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The process of empowerment: lessons from the work of Peace Child International

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• Introduction

Empowerment is the process whereby you take a shy child and transform him or her into a confident, self-assured young person, able to contribute effectively and responsibly to society. When the process is followed carefully, an excellent team of motivated young people is created, thrusting energy, vision and new life into adult-directed activity. Having worked with children on projects as varied as musical drama to house-building, I know what a great contribution empowerment can bring, both to the activity and to the young people themselves. It builds their self-esteem, improves their academic performance and, in an international context, creates social cohesion between disparate ethnic groups.

But it can go disastrously wrong. When empowerment goes too far, kids can become overbearing, commanding adults and peers alike to do their bidding. Social cohesion evaporates, kids become increasingly brat-like and untamable, adult tempers fray, and the kids themselves eventually burn out in a fusion of anger and disillusion.

• Degrees of empowerment

So at what point are the frontiers of empowerment crossed? What are the degrees of empowerment? First some disclaimers: I am not a teacher nor am I an academic. My only experience is working for the last fifteen years in an organization whose mission is to "empower children". My introduction to the field was driving kids home from rehearsals of a musical I had been asked to write and direct. Called Peace Child, it told the story of how

Soviet and American children persuaded their governments to end the Cold War. What struck me was the children's conversations in the back of the car: they were more interesting than the lines I had written! So I replaced them, secretly at first - then with growing joy as the kids and I co-created the play.

Peace Child became a movement where children would use the musical stage as a platform to express their concerns. A 15-year old from Minnesota described it thus: "*Standing on a stage saying lines that you'd written yourselves to an audience of mums and dads and teachers cheering - that was the most awesome experience of my life!*"

Between 1982 and 87, there were about 5,000 performances of Peace Child - each different, each allowing young people to write their concerns into the frame-work of a play that resolved an issue that deeply concerned them: the threat of Nuclear War.

We have now moved on to empowering young people to participate in the creation of books, to run the office, act as ambassadors to groups overseas, and to build the hostel in which our student staff now live. With each experience, we have learned more about the technology of youth empowerment. Examples of over-empowerment have been rare. More common are histories of nervous teachers or directors giving up on empowerment halfway through a process. That is debilitating for young people.

The dangers of over-empowerment remain real. I now run the Rescue Mission project with a 20-year old co-director from Finland. I asked her about it when she was hired:

"For me, the way to fight the peace monster scenario is by having a deep respect, a sense of humbleness, and being forever grateful to the adults who took the risk of believing in you and your capabilities when you were just one kid in a crowd. Also, it's vital to have communication relentlessly between adult and youth so that dangers can be spotted and dealt with."

• **Principles to guide the process of empowerment**

In discussion with her and the interns that now run our organisation, I have developed a series of principles to guide the process of empowerment. So far, we have agreed on ten:

- **Ownership:** The child must be given the sensation that the work being done belongs to him/her. Any sense that the final result belongs to a different set of people immediately diminishes their commitment to it.
- **An enabling culture:** In setting up child participation, the surroundings, the chemistry, must be familiar to the child's culture and life-style. Kids are easily daunted, or deflected, by the trappings of adulthood - formality, suits, official bureaucratic processes. This can kill their creativity by marginalising them.
- **Real power:** Any children's council, parliament or partnership must have real power to influence decision-makers or else the children will perceive their efforts to be useless, and quickly lose interest. The adults have to be prepared to let the kids *"win one!"* They smell manipulation and, though they may still do what they are told, they will be resentful.
- **Expectations:** Harboring unrealistic expectations of what the kids can do is destructive both for the children and the adults working with them. Encourage both kids and adults to expect nothing. Then anything that does happen is positive.
- **Honour their forms of expression:** Not slavishly - adults should correct a child's spelling etc. but they should honour the style of their language; in editing, look only for clarity; honour the color in their language. Paintings, illustrations and other forms of expression should remain untouched. In this way, young people feel that the finished expression is essentially their own.
- **Support:** Support the young people with adult experience, do not threaten them with it. Discourage them from feeling that they have to do everything themselves. Encourage them to lay off difficult tasks on adult professionals - like playing music for a show, preparing color lay-outs for printers, handling money. This last is especially difficult as bank accounts and the disciplines of handling money are generally unfamiliar to young people. Encourage and enable them to ask for help.
- **Respect:** It is impossible for any kind of partnership to work without respect. Children's respect for adults is generally the product of all these other principles being observed. Adult's respect for the young partners has to be present at the start of the exercise: it is the essential component of the adult's attitude.
- **Openness and communication:** Adults and kids must communicate constantly and openly for any partnership to work. There will be secrets, there will be back-chat, but harbouring corrosive feelings of malice and resentment, or trying to keep from kids difficult decisions, is utterly destructive to the process. The kids, and the adults, must feel able and supported to be totally open to each other.
- **Time alone:** In any participation process, children must be given time totally alone. With no adult presence. Preferably in small groups. This enables the less forthright members of a group to come forward with ideas and feel included in the process. It also enables the strange chemistry that occurs between kids to produce the unexpected ideas and strategies that are the most lasting products of any participation.

- **Democracy and other ground rules:**
Kids must adhere to democratic principles and established laws of fairness, respect for minorities, ethnic groups etc., if possible without being conscious of it. They must know the principles of personal choice and democracy, secret ballots, equal time etc., to ensure a fair discussion.

The symptoms of each degree of empowerment can be checked against these 10 principles. They cross all boundaries of age, gender, social background, ethnicity, intellectual capacity, sporting, dramatic or other talent.

• **Conclusions**

In every case, the degree of empowerment reflects the degree of responsibility passed on to the young person. If they have little or no responsibility, they will behave irresponsibly - unless there is an iron discipline to prevent them from so doing. The more responsibility, and support and respect one gives to the young person, the more responsible and rewarding will be their behaviour.

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