

## PAR with children and young people: Tackling challenges and achieving transformations



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## Overview

1. "Pathways to Participation"  
- *Pause for reflection* -
2. Transformative Action Research with and by children and young people  
- *Pause for reflection* -
3. A tool to help researchers develop partnerships with children and adolescents  
*Q+A, final reflections*



*Photos by PLAY-TRAIN (UK 1998-2000, slides 11-15) and CESESMA (Nicaragua 2007-2015), featuring children and young people as active citizens, consultants, researchers, campaigners and human rights defenders, taken with informed consent of the young people featured, and reproduced here with their permission.*



**"All models are wrong, but some are useful"**  
*(George Box, 1979)*

## 1. "Pathways to Participation"



My first publication: *Adventure Playgrounds, an Introduction*. 1984.

### Origins

I started my career in the 1970s, working on Adventure playgrounds in the UK.

Then I 'discovered' children's rights at the 'World Play Summit' in Melbourne in 1993



This experience changed the course of my life...

I discovered that, whatever social issue you want to tackle, children's rights provides both an underpinning framework and an overarching approach – which I have been committed to ever since.



## The child's right to be heard

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child establishes the fundamental right of the child to be heard:

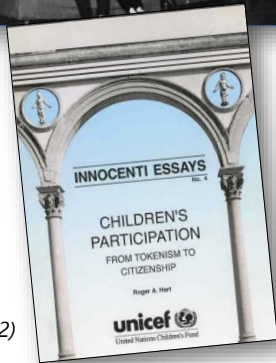
### Article 12

1. 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.

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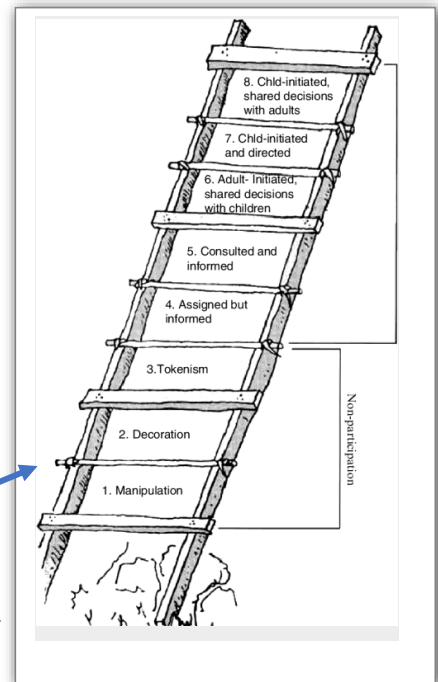
On my return to the UK I formed an action committee to organise the first Article 31 Conference



(Hart 1992)



Roger Hart came and introduced us to his "Ladder of children's participation"



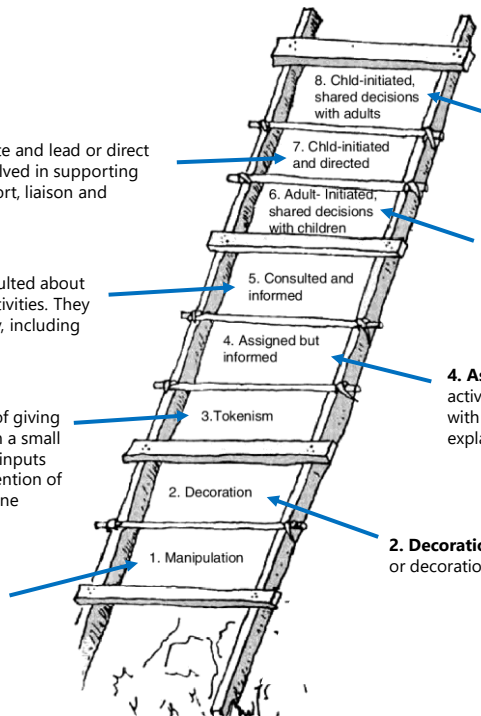
## Hart's ladder

**7. Child-initiated and directed:** Children initiate and lead or direct a project. Adults are often (but not always) involved in supporting roles, such as logistical support, technical support, liaison and facilitation.

**5. Consulted and informed:** Children are consulted about their potential involvement in adult-initiated activities. They are informed about the outcomes of the activity, including decisions made by adults as a result.

**3. Tokenism:** Adults engineer the appearance of giving children a voice, but only the appearance. Often a small number of children are carefully selected. Their inputs are received and applauded, but there is no intention of learning from the children, and rarely any genuine dialogue.

**1. Manipulation:** Adults use children to advance causes or projects that are primarily of interest to themselves.

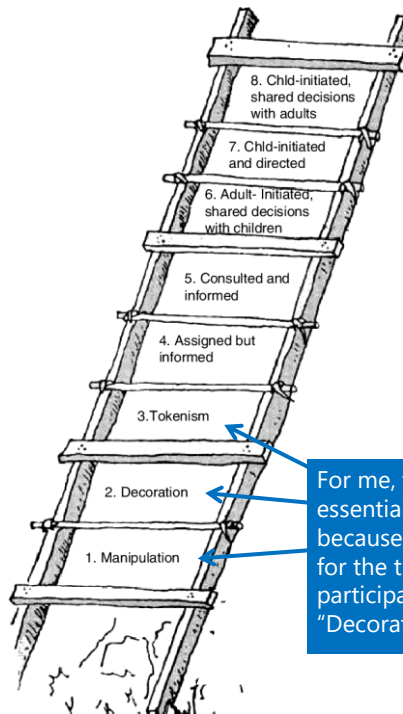


**8. Child-initiated, shared decisions with adults:** Children initiate and lead projects, but invite selected adults to share decision-making, usually as equal partners, with shared responsibility.

**6. Adult-initiated, decisions are shared with children:** Adults initiate and lead projects, but invite children to get involved, and share the decision-making with them.

**4. Assigned, but informed:** In adult-led activities, children are given a specific role with a legitimate purpose, which is properly explained to them.

**2. Decoration:** Adults use children as entertainment or decoration at adult-dominated events.



For me, the ladder model is still an essential part of our tool-kit because Hart taught us to look out for the three types of false participation: "Manipulation", "Decoration" and "Tokenism".

## The Article 31 Children's Consultancy Scheme

The Article 31 Conference led to the **Article 31 Action Pack**



Then the launch of the **Article 31 Action Network**



Then in 1997, the **Article 31 Children's Consultancy Scheme**

There was a fashion for making programmes and institutions "child-friendly", particularly in the arts, culture and recreation sectors. "Expert advice" was being sought.

## So where do we find the experts?



Children are experts on what is child-friendly and what isn't, what works for children and what doesn't, what's fun and what's boring, what makes them feel included and what makes them feel excluded. (Shier, 1999)

## 1998



Child consultants advising the management of the new Manchester City Art Gallery on how to create a child-friendly gallery.



## 1999

Child consultants commissioned by the British Waterways Board to research the educational and recreational potential of the English canal network.



## 2000



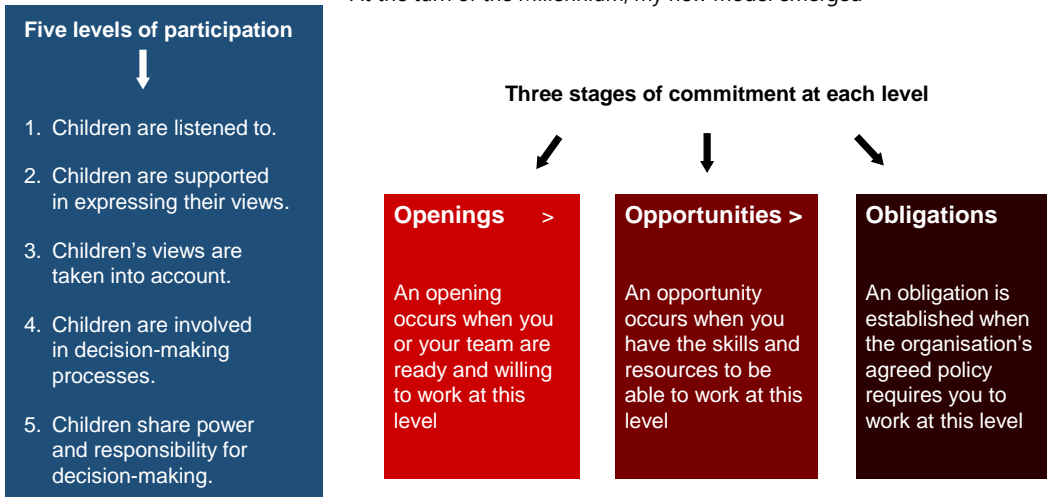
Child Consultants advise managers at the Tower of London on how to make it less boring.



## 2000: Emergence of a new analysis

As the work progressed, I sought to understand how adults interact with child citizens in these situations.

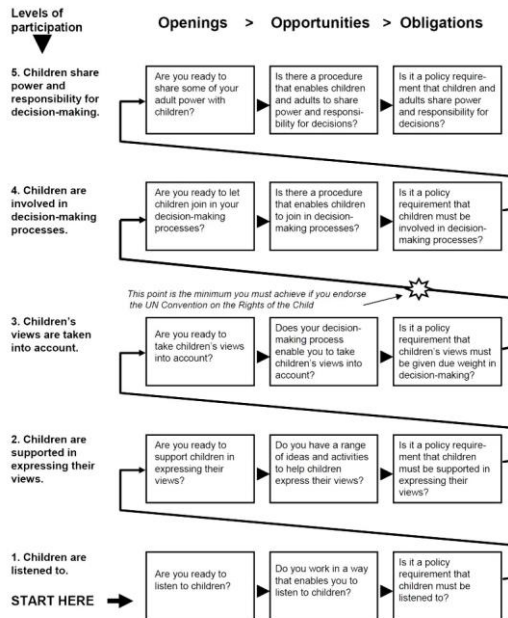
At the turn of the Millennium, my new model emerged





Shier, H (2001). Pathways to Participation: Openings, Opportunities and Obligations. *Children & Society*, 15: 107-117

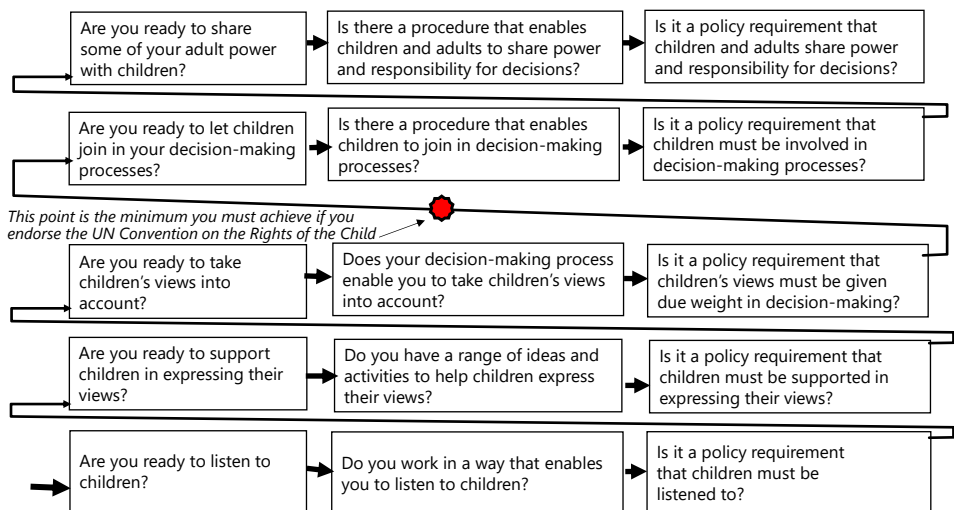
**Pathways to Participation**  
Harry Shier 2001



**Openings > Opportunities > Obligations**

**Levels of participation**

- 5. Children share power and responsibility for decision-making.
- 4. Children are involved in decision-making processes.
- 3. Children's views are taken into account.
- 2. Children are supported in expressing their views.
- START HERE**
- 1. Children are listened to.





“Pathways to Participation” was published in the UK over 20 years ago, in April 2001.

Today it is one of the most widely used tools for analysing and enhancing children’s participation, in academic study, policy and practice, throughout the world.



### Why do we use ladders?

- Both Hart’s and Shier’s models involve “levels”.
- Some have complained that this pushes us to climb ever upwards, striving for higher levels of participation. This might not be in children and young people’s best interests.
- But there’s another way to look at it: How do people use ladders in real life?

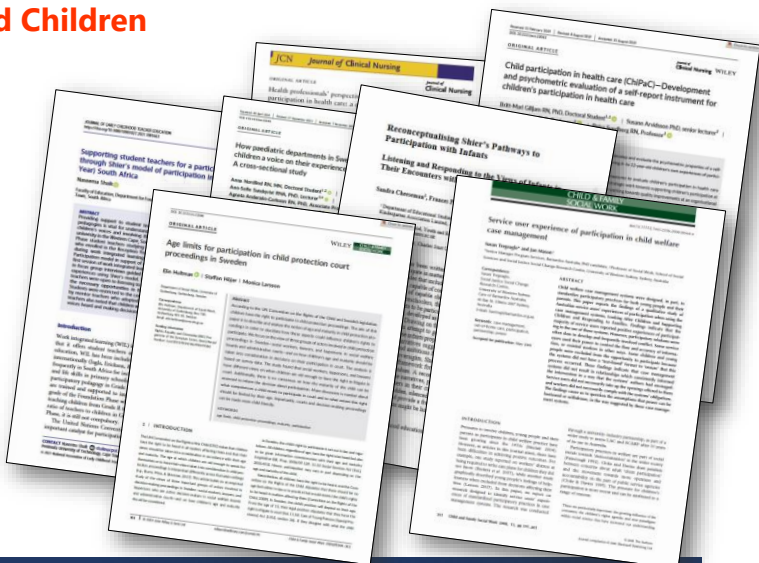
The purpose of a ladder is not to climb to the top. We use a ladder to help us work at the correct height for the task in hand (and without the ladder, we cannot do this).



## “Pathways to Participation” and Children participating in social research

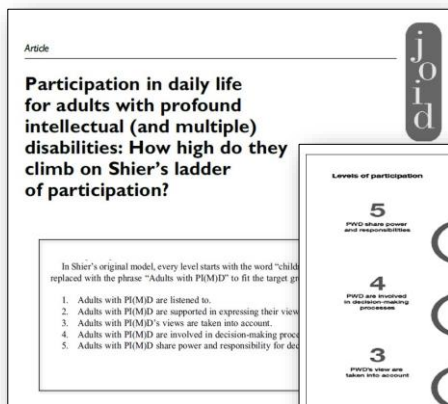
Over the past 20 years, researchers around the world in many disciplines, including education, health, social care, recreation and public policy, have made use of the “Pathways to Participation” model in different ways.

Many have used it to assess, evaluate or re-think the reality of child participation in different service areas and settings. (Tregeagle and Mason, 2008; Schalkers et al, 2016; Gilljam et al, 2019; Hultman et al, 2020; Nordlind et al, 2021; Shaik, 2021; Cheeseman et al, 2022)



N.B. There is no standardised questionnaire or data-gathering tool for “Pathways to Participation”. Every researcher who avails of it, uses it as a framework to create new research tools tailor-made to their context and target group.

It has also been adapted to study the participation of other disadvantaged or unheard groups:



Adults with Profound and Multiple Disabilities (Talman et al, 2019)

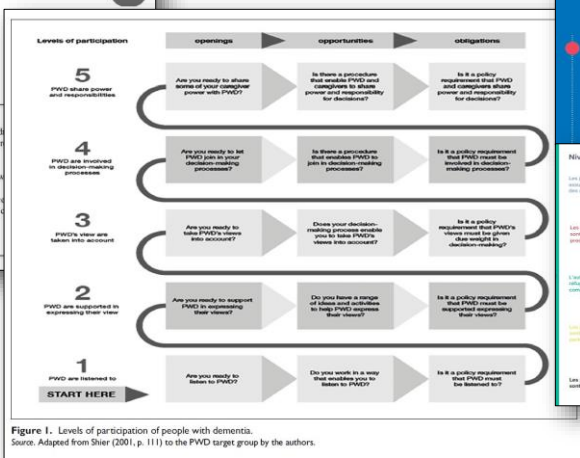


Figure 1. Levels of participation of people with dementia. Source: Adapted from Shier (2001, p. 111) to the PWD target group by the authors.

People With Dementia (Ingard et al, 2023)



Refugees (UNHCR, 2023).

## Talk amongst yourselves (3 minutes):

To what extent do Hart's three types of false participation – **MANIPULATION**, **DECORATION** and **TOKENISM** – still manifest themselves in research projects involving children and young people today?

How should we tackle them?



You will not be asked to report your discussion in full.  
But please be prepared to share any important points.

## 2. Transformative Action Research with and by children and young people



In 2001, the same year that "Pathways to Participation" was published in the UK, I moved to Nicaragua, Central America

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Child labour on coffee plantations  
(Shier 2017)



The struggle for the right to education  
(Shier et al, 2013)



From 2001 to 2011 I worked with a local children's rights organisation CESESMA, supporting child workers on the coffee plantations in claiming and defending their rights. (Shier 2010)



This was an opportunity to review and reflect on the original "Pathways to Participation" model. (Shier, 2006)

The original model still works, and continues to be widely used around the world, but there is so much more to learn...



## A new approach to participation: "Protagonismo Infantil"



Children and young people organise, advocate, take the initiative.

(Shier 2019a; Taft 2019)

Youth theatre against violence in the home



Young people ran a weekly local radio show "Children and Adolescents' Voices Heard", including peer-to-peer messages about preventing, recognising and reporting violence.



*The Dragon of Violence took part in marches and protests, to awaken people to the reality of violence in rural communities, and the need to face it without fear.*

*Public forum on reducing child labour and violence against children, Matagalpa, 2009*



*National Festival Against Violence towards Children, La Dalia, 2011*



*National forum on children and young people as active citizens influencing public policy, Managua, 2012*

Through these and many other actions, children and young people, exercise their *protagonismo*, establishing their identity as rights-holders and rights defenders, deserving and, if necessary, demanding, that their citizenship be recognised and respected.

(Shier et al, 2014; Shier et al, 2023; Shier 2023)



## Exercising their *protagonismo*, children become transformative researchers

### A case study: "We want to live without violence"

Children from Yúcul formed a research team and chose an issue affecting their families and their community that they wanted to find out more about.



The topic they chose to investigate was how alcohol is related to violence in their community.



Planning

Interviewing



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Analysing data



Preparing the report and recommendations

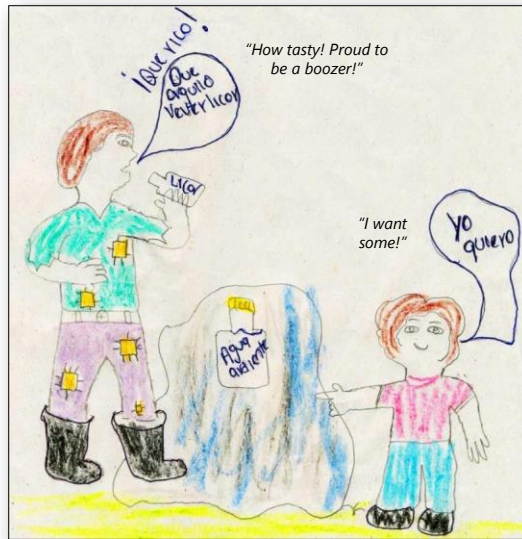


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**Follow-up and impact...**

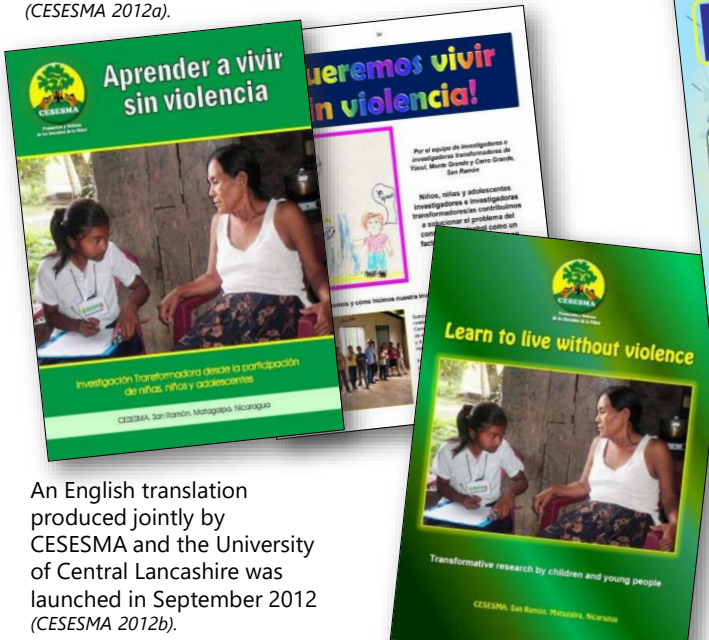
- ❑ The Young Researchers presented their findings to the government's 'Family Life and Security Commission', which decided to make the alcohol problem a top priority.
- ❑ Local government and party officials admitted they had been aware of the issue for years, but it wasn't till the children came forward with their research that they felt forced to act on it.



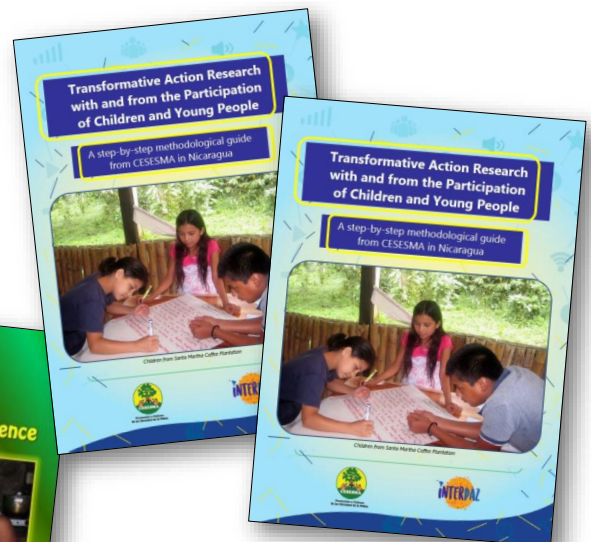
- ❑ The local police also took action; confiscating illegal liquor and closing at least two unlicensed cantinas.
- ❑ A national broadcaster heard about the children's work, and the team was featured on the national TV news.
- ❑ Following the news broadcast, the local authority and police have ensured no new liquor licenses are granted in the Yúcul area.

(Shier, 2015)

The Young Researchers' report was in this book published by CESESMA in Nicaragua in March 2012 (CESESMA 2012a).



An English translation produced jointly by CESESMA and the University of Central Lancashire was launched in September 2012 (CESESMA 2012b).



Finally, last year we published a step-by-step methodological guide to using CESESMA's Transformative Action Research approach – in both Spanish and English. (Shier and Hernández Méndez, 2021a; 2021b)

## Why “transformative”? CESESMA’s view: The four transformations

When children assume active citizenship as young action researchers, 4 distinct transformations occur...



### **First Transformation:**

Empowerment of the young researchers (Shier, 2019c).

### **Second transformation:**

Transforming adult attitudes in the community and beyond.



### **Third transformation:**

Transformation of those adults who support and facilitate through mutual learning.

### **Fourth transformation:**

Social change, policy change, improving conditions of life through research impact, advocacy and community action.

(Shier 2015)



## Transformation as a research paradigm

The “Transformative Paradigm” is an alternative paradigm for social research, proposed by Donna Mertens (2007) to stand alongside the ‘postpositivist’, ‘constructivist’ and ‘pragmatic’ paradigms.

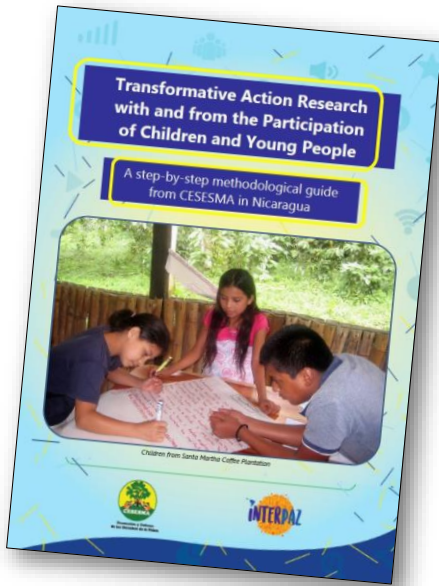
Basic principles of the transformative paradigm:

1. Primacy of qualitative methods;
2. Interactive link between researcher and participants;
3. Accommodating cultural complexity;
4. Explicitly addressing power issues;
5. Acknowledging contextual and historical factors linked to discrimination and oppression.

(Mertens, 2010, p. 11).



## Methodological steps in Transformative Action Research



1. Identification and selection of children and young people to form a research team
2. Organisational preconditions for convening a research team of children and young people
3. Role of accompanying facilitators/educators
4. Building the research team
5. Choosing the research topic
6. Using children's drawings to encourage team reflection on the topic
7. Design the research
8. Design and development of the research instruments
9. Preparations for field research
10. Preparation of young researchers
11. Field research
12. Data management and analysis
13. Reaching a consensus on conclusions
14. Formulating recommendations
15. Writing the report
16. Drawing up an action plan
17. Actions to disseminate findings
18. Evaluation of the Transformative Action Research process

## Another chance to talk amongst yourselves (3 minutes):

What's your experience of action research leading to **transformation**?

Have you experienced any of CESESMA's four transformations?

What other ways might action research lead to transformation?

Let's show the 4 transformations again as a reminder

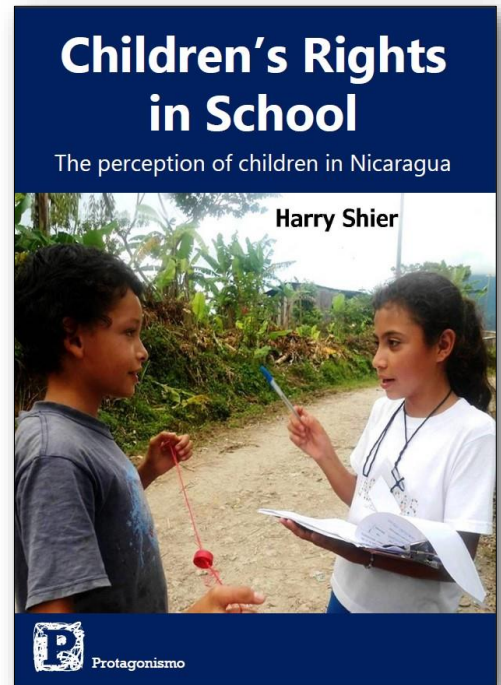


You will not be asked to report your discussion in full.  
But please be prepared to share any important points.

### 3. A tool to help researchers develop partnerships with children and young people

In 2012, after 11 years in Nicaragua, I was offered the opportunity to do a PhD at the Centre for Children's Rights at Queen's University Belfast.

For my PhD fieldwork I returned to the coffee plantations of Nicaragua, and to the methodology of Transformative Action Research with and by children and young people.



(Shier, 2016)



With help from my local colleagues, we built a team of 17 young researchers, ages 9-15, from four rural villages and coffee plantations in the La Dalia district.



Informing the parents

Sharing experiences



Planning the field research



Peer-to-peer interviewing in the community





Data-analysis



Creating a final report



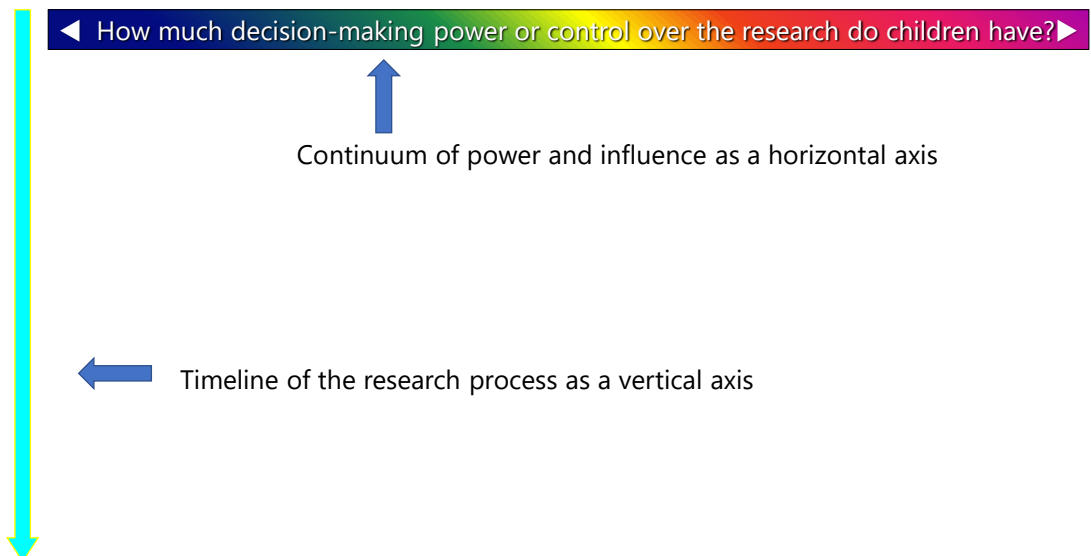
Posing

Presenting the findings to an international audience of senior officials from Save-the-Children

As a byproduct of this experience, I created a new tool to help researchers build partnerships with children.



### Building a matrix



**For the horizontal axis: Lansdown's simplified typology of participation**

**Consultation:**

Is when adults ask children for their views, and children are not involved beyond this.



**Collaboration:**

Is when adults and children work together, sharing roles and responsibilities in planning and carrying out an activity.

**Protagonismo (child-led):**

Activities initiated, organised or run by children and young people themselves (adults may still provide support, though not always necessary).



**The vertical axis: Phases of the research process as a timeline**

1. Identify a research question: problem analysis, consultation. ▼
2. Develop research design, select (or develop) methodology, draw up a plan (find funding, resources) ▼
3. Design instruments, seek ethical approval. ▼
4. Identify and recruit participants, obtain consent. ▼
5. Generate data ▼
6. Data analysis: findings, conclusions, recommendations. ▼
7. Produce a report ▼
8. Dissemination of findings: formal publication, wider publicity, media engagement. ▼
9. Advocacy, public mobilisation, campaigning, policy impact, action for social change.







(Based on Kumar, 2014)



COMBINED IN THE MATRIX...





Phases of research process

	◀ How much decision-making power or control over the research do children have? ▶			
	Children are not involved 	Consulted 	Collaborate with adult researchers 	Child initiated or directed 
Deciding on the research question				
Designing the research and choosing methods				
Preparing research instruments				
Identifying and recruiting participants				
Collecting the data				
Analysing the data, drawing conclusions				
Producing a report				
Dissemination of the report and its findings				
Advocacy and mobilisation to achieve policy impact				

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COMBINED IN THE MATRIX...

Phases of research process

	◀ How much decision-making power or control over the research do children have? ▶				Who is involved and who is excluded?
	Children are not involved 	Consulted 	Collaborate with adult researchers 	Child initiated or directed 	
Deciding on the research question		Children asked about problems that concern them.	Children and adults jointly define research question.	Children choose their own research question.	Who has a say in the research question?
Designing the research and choosing methods		Children consulted on what research methodology to use.	Children and adults deliberate and jointly decide on the methodology to use.	Children decide what methodology they want to use.	Who is invited to get involved in the research design?
Preparing research instruments		Children consulted on (and perhaps test) research instruments before use.	Children and adults work together on design of research instruments.	Children create their own research instruments.	Who gets to work on the research instruments?
Identifying and recruiting participants		Children asked to advise on recruiting participants.	Children and adults jointly identify and recruit participants.	Children identify and recruit research participants.	Who has a say in choosing participants?
Collecting the data		Research involves adults interviewing children or surveying their opinions.	Children and adults collaborate on data-gathering activity.	Children organise and carry out data collection activities.	Who gets involved in data collection?
Analysing the data, drawing conclusions		Adults show preliminary findings to children and ask for feedback.	Children and adults work together to analyse data and determine conclusions.	Children analyse data and draw their own conclusions.	Who has a say in what the conclusions are?
Producing a report		Adults consult children on aspects of the final report.	Children and adults work together to produce a report.	Children produce their own report in their own words.	Who gets credit for the report?
Dissemination of the report and its findings		Adults consult children on how to disseminate findings.	Children and adults collaborate on dissemination and awareness-raising activities.	Children undertake activities to disseminate their findings.	Who is actively involved in dissemination?
Advocacy and mobilisation to achieve policy impact		Children consulted about possible advocacy actions.	Children and adults work together on plans for advocacy and mobilisation.	Children develop and implement an action plan for advocacy and mobilisation.	Who is active in follow-up campaigning and advocacy?

## COMBINED IN THE MATRIX...

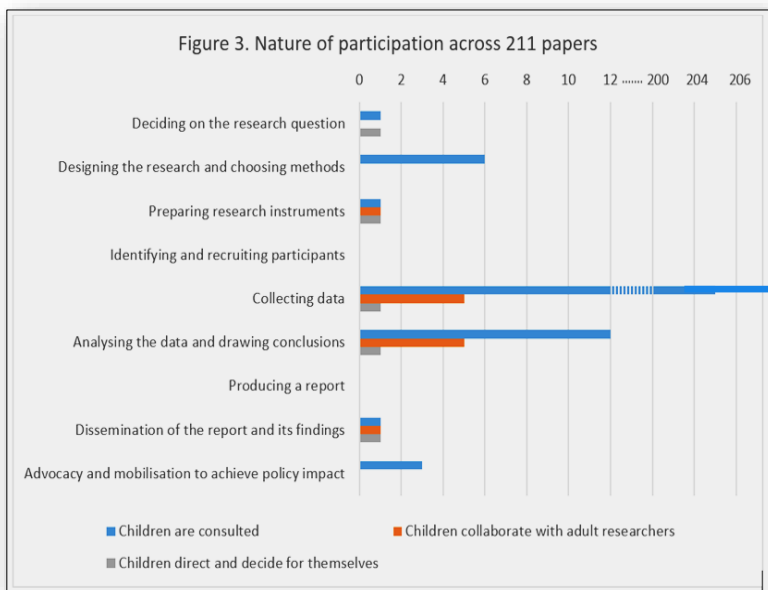
Applying the matrix to the Yucul children's research project

Applying the matrix to my PhD research in La Dalia

Phases of research process

	◀ How much decision-making power or control over the research do children have? ▶				Who is involved and who is excluded?
	Children are not involved	Consulted	Collaborate with adult researchers	Child initiated or directed	
<b>Deciding on the research question</b>	✗	Children asked about problems that concern them.	Children and adults jointly define research question.	Children choose their own research question.	Who has a say in the research question?
<b>Designing the research and choosing methods</b>		Children consulted on what research methodology to use.	Children and adults deliberate and jointly decide on the methodology to use.	Children decide what methodology they want to use.	Who is invited to get involved in the research design?
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<b>Collecting the data</b>		Research involves adults interviewing children or surveying their opinions.	Children and adults collaborate on data-gathering activity.	Children engage and carry out data collection activities.	Who gets involved in data collection?
<b>Analysing the data, drawing conclusions</b>		Adults show preliminary findings to children and ask for feedback.	Children and adults work together to analyse data and determine conclusions.	Children analyse data and draw their own conclusions.	Who has a say in what the conclusions are?
<b>Producing a report</b>		Adults consult children on aspects of the final report.	Children and adults work together to produce a report.	Children produce their own report in their own words.	Who gets credit for the report?
<b>Dissemination of the report and its findings</b>		Adults consult children on how to disseminate findings.	Children and adults collaborate on dissemination and awareness-raising activities.	Children undertake activities to disseminate their findings.	Who is actively involved in dissemination?
<b>Advocacy and mobilisation to achieve policy impact</b>	✗	Children consulted about possible advocacy actions.	Children and adults work together on plans for advocacy and mobilisation.	Children develop and implement an action plan for advocacy and mobilisation.	Who is active in follow-up campaigning and advocacy?

## In 2019 a scoping review looked at methods of participatory research with children in Australia







In the vast majority of studies reviewed, children were not involved at all outside of the data-collection phase.

Grace et al, "Where are the silences? A scoping review of child participatory research literature in Australia". (Children Australia, 44: 172-186)

## COMBINED IN THE MATRIX...

- Applying the matrix to the children's research project
- Applying the matrix to my PhD research in La Dalia
- The norm for involving children in research (as verified by Grace et al in Australia)

Phases of research process

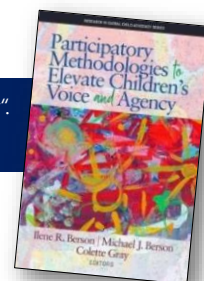
	◀ How much decision-making power or control over the research do children have? ▶				Who is involved and who is excluded?
	Children are not involved 	Consulted 	Collaborate with adult researchers 	Child initiated or directed 	
<b>Deciding on the research question</b>	<span style="color: red;">●</span>	Children asked about problems that concern them.	Children and adults jointly define research question.	Children choose their own research question.	Who has a say in the research question?
<b>Designing the research and choosing methods</b>	<span style="color: red;">●</span>	Children consulted on what research methodology to use.	Children and adults collaborate and jointly decide on the methodology to use.	Children decide what methodology they want to use.	Who is invited to get involved in the research design?
<b>Preparing research instruments</b>	<span style="color: red;">●</span>	Children consulted on (and perhaps test) research instruments before use.	Children and adults work together on design of research instruments.	Children create their own research instruments.	Who gets to work on the research instruments?
<b>Identifying and recruiting participants</b>	<span style="color: red;">●</span>	Children asked to advise on recruiting participants.	Children and adults jointly identify and recruit participants.	Children identify and recruit research participants.	Who has a say in choosing participants?
<b>Collecting the data</b>	<span style="color: red;">●</span>	Research involves adults interviewing children or surveying their opinions.	Children and adults collaborate on data-gathering activity.	Children engage and carry out data collection activities.	Who gets involved in data collection?
<b>Analysing the data, drawing conclusions</b>	<span style="color: red;">●</span>	Adults show preliminary findings to children and ask for feedback.	Children and adults work together to analyse data and determine conclusions.	Children analyse the data and draw their own conclusions.	Who has a say in what the conclusions are?
<b>Producing a report</b>	<span style="color: red;">●</span>	Adults consult children on aspects of the final report.	Children and adults work together to produce a report.	Children produce their own report in their own words.	Who gets credit for the report?
<b>Dissemination of the report and its findings</b>	<span style="color: red;">●</span>	Adults consult children on how to disseminate findings.	Children and adults collaborate on dissemination and awareness-raising activities.	Children undertake activities to disseminate their findings.	Who is actively involved in dissemination?
<b>Advocacy and mobilisation to achieve policy impact</b>	<span style="color: red;">●</span> ✕	Children consulted about possible advocacy actions.	Children and adults work together on plans for advocacy and mobilisation.	Children develop and implement an action plan for advocacy and mobilisation.	Who is active in follow-up campaigning and advocacy?

### The matrix tool is available in...

Berson, Berson and Gray (2019) "Participatory Methodologies to Elevate Children's Voice and Agency".

Also at [www.harryshier.net](http://www.harryshier.net)

(Shier 2019)



- DO use it as a tool for planning research projects involving children.
- DO use it as a tool for reviewing and evaluating research projects involving children.
- DO use it as a check-list to be sure you are not excluding children through narrow thinking.
- DON'T use it to make judgments about whether any particular approach is right or wrong; it just helps you ask good questions, and so make wise decisions about what might work well in a particular situation.

"All models are wrong, but some are useful"  
(George Box, 1979)

THE END

Thanks for listening

www.harryshier.net

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## References

All works by Shier or CESESMA are available at [www.harryshier.net](http://www.harryshier.net)

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