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Child Participation - It's Child's Play



Ruse, 2010

Preamble

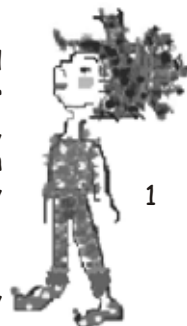
Something fairly extraordinary took place in the Bulgarian village of Dryanovets during the summer of 2009 and youngsters were at the heart of it.

Bulgarian school children have long summer vacations and many de-camp from their sweltering city apartments to village houses occupied by grandparents or other elderly relatives. All too frequently youngsters interpret village summers as periods of exile and deprivation. They make the journey from city to countryside under duress anticipating weeks of stultifying boredom.

In his landmark study 'Last Child in the Woods, Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder', Richard Louv notes that until the nineteenth century the word "bored" didn't exist in anybody's vocabulary far less on the tip of the average child's tongue. Louv cites the academic, Patricia Spacks, author of 'Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind'. Spacks points out that in medieval times, if someone displayed the symptoms we now associate with boredom, that person was thought to be committing something called acedia - a "dangerous form of spiritual alienation" that devalues the world and its creator.

Parents have a tendency to try to give their offspring "everything" and to provide opportunities they consider themselves not to have enjoyed while they were children. They create demanding schedules for their children as a means of pursuing academic or sporting achievement or providing cultural activity. They provide 'educational' toys and myriad devices that depend on access to electrical power or communication networks.

Louv argues that, by providing too much structured recreation parents rob youngsters of the opportunity for constructive boredom. Matters are made worse when, during unstructured time of their own devising, children have ease of access to TVs and computers to which they automatically turn.



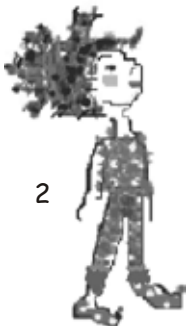
The benefits of constructive boredom were graphically

demonstrated in a study from the 1980s in which researchers from the University of British Columbia examined an otherwise typical Canadian town (named, in the study, "Notel") that did not receive a television service because of isolating geography. The researchers compared children in that town with children in two other towns that did view television. The children in Notel did significantly better in creativity tests. The director of the study concluded that television "displaces other activities ...We had an impression," she says, "that one of the reasons the kids in the town without TV scored higher was because they'd been bored more often and had had to figure out more things to do."

Constructively bored, Annie (aged 12) and Sasho (a few years her junior) started planning games and competitions for their peers. The group grew and events snowballed culminating in a full-blown performance in the small community hall. The invited audience - kids, grandparents, animal herders and tractor mechanics - was treated to a talent contest, music, dance and cabaret.

Encouraged by the mayoress, supported by the village librarian and equipped with a makeshift sound system, the children put together a schedule that actually extended into school term time - a Halloween party was the grand finale. This depended on children actually asking mums and dads if weekends could be spent in the village. Throughout the summer, parents would abandon their city work stations on Friday afternoons and rush to the village for the evening performances. As I write, grown-ups in Ruse, Shoumen, Razgrad and elsewhere in NE Bulgaria are being cajoled into collaboration with the plans of their children for a Christmas extravaganza in the unassuming village of Dryanovets which, until 2009, held very little appeal for youngsters.

Now, that's what we call CHILD PARTICIPATION.
Please read on.



Background

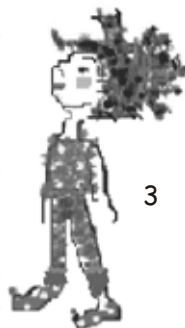
This discussion paper on the subject of Child Participation is being written at a time when leaders of western society (on both sides of the Atlantic) are being forced to radically reassess the dynamics of institutional and social relationships between adults and children. Some commentators have argued that widespread indecision, knee-jerk proliferation of child-oriented initiatives and the multiplication of boards, committees and quangos to deal with the entire process of rearing, socialising and educating children signal a crisis of adult authority.

In the context of a discussion on his new book 'Wasted: Why Education isn't Educating', Frank Furedi, professor of Sociology at the University of Kent, states that "education is an intergenerational dynamic, which relies on the assumption of adult authority. Today, we have an inability to give meaning to education because we struggle to give meaning to adulthood."

He recognizes that a large part of the problem has come about because of the usurpation of the responsibility for the socialization of children from "adults at home and in their communities, and in the formal setting of the school" and the creation of a process he calls "reverse socialization" by which a new breed of professionals transmit values directly to children (frequently in the context of their schooling) which they carry back to their various households.

We are seeing the creation of mini-crusaders for healthy eating and recycling garbage on the basis of government programmes. Children are being 'enabled', 'motivated' and helped to feel good about themselves by phalanxes of childcare and educational experts provided with authority by means of government sponsorship or the weight of the media.

Reviewing Furedi's book for Spiked Online, Jenny Bristow argues that "there is no positive or democratising outcome to our present-day discomfort with the authority of adults: its consequence will be further confusion, where 'the lines between generations become very arbitrary, and the process of socialising generations is incomplete'." (She



quotes Furedi.)

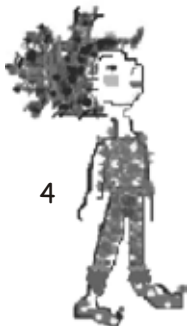
Some argue that when the shape and boundaries of adult interaction with children come to be crafted by remunerated consultants it signals that the rest of us have lost our nerve and become supine before technocratic authority. By becoming politicized and linked to a growing managerial tendency within western government, the promotion of child rights has come to contribute to the erosion of both parental rights and pedagogic authority and independence.

A universal declaration of human rights was shaped during the 1940s largely in reaction to the events of WWII. Soon children came to be recognized as a 'special case'. This recognition culminated in the creation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the UN General Assembly in November 1989. As of December 2008 it had been ratified by 193 countries. Bulgaria is among that number.

The UN Convention defines the basic human rights of children with particular attention to the rights of special protection and care that should be afforded to the young (distinguished from adult human rights)

- Meeting basic needs – food, universal state-paid education, healthcare, criminal / civil laws appropriate to age and level of development
- Right to a level of autonomous action and self-representation
- Right to be physically, mentally and emotionally free from abuse

The idea of Child Participation developed on the basis of the recognition of the right for children to represent themselves and to act with a level of autonomy within the adult world.



I have witnessed many examples of 'self-representation' vigorously assisted by children's NGOs. A common criterion for the funding of programmes in education and child welfare is the 'participation' of those among the youthful target group. Callow and impressionable members of child parliaments in Bulgaria and Somalia can quote their rights as children chapter and verse. Is this Child Participation in action? Unfortunately, in far too many cases it has to be said that - NO - it isn't.

As is the case with the ominous, recent government interference with parenting and interventions in schooling, it's a matter of putting words into the mouths of babes - big style - in a manner that flatters them. Children may be 'participating' after a fashion but the overarching adult agenda is all too apparent.

I strongly believe in Child Participation but it will never be what it says it when it is extensively stage managed by an 'enlightened elite' so as to fuel adult guilt and insecurity. **Child Participation needs Adult Authority as its counterpoint. This is the natural order of things.** If vigorously pushed by crusaders and lobbyists, Child Participation loses its validity because the intended audience is stripped of its essential authority by the antics of the activists who say - "You must listen (on the basis of our authority / expertise)." The children are only piggies in the middle.

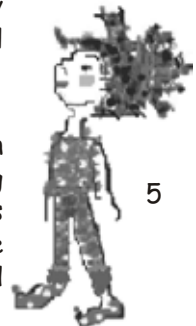
Children can validly participate when their adult counterparts are free to react from a position of natural authority.

What is "Child Participation"?

Child Participation is a fundamental principle of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The "participation rights" enshrined in the CRC are summarized by UNICEF as follows - "Children are entitled to the freedom to express opinions and to have a say in matters affecting their social, economic, religious, cultural and political life. Participation rights include the right to express opinions and be heard, the right to information and freedom of association."

However, Child Participation remains one of those awkward concepts that invite the use of brief, sensible sounding, but essentially opaque definitions or, alternatively, screeds of practical examples of "participation in operation".

The expression can also be used in different ways. It can refer to both the abstract concept of children "taking part" in something and the practical means by which adults can assist this process. Child Participation programmes are common among children's charities. They use Child Participation methodology.

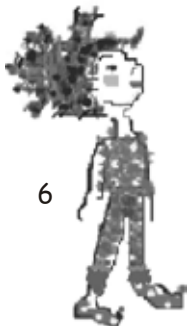


Communities, society at large, comprises of disparate groups. Each respective individual can find himself / herself classified under many different headings within the myriad categories that derive from the bureaucracy of social administration, local, national and global governance. Attaching to each group is a range of assumptions (some are codified but most are unspoken) concerning the rights of any individuals within that group to participate in the framing of those big decisions that affect both that individual and his / her peers.

The expression "Child Participation" has been coined to reflect a growing concern about the extent to which members of that social group comprising "natural person(s) who (have) not reached the age of 18" (definition of "child" per Bulgaria's Child Protection Act) have traditionally been deprived of their right to a level of autonomous action and self-representation. There is seen to have been an overweening assumption among adults that children are not capable of meaningfully representing themselves and, therefore, should only be entitled to the most limited involvement in consultations and debates relating to their personal welfare or those decisions that impact significantly on their lives.

Child rights lobbyists argue that it isn't simply a question of the **underestimation** of children on the basis of criteria relating to intellectual development, reasoning capability or the ability to deal with abstract concepts. The difficulty is rooted in the denial of fundamental human rights -

- The right to hold and freely express opinions
- The right (however inarticulately) to express emotional needs or personal grievances and expect to have them addressed
- The simple right to be heard



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In short, "Child Participation" derives from the recognition that the physical, intellectual and emotional immaturity that characterizes the average child is, in no way, an acceptable criterion for exclusion from involvement in any decision making that affects his / her station in life. This applies in both the familial context and the larger social context.

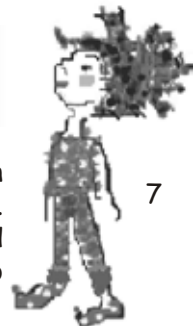
Child Participation has come about both as the embodiment of an aspiration and as a method by which individuals and organizations engage with children because, currently, it is they recognize that children are frequently deprived of their right to participation. It is, therefore, part of the means by which that right is to be secured. Various organizations educate children about their rights as defined by UN CRC and create environments in which they can develop the participative techniques and skills. Will other organizations, groups and, indeed, families come to reflect the spirit of Child Participation? Well, this is the million-dollar question.

Exclusion on the basis of perceived immaturity is now interpreted as authoritarian behaviour. Adult authority is the natural counterpoint to Child Participation. Authoritarianism shouldn't come into the picture. It is, of course, possible to be authoritative without being authoritarian or dismissive of the capacity of children to represent themselves. However, because of the impressionability of children and the adult desire to do what is best for kids as they themselves perceive it authoritarianism can easily intrude into efforts at Child Participation. It is this intrusion that has caused a laudable endeavour to become devalued most certainly in the eyes of cynics and most probably in the eyes of pragmatists.

In the child welfare and educational contexts I am profoundly anti-authoritarian. However, like Frank Furedi and Jenny Bristow I recognize the irony in first castigating parents and teachers for authoritarian behaviour towards children and then proceeding to wage an authoritarian campaign against the adult majority on the twin fronts of formal education and parenting in a manner that patronizes or, indeed, infantilizes those in the frontline of childcare. Education is politicized and childrearing is professionalized. Teachers and parents are monitored and given marks out of ten by credentialed 'experts'.

Words into the Mouths of Babes? Child Participation and Political Activity

Participation encourages young people to be involved in social and educational processes and to take responsibility. It encourages them to think and to implement projects and initiatives as a way of expressing their opinion and to influence policies and practices that affect them.



Of course, this doesn't happen automatically and the children need support and encouragement in order to participate in a meaningful way. Those who are cynical about Child Participation (CP) can easily pounce on this reference to "support and encouragement" and suggest that CP methodology is just another way of manipulating those at a formative age. If, in the wake of a period of "support and encouragement", a child finds his / her voice, how do we know for sure that the opinions expressed are actually those of the child?

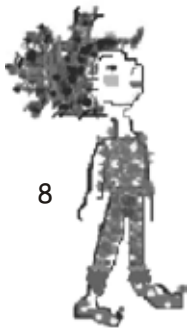
What is it that any of us depends on to arrive at informed opinions? Information. Child Participation is possible when children are provided with information that is not skewed or purposely employed to lead them to certain conclusions when matters are open to interpretation. Child Participation should not be manipulative towards the children. It should not involve substantial 'stage management' by adults to the extent that it justifiably draws into question the level to which the children are volunteers enjoying freedom of expression.

Child Participation tends to be encouraged by organizations that have child welfare or educational agendas. These organizations can fall into two traps-

- Failure to shelter the child participants from the natural tendency to promote the organizational agenda
- Failure to avoid censorial behaviour when the results of Child Participation don't gel nicely with that organizational agenda

Communication and marketing activities need to be kept entirely separate from any organization's Child Protection initiatives. In addition, those initiatives should be monitored for signs of adult heavy-handedness or subtle tweaking when reporting outcomes.

Impartiality and humility among CP organizers are rare and precious commodities but they do exist.



Socialization and Impressionability

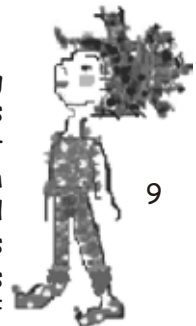
Furedi states that "(f)ormal education is the process by which society transmits its values and intellectual legacy to the younger generation." Selectivity tends to enter into the

process of transmitting values - it is a natural part of the socialization process. A child's right to a level of autonomous action and self-representation does not extend to his or her opting out of or being excused from the socialization process which begins at infancy and leads to the acquisition of the habits, beliefs and accumulated knowledge of society through education and training for adult status. Children have a right to self-expression and participative action but this does not mean adults have to bow to their wishes. Teenagers have a right to express their rebelliousness within domestically / socially acceptable boundaries.

Adult effort towards the socialization of children should stem from a sense of authority, respect for the child and an awareness of the human continuum. We laugh at the story about grandfather's axe - "This is my grandfather's axe and now I'm giving it to you, my boy" "But dad, it looks almost new." "Well, my father replaced the handle and I replaced the blade." However, unless such a sense of continuity between generations is woven into the fabric of society, there is no sense in trying to have rules or regulations apply in school, in the workplace or in the community in general. Organizations, including schools, create questionable orthodoxies that help to keep the organization functional - it's an amoral regime - but heads of families and community leaders create and sustain ethical codes.

We live in a world of rapid change. Unfortunately, many in positions of authority say that this means that the conventions and practices of the past have become outmoded or irrelevant. Tradition has no meaning. We live in a new, digitally driven society in which the intellectual legacy of the past and the accumulated experience of grown-ups have little significance for children who can survive on the basis of dexterity with electronic devices and the ability to navigate information pathways without needing to understand anything all that deeply. All governments worry about is that they should be kept happy and 'on message'.

Since the grandfather's-axe style of transmitting knowledge and values is seen as defunct, governing bodies feel free to usurp parents and educators and target children who have become the tabula rasa upon which politically correct agendas of elite groups can be sketched out via school curricula and campaigns directed towards those at a formative age. Children - 'digital natives' as Furedi calls them - have become the angelic agents of



regional bodies, national governments and multinational organizations with agendas ranging from the eradication of poverty to the stemming of climate change.

This harnessing of the impressionability of children is ominous and genuine Child Participation is threatened by it. It is valid to protect children from bad parents who represent a small minority in any community. It is not right to create draconian conditions that impinge on the authority of all parents and the security of all families. It is utterly wrong to employ Child Participation as a weapon with which to browbeat parents.

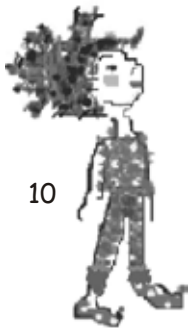
**"We don't need your education. We don't need your thought control."
(Pink Floyd, 'Another Brick in the Wall')**

Genuine Child Participation: A Question of Capability not Impressionability

When providing children with "support and encouragement" so they can take part as child participants in society, organizations have shown a widespread tendency to focus heavily on child rights education.

Some see this as an exercise in provocation or brainwashing. Adults pinpoint authoritarian practice in schools or examples of bad parenting - phenomena tied in with organizational manifestos - and stoke the fires of unrest within the breasts of the young 'participants'. CP practitioners encourage children to complain or express grievances and equip them with rhetoric and tactics in subversion and resistance.

Do human rights advocates or professional consultants plant ideas into the heads of their adult clients? Perhaps, but this is simply an adjunct to the larger process of providing these individuals with the wherewithal to defend their rights as codified in law. A CP practitioner concerned with providing children with the wherewithal for self-advocacy fulfils a similar function on behalf of those children and this is generally achieved by interpreting the UN CRC by means of informal educational tools.



Organizations who undertake Child Participation

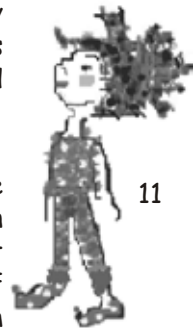
programmes frequently work in countries or regions in which child rights are fairly routinely violated because of authoritarian regimes as opposed to bad parenting. It is also arguable that some of these campaigns involve the 'proselytizing' of youngsters who become espoused to the doctrines of child rights activists and probably made to recognize breaches of their rights of which they were previously unaware. Ignorance is bliss as we say. Children won't feel impinged upon until someone tells them that it's happening.

Going back to our Bulgarian and Somali youth parliaments - if the instigators were children's charities from Western Europe or the USA with child rights axes to grind - couldn't it be argued that a certain form of underhand colonialism was taking place? Not only are western governments and childcare organizations trying to impose their agendas on parents and teachers in their own countries, they are undertaking overseas ventures that employ the same tactic of recruiting children to the cause.

Well, let's think about this proposition. Children's rights as defined by the UN Convention are considered to apply universally. They apply to minors in Bulgaria and minors in Somalia. Bulgaria has ratified the Convention. Somalia is one of the two countries in the world that hasn't ratified. (The other is the USA in case you're interested.) The page on the UNICEF website relating to Somalia has a link to a video in which "(d)isplaced children living in Somalia speak out about their need to fully realize their rights." A child-to-child network operates in 30 Somali schools and, according to the website, "(t)his initiative brings children together in small clubs that meet regularly to discuss issues of concern." Save the Children kick-started a similar network in Bulgarian schools that Equilibrium was involved with some years ago.

Are these organizations guilty of harnessing the impressionability of children to their similar agendas or are they simply providing platforms on which capable, young self-advocates can exercise their right to a level of autonomous action and self-representation?

Speaking from the point of view of Equilibrium, I think we walk a tightrope. All adults who engage with children regularly (and this includes parents) face a dilemma when it comes to providing for the truly autonomous actions of children and their genuine self-representation. Equilibrium

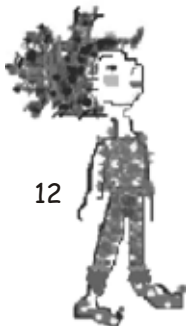


team members face a dilemma because of the organization's engagement with certain educational and child welfare issues,

As a matter of policy, we avoid lobbying for child or parental rights. We are childcare and family service providers. There is a risk that lobbying would change our relationship with those to whom we provide a service. We cannot use these people to serve an agenda. We cannot objectify them. We would be tempted to use them to support our case. Therefore, we purposefully have no case - no axe to grind.

I think this stance assists our approach to Child Participation. We certainly make mistakes on occasions. I suspect the real test will come if or when we are ever asked by children to change direction within any project which impacts on them. Volunteerism prevails in our group activities and workshops with children but placing ourselves in a position in which we could be outvoted by children as regards the direction of an entire undertaking would be a real test. Within the context of service provision a great deal of our activity is heavily regulated but I am looking at ways in which we can meaningfully involve children in organizational decision making. Stuff like summer camps, club activity and event organization can involve meaningful collaboration with youngsters in planning and implementation.

It's a question of honestly and openly saying to children - "We want your input here but please remember where the boundaries lie and that we may not be able to give you what you want. Here are the options. We think they're reasonable but let's hear your point of view." Providing room for expression of that point of view is vital. Respecting that point of view is vital.



Child Participation is a form of 'play'. It involves children emulating adults not BEING adults. Adults must remain the boundary setters. There is stuff that EQ does that is directed towards children that is complex or confidential. Some stuff involves the torturous balancing of moral and practical considerations. This is not a suitable domain for the participation of children.

We work for children but we can't have a child on the management board for simple, practical reasons over and

above the legal specifications for participation. There is, nevertheless, no reason why we can't interpret board decisions for the youngsters they impact upon.

Do we want junior membership of EQ - a youth contingent with the capacity to impact on the decisions of the adult members? Yes, it would make absolute sense when, as an organization, we have the capacity to accommodate the procedures it would bring about.

A Framework for Child Participation

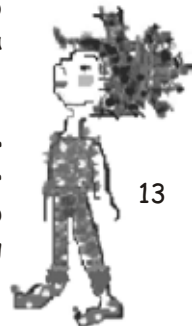
Boys and girls obviously participate in their families, their communities and their societies in a very wide variety of ways (for example: as students, medical patients, carers, workers, consumers and through their involvement in sports and cultural activities).

More narrowly, the term 'participation' is used by those working with children and young people to mean children and young people thinking for themselves, expressing their views effectively, and interacting in a positive way with other people. It means involving boys and girls in the decisions that affect their lives, the shape of their community and the larger society in which they live.

To help ensure that children are meaningfully engaged in the process of social participation, not only should they be well socialized but they also need to be equipped to secure or protect their own rights (as defined in UN CRC) or to claim them for a wider group of children. Children do this in a number of ways:

Through speaking out - for example, to expose abuse, to make a complaint about services, to raise awareness of a problem or to press for a change in policy.

Through their involvement in decision-making - for example, in assessing needs, designing projects or programmes, sharing in school management, drawing up policy guidelines, developing legislation or evaluating services.



Through practical action - for example, through peer education, setting up a child-led organisation, carrying out research or creating / managing media resources run by children for children (eg a children's radio programme).

Children are suitably equipped through being

- Introduced to the tenets of the UN CRC in ways that they can take on board intellectually
- Provided with basic (communication / assertiveness) skills to enable them to take steps towards participation - a process of empowerment
- To some extent, motivated towards participation - it **can** make a difference to their lives

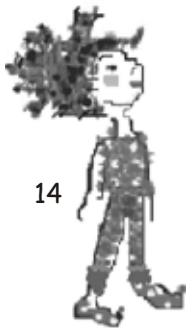
It is arguable that provision of communication / assertiveness skills and the motivation to participate is a significant part of socialization. Children with these skills who have acted on the basis of this motivation should turn into highly capable and self-aware adults.

Child Participation involves

- interaction vertically with individual adults and organizations
- interaction horizontally by means of child-to-child processes

This system mirrors adult interaction which has both formal / hierarchal and peer-to-peer components.

A discrete event (workshop, discussion group or whatever) does not, in itself, represent Child Participation which should involve children in an ongoing process of expression and active involvement in interaction and decision making at different levels in matters that concern them.



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For Child Participation to be genuine and effective it should entail

- Information sharing and dialogue between children and adult based on mutual respect
- Power for children to shape both the process and its

outcome

- Acknowledgment that children's evolving capacity, experience and interest play a key role in determining the nature of their participation
- Capacity building among children by strengthening their skills and competencies
- Building an secure and enabling social environment

Genuine Child Participation is characterized by approaches that acknowledge the rights of the young participants and it takes place within a framework that is

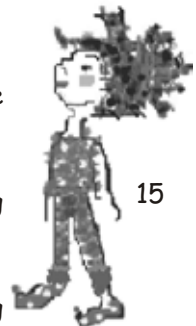
- **Legal** - to ensure that activities are within the prescribed legal and regulatory guidelines
- **Ethical** - to ensure respect for child rights and guarantee the dignity of each child
- **Safe** - in which the protection rights of children as defined by the UN CRC are properly safeguarded
- **Non-discriminatory** - to ensure that all children have an equal opportunity to be involved
- **Child Friendly** - to enable children to contribute to the best of their ability without being imposed upon or manipulated

Child participation can take place at all social levels, namely

- at home
- within the family
- at school and other institutions of learning
- at the community level
- nationally and internationally in advocacy and policy making processes

In the context of the family Child Participation can be supported through:

- organizing family get-togethers at mealtimes or during holidays
- listening to children and taking their opinions seriously
- explaining the reasons for chastising or disciplining



children

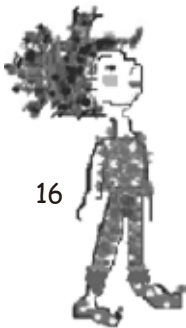
- finding alternatives to physical punishment
- having clear and consistent boundaries
- talking openly to children about issues that affect them - sex, menstruation, relationships, education, hobbies and interests, religion
- involving children in family decisions - holidays, moving house
- praising children for achievements
- giving children responsibilities (which is different from allocating chores)
- involving children in developing or shaping family finances and budgets

Children can be involved in the decision making processes within schools by:

- having school councils on which children are represented
- ensuring that all processes in which children are specially selected are fair and democratic
- ensuring that participation in extra-curricular activity is voluntary
- involving pupils in the development of school rules
- avoiding corporal punishment
- explaining the reasons for chastising or disciplining children
- supporting teenagers to form clubs
- adopting interactive methods of teaching

Child Participation in the community can involve:

- formation and strengthening of youth groups through which views/opinions can be collected
- having youngsters take part in addressing community problems affecting children such as drug abuse, violence, negative cultural practices etc.
- participating in health management systems (eg campaigns about healthy eating)
- partnering with community leaders (eg municipal authorities) to create community visions
- taking part in developing and implementing community development projects e.g. environment protection campaigns



Participation in Advocacy and Policy development, including research and media engagements requires sensitivity in the selection and engagement of participants to ensure children have opportunities to contribute ideas, review, provide feedback and influence change nationally.

Child Participation – Key Points to Consider

- Child Participation is not an activity, but a way of undertaking other activities.
 - A single participatory activity is not 'participation' - participation should be mainstreamed into all areas of social activity.
 - The participation of children is shaped by the context, task to be performed and children and adults involved.
 - Children's participation should always be voluntary, informed, meaningful and in the best interest of the child.
 - Children's participation should empower children, especially those who are disadvantaged.
 - The participation of children should help them to develop the knowledge, attitudes and skills they need to realize their potential and become responsible citizens.
 - Children's participation can enable them to protect themselves from harm and exploitation.
 - Children should not be manipulated to promote an adult agenda through decoration or tokenism.
 - Care should be taken to ensure that the atmosphere in which children participate is relaxed, friendly and democratic.
 - Relations between children and adults should always be respectful.
 - Participation should aim at including the largest possible number of children.
 - Methods and activities should be used that are appropriate to the capabilities, needs and interests of the young participants.

The Wrong Sort of Child Participation

Equilibrium was once approached by an Italian organization seeking young delegates for a youth parliament. We were asked if we could provide a group of teenagers from poor



communities who had been deprived of educational opportunity.

I asked what I considered to be obvious questions -

- Could I be provided with details of the agenda?
- Would we be required to provide our own translators or would they be provided by the Italian host organization?

I was informed that the agenda was being 'kept loose' so as not to impose constraints on the young participants while the working language for the conference would be English and all participants would need to have basic competence in the language.

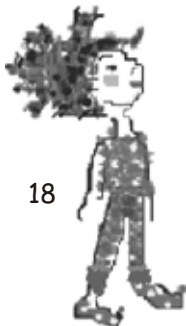
Think about this, please. We were being asked to source educationally disadvantaged Bulgarian youngsters who were English speakers and capable of framing an agenda and sustaining it over several days.

It's alarming that a number of other youth organizations had no problems with the criteria and that the conference took place featuring an international gathering of youngsters discussing their shared experience of educational and social disadvantage in English.

Child Participation in Bulgaria and elsewhere is frequently **manipulative, tokenistic or elitist**.

Examples of common failings encountered in Bulgaria -

1) The invitation of a limited number of children to make a stipulated contribution to an event that is far from child friendly in terms of formality & protocol, technical content and chosen venue (eg a municipal debate on child welfare) with the result of alienating those young participants. In addition, the children are given no feedback on how their views have influenced the decisions that have been made. (tokenism & manipulation)



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2) The continuing practice by schools of promoting / rewarding children on the basis of academic performance in

circumstances in which it is not a relevant criterion eg channeling the academic stars towards NGOs or other organizations who ask for school representatives / young volunteers. (elitism)

3)The intrusion of didacticism and authoritarian practice into the club environment and realm of youth work and a training regime into the domain of recreation. (elitism, manipulation and tokenism)

Educational Impediment to Child Participation

Perhaps the strongest impediment to the acceptance of the validity of Child Participation is the dominance of the bottle-and-glass philosophy of Bulgarian teaching in a system that is highly didactic.

Teacher - bottle full of knowledge

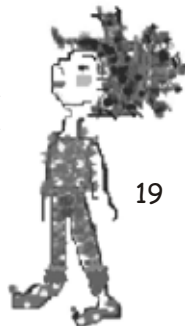
Student - empty glass

Basic premise - the student must absorb information "parrot fashion", memorize it and reproduce it when examined.

"(M)any observers indicate that Bulgarian classrooms are still dominated by rote memorization, authoritarian teachers, theory without practice, and little chance for children or young people to exercise their creative, problem-solving abilities."

('The Role of Bulgarian Universities in the Transformation of Society', Prof. Anna-Maria Totomanova 2002).

This philosophy stands in total opposition to the idea that children have the capacity and, therefore, the right to participate. In addition, it remains true that school continues to see its task not only in terms of the preservation of academic standards but also in terms of the sustaining of a cluster of normative behaviours prescribed for children so that they fulfil their part in the "correct" pattern of social life (ie that approved by central government). The socially vulnerable tend not to be able to comply and the types of problems that arise in schools in



underprivileged communities render these establishments dysfunctional in terms of the prevailing educational and social criteria. The interface between these schools and the social services is often characterised by coercion and control as opposed to caring and support.

Participation and Children's Rights

Participation - the right to a level of autonomous action and self-representation - is an essential characteristic of the child as an active member of society. For this reason, it is seen as a general principle of fundamental importance to implementation of all aspects of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Boys and girls are seen as active holders of rights and individuals whose views and opinions should be given serious consideration.

Children's participation rights are set out in Articles 12, 13, 14, 15 and 17 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. These cover:

- The right to express views freely in all matters affecting him or her (with those views given due weight in accordance with the child's age and maturity)
 - The right to freedom of expression
 - The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion
 - The right to freedom of association
 - The right to information

Article 5 of the Convention is also important because of its reference to parent's role in providing direction and guidance while at the same time actively acknowledging the evolving capacity of their offspring to make their own decisions and form their own views.



Recognition of children's right to participation is also important in Articles 9, 16 and 29 of the Convention which cover such key areas as children's rights to make their views known about any decision to separate them from their families.

The Importance of Child Participation

Child Participation is important

Because it increases the effectiveness of interventions aimed at improving children's lives.....

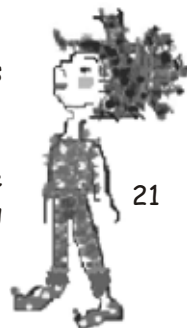
Children's participation makes work more effective because:

- It ensures that projects, programmes and services are more appropriate, relevant and sustainable - and therefore more likely to succeed.
- It provides new perspectives on issues such as inclusion and de-institutionalisation.
- It helps to identify the key barriers that children face in securing their rights and innovative responses to address them.
- It gives children a sense of 'ownership' and sense of responsibility for projects and services developed for their benefit.
- It leads to better decisions, building on children's own experience and knowledge.

Because it brings benefits to the children involved.....

Children's participation brings a number of benefits to the individual children involved. These include:

- Direct improvements in their own lives and life chances e.g. access to schooling or improved services.
- The possibility to protect themselves and challenge abuses of their rights, either directly or through informing a responsible adult.
- Enhanced self-confidence and self-esteem.



- An opportunity to acquire and expand their skills, including problem-solving, negotiation and communication skills.
- Familiarisation with group and democratic processes, including understanding different points of view, the need for compromise and a sense of responsibility for group decisions.
- A sense of purpose and competence in their own lives - a belief that they can make a positive impact on their own lives and on the lives of their peers, family and community.
- An opportunity to learn and practice the skills of responsible and active citizenship.

Because it empowers children as members of civil society and active citizens.....

The practice of participation strengthens children's ability to hold organisations, institutions and governments to account. It enables children to play an active part in civil society and to compensate for their exclusion from formal political processes. It increases the visibility of children and children's issues ensuring that they are given greater weight in economic, social and political agendas. By increasing accountability to children, it enlarges the democratic space and encourages good governance.

Because children themselves want to participate.....

Many - but not all - children want to be involved in decisions that affect them and in speaking out, or acting, on issues that concern them. They feel that they have something worthwhile to contribute that adults often ignore. They would like the opportunity to help make the world a better place. For those with an awareness of their rights, they also believe that when an issue affects them they have the right to have their view heard. Like adults, they also enjoy the chance to meet other children and to explore the similarities and differences in their views and experiences.



Because the concerns raised about children's

participation are either unfounded or can be dealt with through ensuring good quality practice.....

A number of arguments are often used to challenge the appropriateness of children's participation or to deny children the opportunity to participate.

These include views that:

Children will be manipulated by adults and not be free to express their own views.

Children do not have the competence or experience to participate

Children will misuse participation to create problems

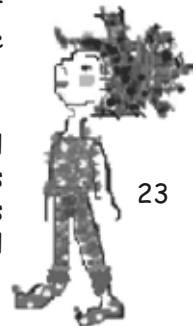
Participation will undermine the authority of adults, especially parents.

Participation will 'over-burden' children, take away their childhood and give them too much responsibility e.g. for protecting themselves or deciding significant issues.

Once provided with relevant information, appropriate support and the freedom to express themselves in ways in which they feel comfortable, children - according to their age and maturity - are able to demonstrate their competence to engage. Furthermore, children show a high degree of responsibility in the way they use such opportunities because they are as concerned as the adults to make a real difference.

With regard to 'over-burdening' children it is important to bear in mind that children's participation should be voluntary and freely given. Children do not have to participate. It also relevant to note that many children's lives are already full of responsibilities (such as caring for family members, working or coping with family disputes) and that participation can be a way of both sharing their experience and finding real solutions.

Adult manipulation is, of course, a risk and it is a critical part of participatory practice to guard against this happening. Like other risks associated with children's participation it needs to be dealt with by ensuring an ethical approach and a high quality of practice.



Finally, participation should not be seen as a threat to parents or to other adults in positions of authority. As noted above, it is through participation that children can learn tolerance, negotiation skills and the need for compromise. By having their views taken seriously they develop respect for adults who are willing to listen and engage with them. Children come to understand that while they may have a view, so will others and that there is a need for finding solutions and building common understanding. As argued earlier, it is not the participation of children that places adult authority in jeopardy, it is the activity of organisations whose agenda is to browbeat others using children as their unwitting agents.

Child participation can usefully be graded as follows -

Manipulation: Children do or say what adults wish them to do but with no real understanding of the issues.

Window-dressing: Children are asked to take part in events but not given any explanation of the issues or the reasons for their involvement.

Tokenism: Children are apparently given a voice but have little or no choice about the subject or method of communicating their views.

Assignment with information: Children are informed about projects and who made the decisions and why they were made.

Consultation with information: Children are asked for their opinions and these are taken seriously by the organization. They will have been informed of the processes within the organization.

Adult initiation with decision sharing: Children are fully involved in the decision-making processes including full consultation and involvement in the decision outcomes.

Child initiation and direction: Projects, ideas and decisions have been initiated by the children themselves.

Child initiation involving shared decision: Children identify or conceive an idea and then work with adults as equal partners in its development.

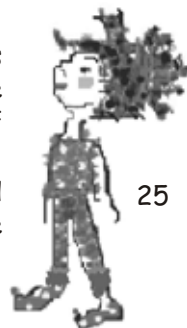


Guidelines for Working with Children in a Meaningful and Child-Oriented Way

i. An Ethical Approach: Transparency and Honesty

There are inevitable imbalances in power and status between adults and children. An ethical approach is needed in order for children's participation to be genuine and meaningful. Adult organisations and workers are committed to ethical participatory practice and to the primacy of children's best interests when:

- Children are able to freely express their views and opinions and have them treated with respect.
- There is clarity of purpose about children's participation and honesty about its parameters. Children understand how much impact they can have on decision-making and who will make the final decision.
- The roles and responsibilities of all involved (children, adult supporters and other stakeholders) are clearly outlined, understood and agreed upon.
- Clear goals and targets are agreed with the children.
- Children are provided with and have access to relevant information regarding their involvement.
- Children are involved from the earliest possible stage and are able to influence the design and content of participatory processes.
- Children have time to consider their involvement and have to give their personal, informed consent to it.
- Outside' adults involved in any participatory processes are sensitised to working with children, clear about their role and willing to listen and learn.
- Organisations and workers are accountable to children for the commitments they make.
- Where the process of involvement requires representation from among a wider group of children, the selection of representatives will be based on principles of democracy and non-discrimination.
- The barriers that children who have been empowered to participate may meet in other spheres of their lives are considered and discussed with the children involved.



ii. Children's Participation is Relevant and Voluntary

Children's participation should build on their personal knowledge – the information and insights that children have about their own lives and the issues that affect them. Recognising their other commitments, children should be able to participate on their own terms and for lengths of time chosen by them. Children participate in work on issues that directly affect them and have the choice as to whether to participate or not:

- The issues are of real relevance to the children being involved and draw upon their knowledge, skills and abilities.
- Children are involved in setting the criteria for selection and representation for participation.
- Children are given sufficient information and support to enable them to make an informed decision on their participation.
- Children participation is voluntary and they can withdraw at any time they wish.
- Children should be involved in ways, at levels and at a pace appropriate to their capacities and interests.
- Children's other time commitments are respected and accommodated (e.g. to home, work, school).
- Ways of working and methods of involvement should incorporate and build on supportive local structures, traditions, knowledge and practice.

iii. A Child Friendly, Enabling Environment

The quality of children's participation and their ability to benefit from it are strongly influenced by the efforts made to create a positive environment for their participation.



Children experience a safe, welcoming and encouraging environment for their participation:

- Ways of working build the self-esteem and self-confidence of children so that they feel they are able to contribute and that they have valid experience and views to contribute.
- Methods of involvement are developed in partnership with children so that they reflect their preferred mediums

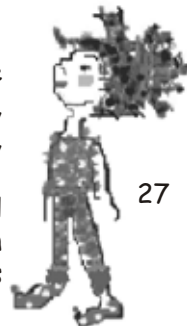
of expression, their age, maturity and evolving capacities.

- Sufficient time and resources are made available for quality participation.
- Adults are sensitised to help them understand the value of children's participation and to enable them to play a positive role in supporting it (e.g. through awareness-raising, reflection and capacity-building).
- Child-friendly meeting places are used where children feel relaxed, comfortable and have access to the facilities they need. They should be accessible to disabled children.
- Organisational or official procedures are designed / modified to facilitate (rather than intimidate) children and welcome less experienced children.
- Support is provided where necessary to share information and/or build skills and capacity to enable children to participate effectively.
- Children are asked what information they need and accessible information is shared with children in good time, in child friendly formats and in languages that the children understand.
- In situations where children meet with different native/first languages interpretation should be provided that allows for children's full participation in discussions and access to written information.
- Non-technical language is used in all discussions involving children and/or all jargon or technical terms are clearly explained.

IV. Equality of Opportunity

Children, like adults, are not a homogeneous group and participation should provide for equality of opportunity for all regardless of age, situation, ethnicity, gender, abilities, class, caste or other factors. Child participation work should challenge not reinforce existing patterns of discrimination and exclusion:

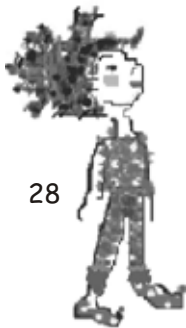
- All children should have an equal chance to participate and are not discriminated against because of age, gender, abilities, language, social origin, class, ethnicity, geographical location, etc.
- Children's involvement should be aimed at including all rather than a few. This could mean reaching out to children in their local settings rather than inviting representatives to a central point.



- Participatory practice with children should be flexible enough to respond to the needs, expectations and situation of different groups of children - and to regularly re-visit these concerns.
- The age range, gender and abilities of children are taken into account in the way participation is organised e.g. in the way information is presented.
- No assumptions are made about what different groups of children can and cannot do.
- Wherever possible, children should themselves select from among their peers those who will represent them in participatory initiatives.
- Influential adults are engaged to gain community support for the participation of discriminated-against groups.

Providing equality of opportunity is an impulse laden with difficulty and organisations with an agenda directed towards 'integration' of children from disadvantaged groups into the mainstream can (and frequently do) succumb to pitfalls. It pays to seek, at best, the involvement or, as a second resort, the advice of those with a genuine understanding of the sensitivities and habits of the non-dominant group.

Also, efforts towards the participation of certain groups may meet with resistance from among the group. I recall the trials of the Equilibrium team as we embarked upon the presentation of an interactive workshop that had been thoroughly tried and tested in Ruse to a group of schoolchildren in Shoumen. At the outset, the team simply seemed unable to create the buzz that we'd grown accustomed to and, indeed, expected to generate. The majority within the group were Turkish but - heck - we were all experienced and sensitive to the quirks of working with kids from minority ethnic groups. What was going on?



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In Equilibrium's manual on 'Experiential Education' (2006) we refer not only to the factionalism that can colour the reaction of a small group from a particular school or club when the kids in question are called upon to cooperate within a larger group, we also refer to a 'complacency bubble' within which groups of teenagers can encapsulate themselves.

Groups that are 'ready made' because of bonds of friendship or some other form of affiliation can be

awkward to work with if the adults with whom they are to interact have played no part in the world from which they carry their 'baggage' in the form of shared experience.

Members of the Equilibrium team that generally works in the context of a social services centre cannot simply walk into a school and say to the children - "Hey, get participating with us." It doesn't work that way. The speed at which we hit it off with new groups we work with depends not only to the past experience of the children in question as regards CP type activity, it also depends on the strength of alignment across the adult-child divide. Culture plays a part. Social class plays a part. I can go on but I think you catch my drift.

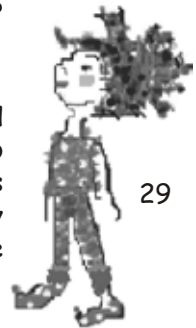
Inclusive Child Participation undertaken in a country in which you have a fair cross section of races, religious and cultural groups is not a question of ensuring that you have little black or yellow faces among the Teutonic blonds. People get themselves into trouble when they try to merge the principles of Child Participation with those of Multiculturalism without taken proper account of the practical considerations. If culturally diverse adult groups find it awkward to share participation why should it be any less fraught when children are involved?

What about individual children and the question of volunteering? Child Participation works on democratic and inclusive principles. Is it adequate or, indeed, acceptable to simply cede to the reluctance of children who may not want to get involved for one reason or another. Shouldn't we avoid a situation in which Child Participation is reserved for those children who put themselves forward? They're up for it and therefore it's made available to them.

How do you socially mobilize shy or introverted children?
Should you try?

"Some parents and teachers think that introverted children should be encouraged (or even forced) 'to become more sociable.' The EQ team totally repudiates the belief that natural introverts can change in this way and, indeed, we feel that this type of effort can damage a child emotionally."

('Experiential Education', an EQ publication, 2006)



Introverts can probably cope with the company of a small number of children who are equally placid. However, their need to internalize experience which involves the tendency to carefully select of things they want to dedicate their attention to and consequently become absorbed, makes it difficult for them to become dynamically participative.

However, let's remember that the right to autonomous action and self-representation extends to the most tongue-tied, the most profoundly withdrawn and the most inarticulate. It's perfectly feasible to construct a safe environment in which such children can express themselves and participate in the setting of rules and boundaries. I've tried it. It can be excruciating. It can also be enormously rewarding for all those involved.

V. Staff are Effective and Confident

Adult workers can only encourage genuine children's participation effectively and confidently if they have the necessary understanding and skills. Adult staff and managers involved in work on children's participation are trained and supported to do their jobs to a high standard:

- All staff and managers are sensitised to children's participation and understand the commitment to children's participation.
- Staff members are provided with appropriate training and other development opportunities in participatory practice to enable them to work effectively and confidently with children.
- Staff members are properly supported and supervised, and evaluate their participation practice.
- Specific technical skills or expertise (e.g. in communication, facilitation, conflict resolution or multi-cultural working) is built up through a combination of recruitment, selection, staff development and practice exchange.
- Relations between staff and between staff and management model appropriate behaviour, treating each other with respect and honesty.
- Support is provided for managers and staff for whom children's participation represents a significant personal or cultural change, without this being regarded as a problem.
- Staff members are able to express any views or anxieties about involving children in the expectation that these will



be addressed in a constructive way.

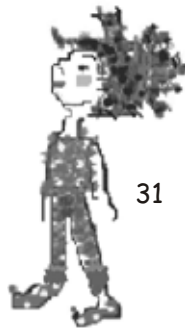
VI. Participation promotes the Safety and Protection of Children

Organisations have a duty of care to children with whom they work and everything should be done to minimise the risk to children of abuse and exploitation or other negative consequences of their participation. Child protection policy and procedures form an essential part of participatory work with children:

- The protection needs of children are paramount in the way children's participation is planned and organised.
- Children involved in participation work are aware of their right to be safe from abuse and know where to go for help if needed.
- Safeguards are in place to minimise risks and prevent abuse (e.g. children are adequately supervised and protected at all times; risk assessments are in place for residential activities away from home).
- Staff members recognise their legal and ethical obligations and responsibilities (e.g. in respect of their own behaviour or what to do if they are told about the inappropriate behaviour of others).
- Child protection procedures recognise the particular risks faced by some groups of children and the extra barriers they face to obtaining help.
- Careful assessment is made of the risks associated with children's participation in speaking out, campaigning or advocacy. Depending upon the risks identified, steps may be needed to protect children's identity or to provide follow-up measures to give protection (e.g. to ensure their safe reintegration into their communities).
- Consent should be obtained for the use of all information provided by children and information identified as confidential needs to be safeguarded at all times.
- No photographs, videos or digital images of a child should be taken or published without that child's consent.
- Unless otherwise agreed, it should not possible to trace information back to individual/groups of children.

VII. Follow Up and Evaluation

It is important that children understand what has been the outcome from their participation and how their



contribution has been used. It is also important that, where appropriate, they are given the opportunity to participate in follow-up processes or activities. As a key stakeholder, children should be an integral part of monitoring and evaluation processes. Respect for children's involvement is indicated by commitment to provide feedback and / or follow-up and to evaluate the quality and impact of children's participation:

- Children are given rapid and clear feedback on the impact of their involvement, the outcome of any decisions/next steps and the value of their involvement.
- Feedback reaches all children involved.
- Children are asked about their satisfaction with the participation process and for their views on ways in which it could be improved.
- The results of monitoring and evaluation are communicated back to the children involved in an accessible and child-friendly way, and their feedback is taken into account in future participation work.
- Mistakes identified through evaluation are acknowledged and commitments given about how lessons learned will be used to improve participatory processes in the future.



Examples of Child Participation Methods employed by Equilibrium

Eskimos in Ruse

Children and adults share the experience of building a village of igloos (January, 2008).



This wasn't part of any project or programme. It was done on impulse and for the sake of having fun. We needed something to take minds of malfunctioning school boilers, iced up pavements and the ice crashing off the eaves of buildings. The igloo village was built in the car-park of Ruse's complex for the social support of families and children by the facility's personnel accompanied by sons and daughters, volunteers from a local outdoor club and a large group of youngsters from among the clientele.

The implications of the EC for Bulgarian youngsters

In the context of a project (2007-2008) focusing on non-formal education undertaken under the EC Education and Culture programme, EQ team members helped Bulgarian teenagers come to understand the importance of "the institutions and organisations of the European Union" for youngsters. A highly interactive workshop was adapted for use in a variety of venues and a variety of young participants from three schools -

Elite' group:

- Ruse English Language School (exclusively representative of the Bulgarian upwardly mobile)





Mainstream group:

- 'Vazrazhdane' general secondary school, Ruse (contained 3 children of Turkish descent).

Ethnic minority:

- Pupils of Traiko Simeonov secondary school, Shoumen - catchment area of school contains a Turkish enclave and a gypsy neighbourhood that is not well integrated into the mainstream. Truancy and aggression were issues within the school.





Summer village programme from children for children

Annie, one of the young driving forces behind the Dryanovets activities (see preamble), gave an inspiring presentation about her summer in the village to the personnel of the complex.





Moving towards self-advocacy for young people with disabilities

Despite his learning disability, the oldest resident at the small group home we manage is good with his hands and likes to join in when things are being baked, built or repaired.



In October 2009, the EQ team hosted a training event that extended over a period of two and a half days and was presented by two representatives of the British organization People First. Mike Le-Surf is a highly experienced trainer in the field of self-advocacy for those with disabilities. His 18 year-old colleague - James Hamilton - is, in fact, disabled: he has Down's Syndrome.

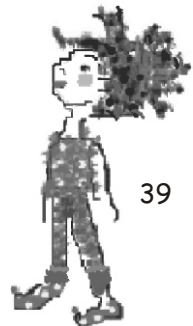
Among the participants were young, learning disabled clients of the Ruse social support complex. A young man with mild learning disabilities spoke of the trauma of spending his childhood in a number of institutions for the disabled having been abandoned by his parents and finally being helped to live independently and work for a living.



Conclusion

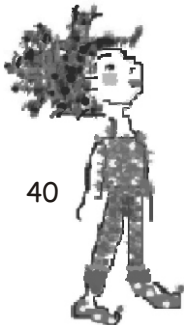
It's very easy to see Child Participation as an exercise in adult naivety or the pursuit of an ideal that is difficult to embody in the realm of hard practicalities. Looking at Child Participation from this cynical perspective does not devalue it. The viewpoint tells us a great deal about the extent to which adults need to mend their ways. Perhaps we need to recognize that contemporary work practices often take us away from our children for too long while the shape of our personal finances - the means by which we earn, save and spend money - does little to support family or community activity. The relationship between working or, more particularly, earning, and caring for children is alarmingly skewed. Government-fueled concerns about health and safety make a significant contribution to the cost of goods and services, employment patterns, the atomization of society and the cloistering of children in a sanitized environment presided over by experts.

We need to find ways to meaningfully reunite the worlds of adults and children while also ensuring that government initiatives directed at children promote the commonweal in the long term as opposed to their simply representing politically correct reactions to hot issues.



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This manual is designed for all those who work extensively with children but primarily teachers, youth leaders and social workers.

'It is important that students bring a certain ragamuffin, barefoot irreverence to their studies; they are not here to worship what is known, but to question it.'

J. Bronowski



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