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Children as special citizens

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• **Introduction**

Our experience has shown that even though there is more and more rhetoric about children's inclusion in decision-making at both local and regional levels, it is difficult to realise children's *actual* participation in practice. Often projects aimed at involving children in local decision-making turn into planning processes that use children as 'hostages' for adult interests. For children to really participate in planning requires something more than just asking them about their opinions. It takes an extended period of time, and means involving children and adults in an open-minded *process* in which no one knows the final outcome. In order to grasp the wide variety of children's thoughts, feelings, and creative abilities in the course of this process, it is necessary to invite a variety of expressive methods, such as texts, drawings, photographs, model-building, and drama. The relations between the children and adults also need to be carefully evaluated. Do adults take the leading and structuring role, or are the children allowed a wide sphere of freedom to formulate their own problems and priorities, select action strategies and research methods, and document and apply results?

The case studies below illustrate firstly what can unfold when *their* process is supported and secondly, when it is not.

• **Children as citizens**

In 1988, the Norwegian Council for Cultural Affairs allocated a total of 1.5 million kroners to a three-year experiment to provide grants earmarked for children. Responsibility for directing the project was given to the Norwegian Centre for Child Research, and

eleven local council authorities took part in the experiment. The project, entitled *Try Yourself*, tried to connect children's participation to play-like activities (Chawla, 1994). The intention of the project was that children themselves should take the initiative to plan, apply for funding, and carry out a variety of leisure-time activities. The project gave the children an opportunity to apply for financial support to put their own ideas into practice: such as starting a newspaper, producing a play, making a film or video, building a hut. It was important that adults should not organise the activities - children themselves were to have this responsibility.

The objectives of the project can be summarised as follows: to give children support on the basis of their own premises and needs; to increase children's opportunities for creative development, and to promote their own culture; to give children opportunities to take responsibilities and carry out tasks; to increase knowledge about children and their culture; and to improve the environment in which children grow up.

Nearly 2000 children registered as participants in *Try Yourself* activities. A striking feature of the results was the diversity and variety in the types of activities for which children applied for support. Their activities were marked by imagination and inspiration derived from various sources:

• children produced newspapers, arranged a photographic exhibition, started rock bands, made skateboard ramps and model aeroplanes;

• they taught other children to dance, they acted, arranged evening entertainment for

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old people, started clubs to look after cats, and sold eggs; and,

- they opened kiosks and local neighbourhood cafes, cultivated fish, built Stone Age huts, and learnt data processing, etc.

This work shows that children's play represents an exciting focus for discussing the realisation of children's role as citizens. When children play, they often create a common symbolic reality, transforming themselves and their environment into a new reality in which they create both the play context and the play text.

Figure 1. Children building a hut with materials they obtained through a grant from the *Try Yourself* project

This process often involves communication and cooperation on advanced and complex levels, but the process is often here-and-now oriented, with a very different character to conventional adult forms of democratic participation. An interesting question to consider is what kind of participation, and what kind of rationality do projects aimed at realising children's role as citizens promote?

- **Children as a resource**

A good example of the limitations and advantages of participation is a term-long school study of their local community by eight and nine-year-old children. The children were from an old working-class section of Louisville, Kentucky in the USA. The study was followed by participation in planning for an extension of

a public walk from the city's downtown area out to the community's abandoned waterfront (Kjørholt, 1993). At the end of the year, the participating class was compared with classes following conventional curricula. The project students were evenly divided between a desire to stay where they were when they grew up and raised their own children and the lure of exotic places like Florida and California. Only 12% of the non-project students, in contrast, were willing to stay in their community, and almost a quarter described their place as ugly and violent, in contrast to only one project member. For the project students, just having a chance to focus their attention on their community as they studied its geology, history, architecture, and culture appeared to affirm its value as a place with future potential.

When the students followed the city's river-walk planning process, and prepared and suggested plans of their own in collaboration with a local museum, they demonstrated sophisticated group skills and original ideas. They showed a particular sensitivity for preserving existing community uses of the waterfront. For example, they were concerned that homeless people who had built shelters beside the river should not be displaced, and included a residence for these people in their recommendations. They also included low-cost suggestions to preserve fishing sites, and an 'archaeology area' where children liked to dig for old pottery and ironwork from homes that had been levelled when a flood wall was built.

However, after the children drew up their recommendations, the city put the river-walk extension into their community on an indefinite hold. Another community, closer to the city centre, was given a say instead. It appeared they were more politically significant. Thus the children became a resource that was no longer needed. It would have been valuable to assess what the children learnt from the aborted process, even though adult facilitators preferred to put the frustrating process behind them. However, follow-up was complicated by simultaneous cut-backs in the museum staff and the lead teacher's sudden illness. Under better conditions the project facilitators should have stayed with the children to work through the shift in city government plans, and to show how community groups can demonstrate persistence

and resilience by finding other opportunities for local improvement.

• **Reflections**

These case studies show that just as it is necessary to reconsider the meaning of 'children as citizens', it is also necessary to reconsider the concept of 'children as a resource' in planning and development. This perspective is connected to an instrumentalistic attitude towards children, which is difficult to combine with the notion of the child as a subject having certain intrinsic rights as a human being. The slogan-like presentation of 'children as a resource' can serve the function of selling a project and the notion of children's participation, but it is a concept borrowed from the field of economics, and may be interpreted as an illustration of the increasing incorporation of children into the capitalist market.

Another term often used in connection with participatory processes is 'empowerment', but this word and concept must also be used cautiously in work with children. As a group, children are the least powerful members of human society. They are usually not expected to have useful ideas and insights of their own, and through the first years of life they are dependent upon others for all their basic psychological and physical needs.

Thus it is necessary to be explicit about the probable limits of a programme's outcomes. Given their own vulnerability, children are likely to be sympathetic to a facilitator's open admission of a programme's constraints. Participation may indeed be an empowering process, but the limits of this power need to be acknowledged in order to make the potential for real achievements clear. This rule is true for human limits as well as for political and economic limits. For many children, the main motivation for work may be an activity's intrinsic interest. Therefore as much attention needs to be given to a programme's intrinsic value as a means of play, learning, and fellowship as to its other goals. Even on this basis, the limits in facilitators' abilities to invest in children's lives, in terms of personal time and resources, need to be made clear.

Another consequence is that little is systematically known about just what children do gain from participation. If they are indeed empowered, in what ways? Are there ways in which they can be hurt? When programme funding comes to an end, what effects are left behind? As well as using participation as a form of research for development planning, the effects of participation itself need to be researched. Simple pre- and post-involvement measures need to be developed and shared; and programmes that use different processes, within different political and cultural contexts, need to be selected for more intensive evaluation.

Finally, if children's participation is not to be mere tokenism, adults need to see themselves and children as genuine collaborators - but adults need to be very careful about the part they play in this relationship. The main challenge is to find the right balance between giving too much and too little assistance.

In interviews at the end of the *Try Yourself* project, for example, children's observations about adults showed two tendencies. If adults interfered too much, it made the children feel inadequate, and they lost the fun of learning from each other and imagining and thinking up new things together. Children's most common observation, however, was that adults could have given more help. Particularly with larger groups, including class-size groups, the demands on leadership, organisation, and conflict-solving skills are often more than children can master without adult examples at key moments. To believe that all children know everything about what they want to do, or are able to learn it themselves, is to over-estimate children, and not take them seriously. When adults show too much distance, children can also take it as a sign of a lack of genuine interest and investment in the project's success. A true collaboration with children involves learning to observe when to follow the children's lead, and when to come forward with the practical and social skills that are needed to carry the project forward.

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