruitful exchanges for everyone. After the end of the forum many links had been forged, people had participated in the debates and were intrigued by the objectives of the forum and its way of working. The experience led to

establishing the Social Forum Ivry (SFI). It has a meeting space provided by the municipality that is used by all the non-profits in the town for their own activities, as well as for joint projects with those that want to participate. The objective is to make known as widely as possible the principles and values of those supporting an alternative world to the citizens of Ivry. This is how in February 2004, 23 non-profits and unions in Ivry (now about 40) and individual citizens decided to establish the SFI based on a strict respect of the Charter of Porto Alegre. There is no umbrella organisation just a meeting space for organisations and individuals who share the values and aspirations of this immense wave of people from all around the world and want to make it known where they live.



Participants and functioning

The meeting space, provided free of charge by the municipality, has played an important role in the development of the Social Forum Ivry. It enables all the participants to hold their own meetings, use the photocopier and telephone and also to meet each other regularly and exchange information on what they are doing, the current situation and to start thinking about joint projects. Each organisation has a key to the meeting space and there is a calendar for reserving a room. Each organisation also takes their turn for the monthly cleaning. It is in a shopping mall in the centre of town with big windows on both levels so that information about the activities can be posted and seen by all those who pass by. All of this creates a very favourable situation for the local forum.

There are about 40 more or less active member organisations; the annual subscription for an organisation is 30 euros and 10 euros for an individual. As the municipality gives an annual subsidy to each of these organisations, this means that the forum is correctly funded. Among the organisations there are local branches of national and even international organisations (e.g. ATTAC, Droit au Logement, La ligue des droits de l'Homme, le Comité de soutien au Sahara Occidental). There are also support groups for non-documented migrants, an organisation of young people from local council estates, a local radio (GLOB RADIO), ecologists, the local branch of a trade union, a theatre troupe, and many organisations of people from other countries, especially African (Mali, Niger, Madagascar, Central Africa, etc.).

Relations with other local and international social fora

Ivry is not the only town where local social fora have developed in order to work towards the objectives of the WSF within local populations. They allow local initiatives to be part of the international dynamic towards human emancipation often known as an 'alternative world.'² Exchanges of experience and cooperation among French-speaking local social fora have thrived since 2008 due to this network. Through its links with the WSF, the Ivry SF has also developed by sending delegations to many of the fora, including to facilitate activities, which in some cases drew a large number of participants (Dakar 2007, Belem 2009), as well as by bringing back information and experiences, and through Skype exchanges with fora in other countries on specific themes.

Some significant experiences

In general, the local social fora whether organised at different geographic levels or thematically are one-off events, usually one per year or every two years. In Ivry activity is on-going which makes it unique. (For more information in French: <https://fsivry.wordpress.com>.)

Furthermore, since the beginning, there has been a constant concern to organise an annual event designed and implemented by as many local non-profits, unions and citizens as possible. It aims to attract as many people as possible beyond the usual participants and reach out to citizens beyond groups of activists. In order not to fall back on routine and to address people's needs every year, we have had to continually re-invent these initiatives.

a. The first years ...

We quite simply organised a Local Social Forum Ivry over one or two days using the same model as the WSF: workshops, presentations, cultural activities, etc. Thus in 2005 there were several themes and in 2006 we focused on 'What Europe do we want?' In 2007 there were again several themes as well as an 'international' football tournament. These events brought together 300–600 participants depending on the year.

b. Another World Film Festival:

Since 2008 we have organised a one-day film festival every year in cooperation with the local cinema, showing three films around a theme and including for at least one of them a debate with the film director or a specialist on the subject. These events attract an audience of several hundred. We often also show films in neighbourhood community centres. (See the programme for 2016 on the website of the SFI.)

² For more information in French: openfsm.net/projects/presentation-rapide-du-reseau and openfsm.net/projects/annuaire-des-fsl et openfsm.net/projects/les-sites-fsl

c. Participation in WSF and bringing the WSF back to Ivry:

We have sent delegations of different sizes to some of the WSF and on their return organised meetings to bring the experience back to Ivry: the 'World Social Forum comes to Ivry.' A memorable experience was when 15 young people from an organisation based on a council estate in Ivry went to the WSF in Belem (Brazil) in 2009. During the week before the forum they worked with an amateur theatre troupe from a favela in Rio to put on a play together about their own lives. They performed it three times to audiences of several hundred people who were very enthusiastic, making it a triumph for them! After the WSF in Tunis in 2015 we organised a month of activities in Ivry.



d. The 'Alterparade': participating in the dynamic of Alternatiba, the village of alternatives...

(For more information in French on the 2010 Alterparade:

<https://fsivry.wordpress.com/2010/07/02/alter-parade-du-29-mai-2010-vous-etiez-au-rendez-vous/>)

Alternatiba was the Basque name given to an initiative in October 2014 undertaken in the 'French' Basque Country (or North Basque Country as the Basques call it). A village of concrete experiences in all sorts of fields, that show us alternatives to the current dominant system was organised over a weekend in Bayonne with debates, events, etc. This experience was very successful and many activists wanted to reproduce the same event where they live, which led to the creation of a movement called Alternatiba in several European countries. In France an important date was the organisation of this type of village in the Ile de France (region around Paris). It was preceded by a 'tandem tour,' a bike rally of 5,000 kms promoting a pact for transition – 15 concrete measures that could be rapidly implemented were proposed to municipal councils (<http://www.transitioncitoyenne.org/le-pacte-pour-la-transition/>).

We actively participated in this dynamic, welcoming the rally to Ivry with a carnival of animals threatened by climate change ...! The Mayor of Ivry formally engaged the town by signing the pact publically on 6 April 2016

(<https://fsivry.wordpress.com/?s=alternatiba&x=0&y=0>).

In 2016 we suggested to all interested organisations to organise together a 'Village of Alternatives' during the annual town festival. The aim was to reach the very large number of people who would come to the festival and to let them see the many very rich and concrete initiatives that exist in their town and how much hope they bring, acting as pilot sites for what society could look like — one that allows each person to flourish in the way they wish, in harmony with nature and in which every person can participate in their own way. Participation with many more people than at present is the only way to open the doors to another future which is different from the catastrophic one of the global oligarchy.

Outcomes and perspectives

Over the last 12 years has the practice of the Social Forum in Ivry really been able to start addressing the obstacles which block access to a sustainable society? Putting the question in that way, the answer is certainly 'yes.'



We estimate that, out of an adult population of about 50,000, several thousand citizens have benefited from the existence of the SFI. Thanks to the activities they have been able to better flourish as empowered citizens with the desire to contribute to building the more humane society that is more and more urgently needed. They have been given the opportunity to understand that such a society of 'Bien Vivre' (translating into French the concept of 'Buen Vivir' that comes from the Andes and has been integrated into the constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia) will not come about without their contributions and that they will never experience well-being in their lives if they do not take an interest or if they feel disempowered.

But our activities have only reached a few of the 50,000, which remains too few! There is still a long road to travel even in an exceptional context where a major effort has been made over a long period. While we feel that our work has been worthwhile, we are well placed to measure how far we are from overthrowing the dictatorship of a small global oligarchy that is leading humanity to disaster. Furthermore, with the current speeding up of climate change, time is running out.

A mix of satisfaction and anguish! This is felt by all those people the world over who are fighting for an alternative society and seeking the best ways forward. Though the social fora have been very useful for a number of years, some organisations and individuals think that they are no longer needed or that they are the most adapted tools. At the beginning of the 2000s, they initiated an innovative way of working that is commonly used today –horizontal networking and a focus on action by organisations, local groups and individuals coming together around ad hoc or long term objectives. What can they still bring that is specific and can they help to accelerate the transition towards a society where people can flourish? In addition, even though at local level we have continually tried to reinvent, it is difficult to avoid running out of steam when there is not a qualitative leap in the size of the circle of people involved. This situation can be observed throughout the network of local social fora that is less active today.

Nevertheless most of us remain convinced that social fora cannot be replaced, even if they need to evolve in order to be more efficient. They are the only structures using emancipatory practices through which people the world over can recognise themselves as part of the same developing force. By working together ways can be found to oblige oligarchies to greater and greater compromises, while moving towards societies that correspond to the needs and possibilities of the 21st century. In Ivry we are convinced that the social fora can only succeed if they stay ever more deeply rooted in the participation of local populations.

So, let's continue!

In the words of Edouard Glissant '*Agis dans ton lieu, pense avec le Monde*' ('Act in your place, think with the World')

Authors

Marie-Thérèse Dufour: I was born in May 1941 in Tour and participated in youth movements from when I was very young: first the scouts and then the Young Women's Christian Student Movement (JECF), very present in schools and universities. At the age of 20 I became the General Secretary of the JECF and moved to Paris. This was a time of great effervescence among young people and not long before the movement of May 1968 which split open strong social constraints. In 1965 I got married and went with my husband as part of the civil cooperation service to Algeria, shortly after its independence. I finished my public law studies in the University of Algiers. We returned to France as the events of May 1968 were starting. I then started to work as an Inspector in the Labour Inspectorate where I worked until my retirement. Since then I have stayed actively engaged in the altermondialist movement. I'm a member of ATTAC, participate in the Ivry sur Seine Social Forum, work with a committee supporting undocumented workers and participate in a movement supporting local agriculture (Association pour le maintien d'une agriculture de proximité).

Jean-Guy Dufour: I was born in Senegal in November 1939. I qualified as an engineer from the Ponts et Chaussées (Paris) and spent the first four years of my professional life in the recently independent Algeria. I then worked in research services in France until my

retirement. My life has been mainly devoted to the struggle for a world where all men and women could actually live as stated in Article 1 of the Declaration of Human Rights. Before going to Algeria I was active in JEC (Christian Student Movement) and since then I've had many successful or less successful experiences mainly through the trade unions and the non-profit sector. Over the last 15 years I have been engaged in the Social Fora, ATTAC, etc.! And always with the same strong feeling of revolt as I felt at the age of 6 years old when, on arriving in Paris from my village in the Pyrenees, I saw someone obliged to sleep in a corridor of the Paris metro.

This article was written in French and translated into English by Jean Gordon.
The French version is available in pdf.

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Khulani Nande – Grow More

By Carol Gorelick

Introduction

Settled into our airplane seats on the long flight from JFK to East London South Africa, in October 2007, Al Witten and I began the conversation that launched the ABC Connects project, a four-year school community improvement programme. In this project we see a school as a community hub that brings together many partners to offer a range of support and opportunities for children, youth, families, and the larger community.

The ABC Connects' goal is for the school principal and staff to engage with parents and other education stakeholders in a community to address the challenges of poverty, improve teaching and learning, and to support students' well-being and development transforming schools into vibrant centres of community life.

The purpose of this trip was to initiate conversations with two school principals about an action research project: Building Communities: Strengthening Schools.

Background

Al Witten, a former principal, in Lavender Hills Primary a township school,¹ in Cape Town South Africa, transformed the school by involving the entire community in creating jobs and eliminating crime. The successful programme expanded to 100 Cape Town schools and led to Al developing 'The School-Based Community Learning Framework', as a doctoral student at the Harvard Graduate School of Education

¹ Township – forced settlements created during apartheid. The Democratic Elections in 1994 legally integrated schools.

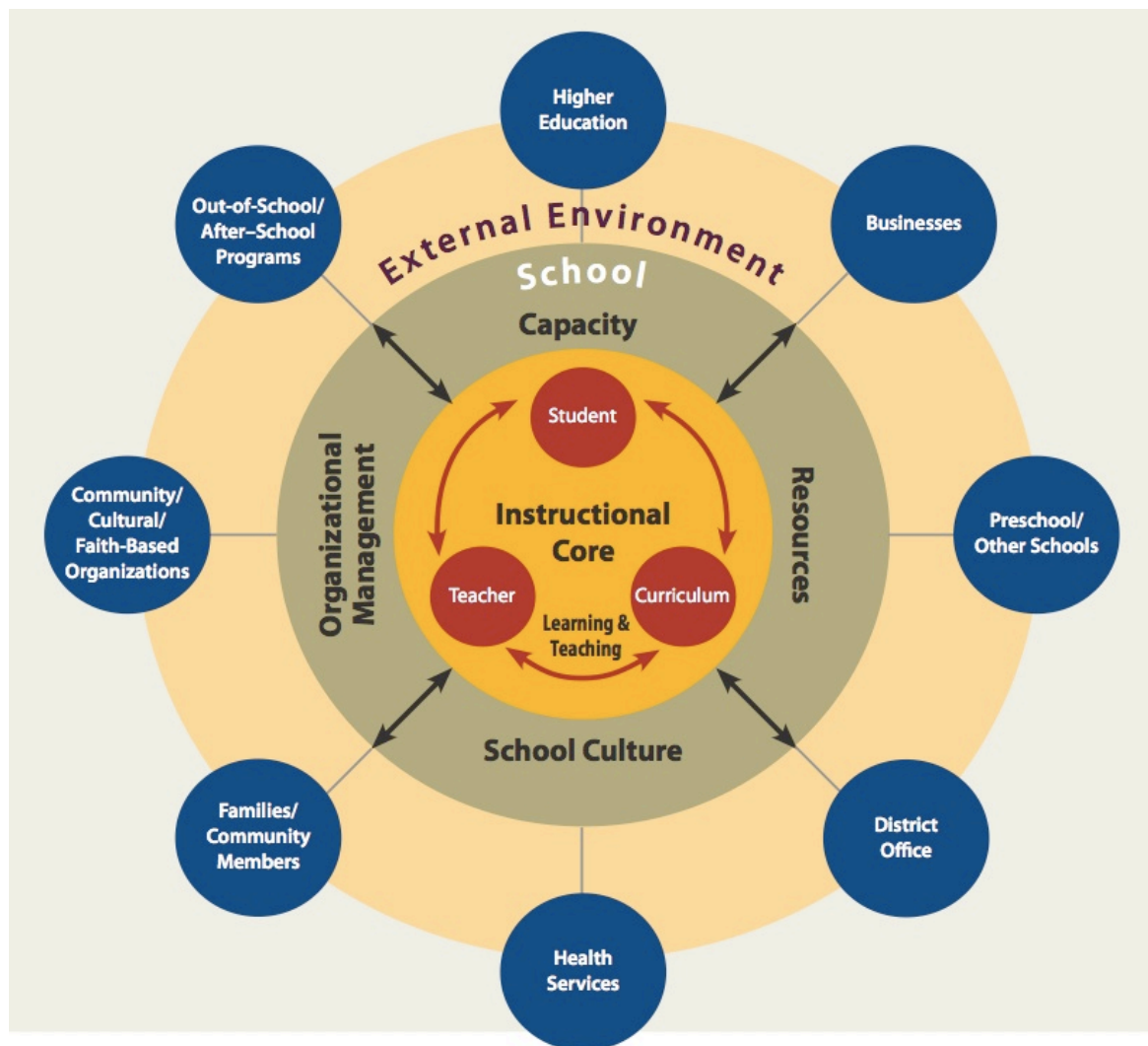


Figure 1 School Based Community Learning Framework

When Al and I met, through a Society for Organizational Learning colleague, we knew we had to work together 'on the ground'. For me it was about collaborative learning for social impact. For Al it was testing and validating his framework to improve schools and communities, ultimately at the national level in South Africa. We were both committed to 'nurturing the whole child through school communities'.

The opportunity came when we received a grant from the Kellogg Foundation to implement the programme in an under-resourced school in South Africa and one in the US. In this article, I am focusing on the experience in South Africa.

South Africa – The Beginning

After visiting several schools, Al selected Pefferville Primary and Willow Park Primary as potential sites. Our assumption was that a principal's fundamental objective is to improve teaching and learning within the school. The reality in East London made it impossible for a principal to meet this objective without involving a broad range of stakeholders in the community.

The current situation included children coming to school hungry and living long distances from the school without dependable transportation; unemployment; unstable families (single mothers, grandmothers acting as mothers and fathers, alcoholism, abuse etc.); no electricity (how can children do homework at night without light?); parents with low literacy levels or who spoke isiXhosa but had chosen English as the language of instruction for their children; and teachers who neither spoke the indigenous language nor were trained to teach English as a second language.

Pefferville was representative of a post-apartheid township school. It is located in an urban area of East London which had been classified as 'coloured' under the apartheid regime. The principal and core staff had been at Pefferville since it was built in 1973 as a temporary school. For more than a decade there had been a steady decline due to a flood, poverty and violence.

Willow Park was very different. Prior to the democratic elections it was a Model C school (exclusively white). Post apartheid, it became predominantly African (80%) with some white and coloured students. Most of the students came from communities with high unemployment and poverty stricken informal settlements very far from the school. After the democratic elections, Mr Peet Swanepoehl, a white former government employee, became a teacher and then principal. At the time of his appointment the school was in disrepair and without parent involvement. He initiated significant change, involving community stakeholders.

Both schools met our selection criteria so we decided to keep both, certain that we could find funding and resources to create a community of practice for Pefferville and Willow Park to support each other.

Our first action was to meet separately with the principals, followed by a meeting with the teachers to assess their interest and willingness to participate. If the teachers responded positively the plan was to quickly facilitate brainstorming the desired outcomes with each school.

Pefferville Primary School

Approaching Pefferville Primary, I was surprised at the pleasant scene, a series of low buildings, surrounded by grass. The school itself was in a dismal situation due to a major flood almost a decade earlier. There was extensive infrastructure damage, part of the roof was missing, and there were no boys' toilets. To enter the school grounds you had to cross a 'stream' that was filled with trash. Crime was rampant. Teachers were demoralised. The principal, Mr Devraj Naidoo was cautiously optimistic about the project, saying 'If you want to change South Africa, you start here'. Before the meeting with the teachers we toured the school. Orderly classes had 60 children with one teacher, antiquated equipment (no computers, no microscopes). The bright spot was a library, which was built and supported by Room to Read, an international NGO.



Figure 2 Pefferville Entrance Before Renovation

Mr Naidoo introduced us by saying that he thought we represented an opportunity for the school to be 'uplifted'. He asked the teachers to decide if they wanted to participate in the ABC Connects programme. We introduced the School-Based Community Learning Framework and our approach. We wanted to work with the broad Pefferville community to determine their needs and wants to improve the lives of their children. Together we would create a plan to address their highest priorities using organisational learning methods and tools.

By the end of the meeting teachers expressed interest and cautious enthusiasm. Cathy Lessing an outspoken, experienced teacher said that ABC Connects was a gift the school needed. As the teacher representative to the School Governing Body (SGB) she committed her support and offered to invite parent members of the SGB to a visioning session the next day.

Pefferville Visioning

The teaching staff and six parents assembled. We started with a check-in to hear everyone's voice, asking each person to state their name and to answer in a word: '*How do you feel coming into this meeting?*' At first there was silence, then Cathy began: *Excited*. Several people were sceptical or shy, a few passed. After an introduction to our purpose and the framework, everyone was asked to write a dream for Pefferville on an index card. Groups of 2-3 transferred dreams to post-its. Examples were: a brand new brick building; a fully equipped library with a programme to enhance literacy; a commitment to change; a computer room; a pool. One statement spoke to everyone:

To strive to make the community more aware of their roles, rights and responsibilities regarding the education of their children at home and at school.



Figure 3 The Vision Wall

The highest priorities were: infrastructure improvements; a fully functional library; a feeding scheme to provide a meal for each child each day. By the end of the meeting the group selected two doable projects:

- library and media centre to improve literacy levels
- refurbishment of flood damage and polluted stream clean-up

We followed the same process at Willow Park.

Willow Park Primary School



Figure 4 Entrance To Willow Park

Arriving at Willow Park we saw a modest and inviting school building, with at least 100 white vans on the perimeter of the school grounds. We entered a cheerful hallway filled with pictures of school activities, student art work and sports trophies. The principal, Mr Peet Swanepoel, told us stories of his beginnings in the school: paint was peeling off the walls, gates were hanging...it made a bad impression. He received a donation of pink paint which he used reluctantly – the school remained pink for several years. To accomplish the

renovations, he bartered with parents who had building skills in return for no school fees.² He then entered into a relationship with The East London Youth and Child Care Centre, a nearby NGO for homeless children. Fifteen, mostly special needs, children from the Centre attended Willow Park and the Child and Youth Care Liaison Officer was based at the school to provide psychological as well as educational support. A nearby farmer became a 'friend/partner of Willow Park' paying school fees for 20 of his employees' children and providing food together with other neighbours for the students. Peet demonstrated entrepreneurial skills when he contracted to park trucks on school property before they were shipped to buyers. For several years, this generated significant funds that were used to improve the school.

Listening to these stories it was clear that Mr Swanepoel understood the concept of a community school. He was willing to gather the teachers for a meeting but clearly stated HIS priorities. When we described the framework and our plan, most of the people immediately came on-board and agreed to attend the visioning session and to invite parents, members of the School Governing Board (SGB) and the Board Chairman of the East London Youth and Child Care Centre.

Willow Park Visioning

After the introduction, the dream exercise went quickly and the highest priorities were: more parent involvement; a feeding scheme so every child got one meal a day; a library; more access to sporting opportunities through a bus; staff development.

By the end of the meeting the group had selected two doable projects:

- start-up an organic vegetable, fruit and herb garden
- obtain a school bus for transport to sport and cultural activities

Creating An Infrastructure For Collaboration: The Projects Began

Before we left East London we asked Pat Goosen, a retired principal from an East London Primary school to join the ABC Connects team as the local project manager and to use his video and photography skills to visually document the project. He also facilitated the installation of equipment needed for ongoing communication. His network and relationships, were invaluable to the success of ABC Connects.

ABC Connects was launched and we were ready to invite willing partners and stakeholders who could contribute resources: expertise, relationships, products, and funds. Stakeholders included parents, teachers, community members, NGO's, churches and government entities etc. We were committed to co-creating the next steps with stakeholders and partners, building internal capacity and capturing learnings throughout what became a four-year process.

² All South African public schools require parents to pay school fees based on the classification of the school. Both Pefferville and Willow Park were at the lowest level of school fees but many parents still could not pay.

The First Offsite – Launching A Community Of Practice

The first Bosbeeraad³ was held at a beach resort, 90 minutes from town. The principals and all the teachers and members of the school governing bodies were invited as well as local partners (60 to 70 people). Several participants had never been to a hotel or beach before. The primary purpose was to build capacity in each school and to create a learning community between the schools. The goal was to encourage cooperation, collaboration and learning for individuals, each school and the communities.

The three-day event met the goal for each school: to develop a collective vision in a way that was safe, open, fun and included representatives from the whole community.

Pefferville's Vision Statement

We at Pefferville School strive to provide the learners with knowledge and skills, and a sound value system to enable them to reach their full potential and to enable them to take their rightful place in society.

We hope to change the mindset of parents regarding their responsibility towards their children and development of the school while building partnerships with all the other stakeholders involved in education.

Willow Park's Vision Statement

Khulani Nande – Grow More

To develop the children holistically, emotionally, spiritually, physically to be able to fulfil their role in our country as responsible citizens.

To be able to cope with their own challenges, educationally, now at home and later in life.

Bosbeeraad participants submitted positive feedback e.g. '...I left feeling enriched emotionally and spiritually. The commitment of everyone and the positive atmosphere in tackling the challenges and projects awaiting us left me feeling capable to aspire to do the best I can for my loved ones and in my workplace.'

It also was the beginning of a Pefferville, Willow Park community of practice. One participant wrote 'It was a great experience to share with the other school. We have gained a lot. I wish it could be our annual meeting'.⁴ Another said: 'You could place more people in one Cabana ...mix teachers from the other school with us so we know them better.'

³ Bosbeeraad is a South African term for a bush meeting-a strategy meeting held outdoors, for example in a game reserve. We saw it as an 'offsite'.

⁴ For two subsequent years we hosted and designed Bosbeeraads in January.

Pefferville's Projects

The first major project supported by parents, local church members, local businesses, faculty and staff renovated the dilapidated school building into a functional community centre. Less than a year after the first meeting invitations to another meeting were sent to all parents. A few minutes before the meeting was to begin, the room was empty. We had a momentary fear that no one would show up. Within 10 minutes there was standing room only; parents came and brought babies. The meeting was led in all three languages (isiXhosa, Afrikaans and English) and information was given about what had been accomplished and what was possible/planned. By the end of the meeting, over 70 percent of those present had volunteered for gardening, painting, feeding schemes etc.

Alicia Theron, a 2nd grade teacher in Pefferville, describes her experience as a long-term teacher at Pefferville in this video. She is representative of the committed teachers.

http://www.abconnects.org/news-and-media#!_news-and-media/alicia-theron

Timing and networking led to the biggest measurable success of the ABC programme. Pefferville was recommended to become the East London community, and Pefferville Primary School the centre for operations for the KWANDA project run by The Soul City Institute.

KWANDA⁵ was an initiative to mobilise local people to 'uplift' (look better, feel better and work better) their communities. Soul City contracted with SABC, a national TV network to create a reality show to document the KWANDA initiative that encouraged local job creation to reduce poverty and improve the community.

KWANDA was designed as a competition between South African communities from five provinces. The programme included skills training, at a 4-week rural Learning Camp. Altogether 100 people from the Pefferville community were selected to participate and were trained in gardening, building, starting businesses etc. The programme provided a small amount of money for applied projects when people returned from the Learning Camp, as well as coaching support. Each of the communities was the subject of 2 segments of the weekly reality TV show. During the final week the whole country voted for the winning community.

For Pefferville, the project created a working control centre from an unused and flood damaged room, installed security and equipment (an alarm system, computers, printers, a photocopier), and hired a security guard at night to protect the control centre (and school). All the equipment remained at the end of the project as a computer facility for staff at the school.

⁵ An article describing the Kwanda project in detail can be accessed at http://www.nordicom.gu.se/sites/default/files/kapitel-pdf/362_ramafoko_andersson_weiner.pdf

By the time the Kwanda project team left Pefferville, there was a sense of pride at the school and in the community. The entire community had been cleaned and flowers planted. Crime was effectively eliminated. Children were fed daily through an expanded scheme; vegetable gardens on school grounds contributed to the feeding scheme. A screen-printing business was started by people who attended the Kwanda Learning Camp. A total of 2,500 local jobs were created through the Kwanda experience.

Willow Park Projects

ABC provided funds that helped Willow Park buy a used bus so that children could participate in more sports and cultural events. This contributed to Willow Park's being a major contender in netball and soccer within the province.

Willow Park also wanted a library to improve literacy. With Pat Goosen's assistance, the principal acquired a donated mobile library and created a reading programme for all grades, a major improvement in teaching and learning.

The school secretary was instrumental in having a mobile kitchen donated with on-going food deliveries, which provided a daily meal for each student. This was recognised as a primary contribution to each child's ability to learn.

Pefferville And Willow Park Launch

THE 'LAUNCH' – 1,000 Stakeholders and Partners Under a Tent

A milestone for Pefferville and Willow Park was the March 2009 Launch (Celebration) of the ABC Connects Program sponsored by PetroSA, the primary South African financial contributor.



Figure 5 The Launch

Speakers included the Deputy District Director from the Department of Education, A senior executive from PetroSA, as well as members of the school communities and the project.

Classes from both schools sang, recited poems in isiXhosa, Afrikaans and English, and danced. The pride and joy was palpable.



Figure 6 ABC Connects Song and Dance

A speech given by Akona Sokutu, a ninth grader at Willow Park, was touching evidence that we had planted the seeds to fulfil our objective of ‘nurturing the whole child through school communities’. Akona ended his talk saying: ‘We as children have power to change the world. Learn as much as you can. Be somebody in life. Try to change the world’.⁶

The Last Bosberaad – January 2010

The third offsite event took place on the beach in East London to develop a plan for each school to take forward and to launch a formal on-going community of practice. It ended with a braai (barbeque) for participants and their families. It was a productive and joyous event. Both schools celebrated their success, recognising how far they had come and left with a plan to continue the work and to support each other as a community of practice. A senior teacher, who had been at Pefferville Primary since it began, introduced her daughter and grandchildren to me, telling the beaming grandchildren that Pefferville had once again become a source of community pride.

Programme Results Overview

The programme began in 2007 and ended with external evaluations in 2011⁷. The goal of improving schools at risk by inviting the community in, rather than building electric fences to keep people out had been met. The schools were seen as an asset to each community, connecting parents and youth, alumni and community members. The approach and results varied at each school.

A first step at Pefferville was to create conditions that support teaching and learning. The external evaluator commented that ‘all around the school, scrub has been cleared and the

⁶ Akona Sokuto’s full speech http://www.abccconnects.org/news-and-media#!_news-and-media/akona-speech

⁷ “It Takes a School To Raise A Village” describing the project was published in *Reflections*, The Society for Organizational Learning Journal
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B5trfye99nOoQURBY1hZSTFwRmc/view?usp=sharing>

grounds are clean, clear of papers and plastic. No one, learner or drug user, can lurk in the bushes because the bushes are no longer there. The school is fenced now, and a member of the community guards the gate in a friendly but watchful way.

The school buildings are still old and prefabricated, in need of repair. But they are well kept and tidy. The gardens in the central courtyard are now thriving vegetable patches maintained by the community, and the vegetables look good enough to eat. This means that you see members of the community constantly at work in the school. 'A student said "Now we feel safe...our school is clean".

In addition to the external changes, the evaluator noted substantive changes within the school culture. She saw Pefferville as 'a school located in desperately disadvantaged circumstances but nevertheless alive with a spirit of determination to run a safe, well-ordered institution. For the many who have worked so hard to achieve this, it must be a source of immense pride and fulfilment.'

Willow Park was already functioning with a strong leader involving the community, when ABC Connects arrived. It was an opportunity to join forces to continue the journey of transformation at the school. According to the evaluator, the principal said: *'...I looked positively at ABC as I do at every project. It was focused mainly on management assistance...I can always learn...but some of the staff were against it. If the school can benefit and I can...what a pleasure...'* He had understood that the focus was not on financial assistance, and that it was also aimed at reaching out to the community. The project wanted to support the school in implementing its own projects.

Since the school had regular staff meetings, as well as meetings with stakeholders Peet saw the management training as *'... a couple of nice planning sessions. The bosberaads were motivational. We looked at things collectively and it was more relaxed so we opened up.....we grew closer together; I got to know them [the staff] differently.'*

The staff are aware that they now have more voice at meetings; they feel they are included in planning, and that there are more meetings. They all mention the team building at the bosberaads, and the approach of the project team as having had an effect on their own confidence in taking part in meetings. One staff member said *'I learnt that it was about team building as staff...I think it has had an impact on management...to me there is a difference. ...If there is a problem with a child they [a teacher] will go first to the Head of Department (HOD) before the Principal... before if you had a problem you didn't discuss it, you kept quiet....now we talk together.'*

In parallel ABC Connects had tried to run the same type of programme in two Detroit schools though with little success. In South Africa there were more local resources (people, organisations, products and funds) available than in the schools in Detroit. A critical success factor was, Pat Goosen, the local project manager, a resident and former principal in one of the school communities.

In Detroit there was less support from the schools themselves and much less involvement of local stakeholders, including parents. The bureaucratic pressures and local priorities in the city impeded the adoption of the programme and involvement of additional stakeholders.

After the end of the project, the work continued in East London. In Pefferville, the principal retired on disability and was later replaced by a deputy principal from a local school. The work continued due to the commitment of teachers and staff though it lost some momentum during the transition to the new principal. Willow Park's Principal who was already involving the community when ABC Connects arrived was able to continue the work with a more enthusiastic and skilled staff. Ultimately he was appointed Principal of a newly renovated rural school and took his experience and learnings with him.

Sobering final words from the external evaluator are a reminder that school-based community learning through active stakeholder participation can build communities and strengthen schools. 'I am one of many who claim that if you do not help to heal a very ill community, the children who come from it cannot focus on their educational goals.'

Author

Dr Carol Gorelick is a facilitative leader of systemic change. As co-founder and Executive Director of [ABC Connects](#), she is working to develop community partnerships. Having worked in large global companies, leading a consultancy and NGO, and taught at Pace University in New York City and the University of Cape Town, Carol bridges the worlds of practice, capacity building, and research.

Hristescu, A. (2017) 'Not another article on social inclusion: youngsters with disabilities, the hidden gem of youth work' in Learning for Well-being Magazine, Issue 3, published by the Learning for Well-being Foundation.

Not another article on social inclusion: youngsters with disabilities, the hidden gem of youth work

By Adrian Hristescu

Introduction

When I was asked 3 years ago to be a group leader for 7 Romanian youngsters with visual impairments that were participating in a youth mobility in Greece, I felt quite anxious. Even if I was supposed to be accompanied by two resource teachers who were working in what is politely called a 'special school' for the visually impaired, the feeling was still there. 'How should I handle the logistics?', 'What can they do there?', 'How will they deal with the activities?', 'Will they really enjoy this experience?' All these questions were popping into my head. But then the project happened and 'Wow!' the work I had to do was not so different than with other groups. I can honestly say that it was actually less stressful than usual.

Looking back to my previous youth work experiences, both as trainer and participant, I could only find 2 occasions in which a person with disability was also present. This was 2 occasions out of more than 40 which means 2 persons out of more than 700, to offer you the full context. Statistically, taking into account that about 3% of all young people in Romania are facing some disability, to keep these proportions there should have been close to 20 persons. But it was just one tenth of this. Clearly, there was something missing and this made me and one association from Arad, Romania, start looking for what exactly it was it and how to deal with it.



Image 1 - Participants in the 'Peers for Inclusion' training programme

The unexpected of working with people with disabilities

As is logical, we began by asking different stakeholders about their position on the topic. The project addressed young people with visual impairments, so first we needed to know if they were even interested in getting more involved in non-formal activities? And, if true, in which kind and how could this be facilitated? On the other hand, were NGOs or other institutions addressing youth willing and capable of including participants/beneficiaries with disabilities in their current activity? And were other young people comfortable with working in the same team as persons with disabilities?

Some of the answers we received kind of confirmed our initial assumptions. There are few opportunities for youngsters with visual impairments and NGOs are not really active in improving this. Still, some other findings came as a surprise.

First big surprise: 'It's not babysitting!' We, just like most of the other youth workers we were interviewing, lived under the impression that if we were to involve one participant with visual impairments we should more or less have a 'shadow' person always by his or her side, to guide and do everything for that individual. And this was totally discouraging for most, as it seemed like too big of a challenge. What we failed to realise was that by the age they would participate in a youth project, most persons with visual impairments would have already learned to be autonomous. Yes, being blind or partially sighted does not mean you are dependent on another person! Of course, sometimes you would need some guiding or some little help in the tasks, but in more than 90% of the time no assistance is required.

Second surprise: 'We are so overthinking it!' It just doesn't have to be perfect! Persons with visual impairments are aware of the fact that some activities will not be accessible to them and they are fine with this. While there are a lot of assistive technologies that make participation more accessible, the reality is that not everyone can afford them and people are happy enough with the situation. Yes, it is natural to want the best and one should aim for this, but not being able to provide the perfect experience should not be a reason not to do it at all. In practice, this perfectionist way of looking at things led to one of the two behaviours we noticed, neither of which is desirable in the context: people were either

avoidant on the issue, and they just didn't involve people with disabilities in their activities, or they were overprotective, which created also a form of exclusion, by emphasising that the person with disability is different and needs so much special attention, which was again quite uncomfortable.

The big 'A-Ha!' moment: we should not be doing activities 'for' those with disabilities! We should be doing activities 'with' those with disabilities! Even if they are often considered to be synonymous, integration and inclusion are different concepts. There is quite a big difference between organising an activity solely with people with disabilities and organising an activity in which persons with and without impairments are participating together, being equally engaged. Unfortunately, what we noticed was that typically NGOs think about involving persons with disabilities just in terms of organising projects that target them exclusively. Most consider that this is the only way in which these persons can be involved, as they lack the capacities to perform in a mixed group. As a consequence, many of the organisations don't do anything because this would mean switching from their main activity. And even if they do decide to do something, by involving solely those with disabilities they still perpetuate a form of exclusion. Humans are social beings and they need social interaction. Participation in different non-formal education or volunteering activities is not just about learning, it is equally about being social and not feeling so different and excluded. Organisations should not think about inclusion in terms of changing what they are doing! This is not the point! Rather, organisations should improve what they are doing by making their regular activities more accessible. It is true that for most this seems difficult to achieve, but as we found out, it's not at all complicated!

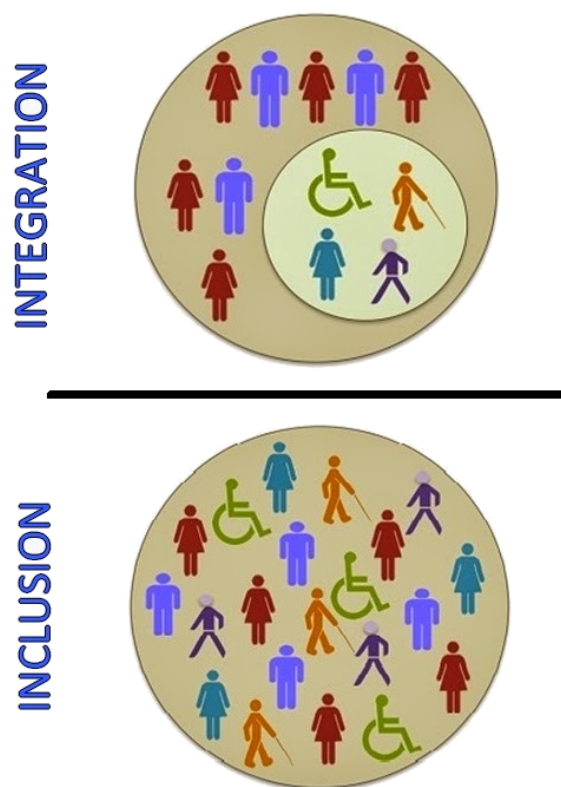


Image 2 - Integration vs. Inclusion

Changing attitudes through peer education

Ok, so that was the easy part! The most difficult part: what can be done about it? How can others be helped to realise the same thing? There are guides on mobility and orientation, the internet is full of resources, most of the grant opportunities encourage and fully support participation of persons with disabilities, but still, not much is happening. Therefore, the main problem is obviously not the resources but the mentality, as a large share of the youth workers are either not considering the subject at all or are thinking of it in the wrong way. And if there is something that people working in education know, it is that attitudes are often the most difficult to change.

Fortunately for us, there was one solution within reach that answered the needs above perfectly: 'peer education.' For those unfamiliar with 'peer education,' I should say that this concept refers to persons teaching their 'peers' or 'equals' in the sense that the traditional 'teacher,' 'trainer' or 'expert' is replaced by a person with whom you have something in common. In our case, youth workers (rather than experts in special education) would train other youth workers. We were not professionals in the field, but we had learned something very valuable about working with persons with disabilities and we wanted to teach the same things to others like us.

The reason for which a peer-to-peer approach can be a proper solution in contexts like this is that in some situations people change their perspective based not only on the information they get, but also on the opinions and actions of others like them. And this was clearly one of those situations. Yes, we were no professionals in teaching 'mobility and orientation' and we had not mastered the Braille alphabet. But we could refer to something more important – actual experiences. We could talk about 'what was done and how you can do it also' rather than 'what can be done?' And, especially in the youth field where 'action' and 'doing' are key words, this often has a greater impact.

Moreover, Ofensiva Tinerilor, the association that initiated the programme, is an active member of the European Peer Training Organisation (<http://www.epto.org>). E.P.T.O. has been committed for 10 years to promoting anti-discrimination education and, up to a point, there are strong connections between discrimination and the lack of opportunities that people with disabilities face. As previously stated, the first barrier for youth workers is not really their lack of knowledge, but their low awareness on the issue and, often, their reluctance to work with young people with special needs. Given this, the first priority is not teaching about accessibility but rather making the youth workers more open to getting involved. And then, the rest would follow: guiding techniques, assistive technologies, improving accessibility, hands-on experiences.

So, we went for it and after 3 months of work, all of the above were combined in a peer-training programme which was designed to determine and help youth workers to improve their regular activities such that they would be accessible for persons with visual impairments. Reaching the testing phase, the results were amazing! More than 70 persons followed the programme, out of which 7 were either blind or with low vision. About 90% of the participants declared that after the training course they were more open to working

with persons with visual impairments. Later they also proved that they have the will and skills to make their activities more accessible, as during or following the programme each participant actually organised events involving persons with visual impairments. Their response to this was great! It was like a new world had opened up to all of them!



Image 3 - Participants in the 'Peers for Inclusion' training programme

In addition to these encouraging results, the fun part about the training was that, as mentioned above, it was conceived to be a peer education activity. The methodology was simple enough to be used in teaching by other youth workers who had some experience of working with youngsters with visual impairments but who were not necessarily experts in the field. Actually, none of the trainers who worked with this methodology and achieved these remarkable results were resource teachers. They were simple youth workers. And this is extremely important, as in the long term, this essential feature makes it fairly easy to multiply the results we got. Unlike traditional training programmes, we don't need to limit the multipliers to the professionals in this sphere of work. Anyone with some skills in facilitation can potentially be a multiplier, as long as they are willing to share their experience of including persons with disabilities in their regular activities.

It is true that by not being an expert in the field you might be limited in what you can teach others and may not be able to go very deep into explaining everything related to the subject of accessibility. On the other hand, again, as we found, this was not really necessary. The small things that we were not able to provide in the experiences we created were insignificant in comparison to the sheer joy of the persons with visual impairments of being involved, either as participants or as beneficiaries of the later activities. Plus, in terms of teaching, going for peer education had one more advantage: the fact that youth workers helped others like them understand what it takes to be more inclusive and that they could relate to actual personal experiences rather than to theoretical information inspired those who were trained a lot. It showed that what was on the table was real and actually achievable.

Lessons to be learned

I started this article promising it would not be your typical one about social inclusion and I don't want to finish it without explaining why, especially as it is strongly connected to maybe the most important lesson we learned in this project. If you google 'social inclusion' most of the results you get will be connected to policies, things different governmental agencies could or should do, and abstract definitions of concepts related to the field. Going off-line you will see the same attitude: 'we need to have it, but the government is not doing anything!' Social inclusion is typically seen as something abstract, that should come from above, too complicated for the average individual. Most ignore the 'social' in 'social inclusion' and fail to achieve that it is society that is the main actor in this. Well, this change in mindset is exactly what the activities I presented are trying to promote: social inclusion, much like many of the other changes needed in our society, should also start from the bottom and go up!

Simple people can be more inclusive, even in the absence of fancy policies, just with an open mind and simple actions, which they can learn from others like them. And later they can help their own peers understand how easy it is to be more inclusive. You don't have to wait for the experts and policymakers to initiate change, you can become yourself the initiator of change! Because the credibility you have with your peers can often mean more than elaborate methodologies.

With this pledge on peer education, I end my article before it gets too long, hoping it was appealing enough to get you to read it to this final section. Having you here, I will also confess that I really hope this experience will inspire you to research further into accessibility and help you discover, like we did, that it is actually not so difficult to involve persons with disabilities in your regular work, whatever it may be. It will not be a big effort for you but it will bring a lot of joy to people who, for reasons beyond their control, are wrongly denied a typical life, often because we are too anxious to try something outside our imaginary comfort zone. And last, but not least, I end this article by encouraging you to explore peer education. For sure you have some interesting and motivating experiences that you can share and for sure there are plenty of people out there who could use them. Much like what I was trying to do now!

The project that was presented is called 'Erasmus 4 VIP' and is co-founded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Commission. For more information about this project, you are more than welcome to write us at: office@ofetin.ro

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