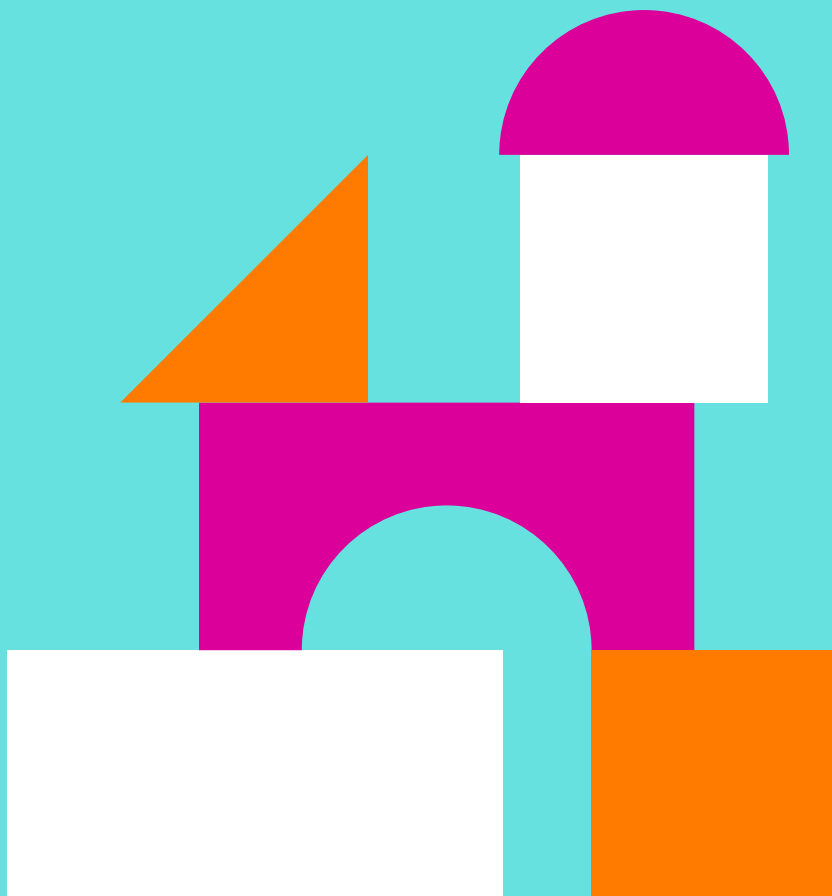


Participation – on the children's own terms?

Monica Nordenfors



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Foreword

The population of Sweden includes two million children. They are a group who, by virtue of their power of experimentation and wealth of ideas, have the ability to lead society in new directions. At the same time, today's society places high and complex demands on children. Guaranteeing them good conditions during childhood and adolescence, in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, is an important social issue. At Gothenburg's central crime prevention council, A Safer and More Humane Gothenburg, we believe that working to promote good and secure such conditions is among the most challenging but ultimately also among the most effective ways to prevent crime. And we are convinced that a society which is good for children is a good society for everyone. One way to promote good conditions in childhood and adolescence is to involve children in decision making processes of all kinds and to make use of the special competence and wisdom that children so often possess.

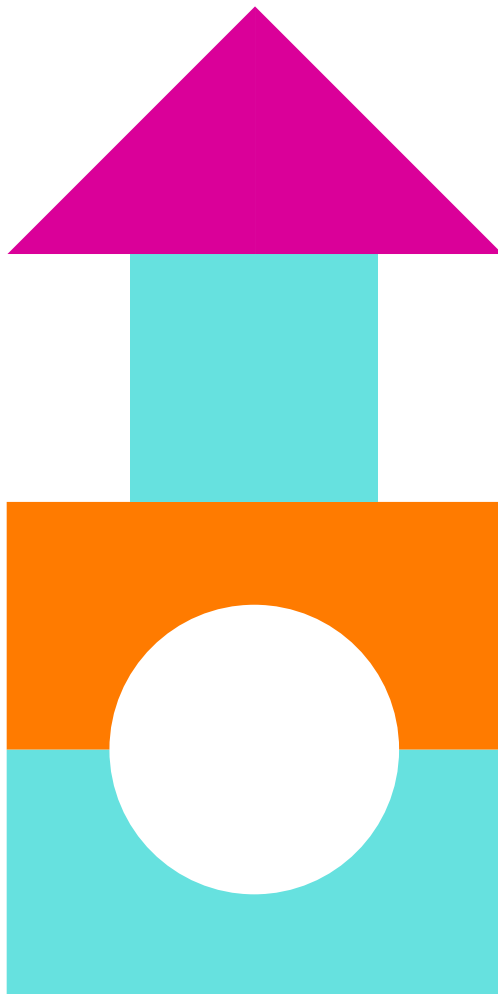
This book, "Participation – on the children's own terms?", written by Monica Nordenfors for A Safer and More Humane Gothenburg, offers an important contribution to the efforts to increase children's participation, and thereby to the realisation of the intentions of the Child Convention. The book provides an overview of parts of existing research into children's participation. In addition to giving a situation report on children's participation, it points to the conditions for that participation.

One of the salient themes of the book is the position of power that adults have in relation to children. Adults are the ones who decide if, when and how children are allowed to participate. In making this point, Monica Nordenfors wants us also to turn our attention to ourselves as adults and carefully consider the conceptions we have of children. We have to begin there, she contends, and urges us to take children seriously. The possibilities she sees are in the encounter and dialogue between children and adults. And that we really listen to what are children's perspectives.

Gothenburg, February 2010
For A Safer and More Humane Gothenburg

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Summary

We live in a time when children's circumstances are avidly analysed and discussed. Children have been given rights, and their participation in society is increasing, but much work remains to be done. Part of that work is the present text, which was written on commission from Gothenburg's central crime prevention council, A Safer and More Humane Gothenburg. The commission entails making a research/knowledge overview of studies into how children are made participants in issues that affect them. The aim is to seek knowledge about how to promote children's participation and to describe, through examples, how to work towards that goal with and for children. The text includes examples of studies in different areas that focus on children's participation at the societal, group and individual levels.

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is about the child's right to express his or her own views on issues that concern him or her, and to have those views respected and given due weight in accordance with his or her age and maturity. In practice this is not easy to comply with, and several authors highlight a number of areas where there are difficulties implementing the Convention in day-to-day practice. Rasmusson (2006) and several others point out the importance of considering the tension between different perspectives inherent in the Convention's view of children. This includes the view of children as objects needing care and guardianship (protection), in contrast with the view of children as actors with rights (participation). Studies show that it not infrequently falls to individual officials to weigh up the child's right to be heard against his or her need for protection, as well as to determine what significance the child's opinion should have in relation to his or her age and maturity. This means that children and young people end up in the hands of individual decision makers and are subject to their competence regarding children's needs and civil rights.

One purpose of children's participation is for children to fit into society and for children's power in relation to adults to increase. As adults we generally have considerably more power than children, and in public arenas adults' power is frequently absolute. This means that ultimately adults decide just about everything when it comes to designing public spaces or determining the outcomes of public processes. Children may be invited to give their view on matters of fact at an early stage, but they rarely have any say at the end, even on issues that are important for them.

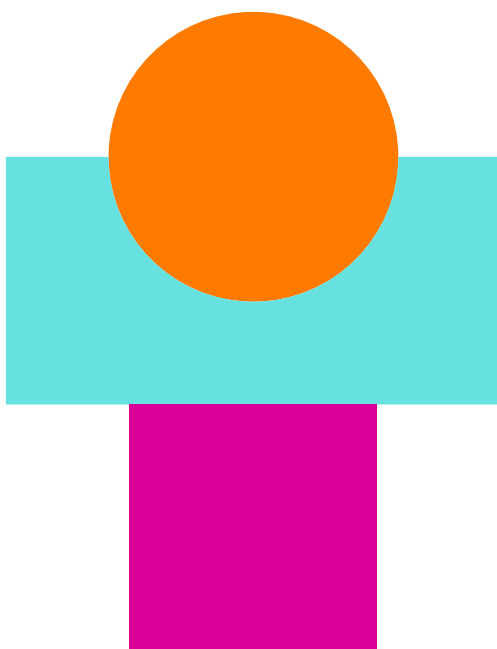
Every other year since 1995, the Ombudsman for Children (Barnombudsmannen) has carried out a survey in order to chart how Sweden's municipalities are working to implement the Child Convention. The 2007 survey showed that 78 per cent of municipalities have made some kind of municipality-wide decision to work on the basis of the Child Convention. Results indicate that quite a lot of work remains to be done and that one of the big challenges that municipalities face is turning decisions and wordings in steering documents into practice and action. Which is to say that most municipalities agree on the importance of implementing the Child Convention, but the question is how this is to be done. The Ombudsman has identified a number of factors which are significant when municipalities, county councils and government agencies adopt a new perspective in their activities. These success factors include: the unequivocal support and involvement of management; that perspectives are adopted in central steering documents; training and information; financial and staff resources; dialogue and experience exchange; follow-ups and evaluation.

One area in which several projects have been carried out and where some research has been done is children's participation in planning housing and outdoor environments. In a report from 2008 (carried out by Movium), Lenninger describes where, how and in what contexts children and young people are involved in planning. Lenninger observes that what is lacking is not research but a method for existing knowledge to reach officials and politicians and to be turned into practice.

Several of the studies looked at given examples of how young people who participate in decision making processes and other projects often have to adapt to adults' conditions and that as long as they do they are welcome to participate. The power relationship between children and adults is thus laid bare. When we talk about children's participation we need to think about what participation means in purely practical terms, and in order to create an increased awareness of children's participation we need an analytical tool. One such tool is Hart's (1992) participation "ladder", which is used in several of the studies but also in actual projects, with the aim of increasing children's and young people's participation. In order to achieve true collaboration, Hart argues, it is important to allow children to participate in the entire process. It is often the case that children

are brought in only when the design is finished. This is a mistake, Hart claims, because even if children can't have a decisive voice in these discussions they have to be given the opportunity of participating in discussions about technical details in order to understand how and on what grounds decisions are made. In that way children are given a more realistic picture of how their surroundings are created. Different circumstances call for different degrees of participation. In other words it should not be automatically assumed that the topmost rung of the ladder is always the goal or the best result. Freedom of choice is an important element of participation. Equally important is to consider the context in which we are acting. All forms of participation are not always possible or desirable (McNeish, 1999). On Hart's seventh rung, participation is about children taking their own initiatives but daring to ask adults for help. According to Hart, this presupposes that children have faith in their role as members of a society and that they know that adults respect their views and will not disregard them. In a 2003 report by the National Agency for Education it emerged that pupils with little knowledge of democracy also have less faith in democratic processes than pupils with more knowledge of democracy. Without either knowledge of or faith in society and democracy, young people are unlikely to participate and make use of the possibilities for influence that actually exist (Frost, 2005). Some studies have investigated how young people regard their position in society. Results vary from study to study, with some indicating that young people see themselves as citizens with rights while others show young people's perception that they have a subordinate position in relation to adults and that their views don't count.

When it comes to what issues young people themselves want to participate in, some studies show that for young people participation is most meaningful and has the greatest effect within their everyday contexts such as home, school and leisure. Society's conceptions of children are connected with how children's participation is shaped. The ideas we have about childhood affect power relations between children and adults, and thereby also the possibilities that children and young people have for participation, as well as what arenas become available for children's participation (Moses, 2008). Ågren's (2008) study is an example from practice that reveals the conditions on which children and young people participate in different arenas. The study also shows that the space given to children is largely dependent upon and traceable to adults' conceptions and wishes, and not on or to young people's competence. It is important to have an awareness of the norms and values that surround our conceptions of children and childhood within the organisations that want to work with children's right to participation. A failure to expose conceptions about children's competence and vulnerability risks creating an obstacle to children's participation.



Introduction

Children are socially and politically excluded from most national and European institutions. They cannot vote. They have little or no access to the media. They have only limited access to the courts. They are not members of powerful lobbies that campaign and lobby governments such as the trade unions, the commercial sector or environmental groups. Without access to these processes which are integral to the exercise of democratic rights, children and their experience remain hidden from view and they are in consequence, denied effective recognition as citizens.

(Landsdown, 2001, quoted in Davis & Hill, 2006:10)

Landsdown's words are harsh and point to children's position in society today. And yet at the same time we live in an era in which children's circumstances are busily dwelt on and discussed. Children's rights have been recognised, but much work remains to be done. The present text, commissioned by Gothenburg's central crime prevention council, A Safer and More Humane Gothenburg (Tryggare och Mänskligare Göteborg), is part of that work. The insights that an individual's sense of security is established early in life and that children have to be given the space to make their voices heard have contributed to making the Convention on the Rights of the Child increasingly prominent in the council's work. The

commission involves compiling research and knowledge from studies of how children are made participants in issues that concern them.

This report looks at selected studies that in one way or another focus on children's participation. I have read research reports, evaluations and literature that discusses the participation of children and young people from various theoretical perspectives. Studies of children's participation cover a very wide area, and this report aims to provide some examples of important results. Children's participation in various contexts is explored with the help of various theories.

The fundamental purpose of the study is to seek knowledge about how we might work towards achieving children's participation, as well as to describe by example how this could work in practice.

Issues:

How can children's participation be understood from a theoretical perspective?

How is children's participation achieved at different levels of society?

In what arenas and on what conditions does children's participation occur?

Most of the studies I have read focus on children's participation in arenas dominated by adults. Children are given access to an arena where the agenda has been set by adults and on adults' terms, which is to say that adults have defined children's conditions for participation. The studies set out from different assumptions. They all deal, in one way or another, with children's participation, but the objects of study vary greatly. Some focus on the organisational level, others are self-reflective in that the authors have been involved in and observed how "participation projects" have been carried out, some have directly interviewed children and young people to hear their views and experiences of children's participation. I have made a selection of studies that exemplify children's participation or non-participation at different levels and from different perspectives. The studies all highlight different phenomena which I consider important for all adults (and children) involved with promoting children's participation to be aware of.

One delimitation has been imposed regarding literature that describes what is being done today but does so without an evaluating or scientific perspective. Straight handbooks in e.g. how to go about making a child consequences analysis have been left out.

The report begins with a review of important terms and concepts (child perspective, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and

participation), followed by descriptions of various studies that point to very different phenomena which all touch on children's participation. In an annex is a list of references to studies in the area which are not mentioned in the report, but which are pertinent and may be of interest for different activities.

A child perspective must set out from the way in which children themselves perceive their reality (Tiller, 1991). In modern childhood research, childhood is seen as:

...a social reality which is not constant or uniform. In the same way that men and women describe their family from different points of view, children's views of their family are also different.
(Larsson Sjöberg, 2000:25)

According to Halldén (2003) the term "child perspective" has various meanings and is used both as an ideological term and a methodological term. Halldén refers to an article by her and Lindgren (2001) in which they show how the child perspective becomes a rhetorical and ideological tool in political discussions and how children's perspectives are used as a pretext for pushing through political changes. Children's perspectives (in the plural and possessive) are about partaking of what the children experience, i.e. capturing a culture which is theirs. The child perspective (in the singular) involves capturing the children's voices and interpreting them. This is about the place that children are given in society, and aims to "safeguard children's conditions, act in the best interests of children or to study a culture created for children" (Halldén, 2003:14). "The child perspective thus becomes something beyond reproducing children's perspectives on different phenomena" (Halldén, 2003:12). Participation and children's perspectives are mutually dependent on each other, since it is a premise of children's participation that adults have the capacity of adopting children's perspectives (Pramling Samuelsson and Sheridan, 2003).



The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has, for the first time in international legislation, recognised that children are subjects with rights and not just recipients of adults' protection (Landsdown, 2001). Sweden ratified the "Child Convention" in 1990 and thereby pledged to work towards making children participants in issues that concern them.

Articles 2, 3, 6 and 12 are regarded as fundamental principles of the convention and as representing the convention's view of children (Englund, 2008). Article 2 establishes that all children have the same rights and are equal - no-one may be discriminated against. The Child Convention applies to all children who are present in a country which has ratified it. Article 3 states that the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all actions and decisions concerning the child. The term "best interests of the child" is a pillar of the convention and has been analysed more than any other term in it. What constitutes the best interests of the child must be determined in each individual case. Article 6 states that every child has the right to survival and development. This is not just about the child's physical health but also about spiritual, moral, mental and social development. Article 12 is about children's right to express their own views on issues that concern them and to have the view respected and heeded in relation to age and maturity. The UN committee has observed that this right includes all areas and all contexts. This is not easy to follow in practice, and several authors point to a number of areas in which there are difficulties implementing the convention in daily activities.

In a thesis, Stern (2006) studied children's right to respect for their opinions and to participating in decision making processes. The analysis deals with the democratic aspects of children's participation in decision making processes at different levels in society. Stern looks at the theoretical basis as well as how this right is observed in different states. He draws the conclusion that the view of children and what children can and should do or not do is broadly similar irrespective of the type of society ("traditional" or modern states) and constitutes an obstacle to the full implementation of the convention. Stern argues that the challenge lies in changing adults' attitudes to children and the weight given to their opinions and influence in decision making processes.

Rasmusson (2006) and several others (see e.g. Röbbäck, 2008) point to the importance of drawing attention to the tensions between different perspectives inherent in the Child Convention's view of children. This includes the view of children as objects in need of care and protection in relation to the view of the child as an active subject with rights (participation). Rasmussen regards this as a limiting factor for children's possibilities of being treated on an equal basis.

As there is no system of sanctions linked to the convention, Schiratzki (2003) regards the document primarily as an instrument of pedagogy (Englund, 2008). According to Englund, Nilsson (2007) notes in a law thesis that despite Sweden's pledge under international law to respect the convention, it is Swedish legislation, preparatory inquiries and case law which may be expected to be given preference in a conflict between the convention and national law (Englund, 2008). In a comparison between Article 12 of the convention and Sweden's Aliens Act, Nilsson notes that there are considerable difficulties in terms of application. It is left to the individual official to weigh the child's right to be heard against its need for protection, and to assess what significance the child's opinion should have in relation to a specific child's age and maturity. In respect of the assessment of individual children's age and maturity, this is a situation which also holds true in other activities involving children, e.g. school, health care, social services and judicial system. Children and young people are thus held hostage to individual decision makers' competence when it comes to children's needs and civil rights.

Although initiatives to implement the Convention on the Rights of the Child have been numerous, both evaluations of these initiatives and research papers into implementing the convention are limited in number, which is seen as problematic by the practice charged with the implementation (Englund, 2008).

Participation

There is almost universal agreement that participation is a good thing, but there is some confusion about what counts as participation, what participation should lead to and exactly how participation affects social exclusion (Davis & Edwards, 2004). The rights to participation comprise civic and political status, which include the child's right to be consulted and considered, physical integrity, access to information, freedom of expression, and the right to question decisions made on the child's behalf.

One important aspect to reflect on is the purpose of children's participation. Thomas (2007) discusses the development of a theoretical framework for understanding what we mean by "children's participation". Thomas refers to Sinclair and Franklin (2000/2004), who specify the purposes of children's participation thus:

- the fulfilment of legal responsibilities
- the improvement of services
- the improvement of decision making
- the enhancement of democracy
- the promotion of children's need for protection
- the enhancement of children's skills
- the enhancement and raising of self-esteem.

Others (see e.g. Matthews, 2003) point out that one purpose of children's participation is for children to fit into society, and for children's power

vis-à-vis adults to increase. As adults we generally have considerably more power than children, and in public arenas adults frequently have total power. That is to say that adults ultimately decide just about everything when it comes to the design of public spaces and the outcome of public processes. Children may be allowed to comment on the state of things at an early stage, but they rarely have any say in the final stages, even if the matter concerns issues which are important for them. One of the aims of children's participation, according to Matthews (2003), is to amend this imbalance of power. Based on formal power, the physical superiority of adults and their authority rooted in knowledge and experience, they possess preferential right of interpretation in most situations (for a further discussion of this, see Näsman, 1995). In order for children's participation to increase from the bottom up, we adults (and children) have to surrender this preferential right of interpretation and enter into processes where children's perspectives are not only regarded as picturesque features in various contexts, without being taken seriously and granted significance. This is not a simple process that can be taken care of in an instant, instead it requires that we do away with our preconceptions about children and their situation on a number of counts.

Historically speaking children have not been included in democratic processes, and the view of children as incapable of participating in decision making practices is common to all types of states. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is a sign that the view of children is changing. The observation of children's right to participation in the social process will contribute to a deepening of democracy and a flattening of power relationships, and can eventually lead to more profound social changes (Stern, 2006).

Participation can have several dimensions and levels, and there is no perfect model for it; instead the best solution varies from case to case (Brady, 2007). Participation can be about participating in private decisions; formal or informal ones; large or small scale ones; or short or long term ones. Children's participation can be about decisions to be taken on a number of different levels with different aims. McNeish (1999) divides the contexts in which the participation of children and young people is desirable into four levels:

Participation in individual decision-making is when young people are to be involved in decisions that affect aspects of their own lives. Decisions that affect most children and young people are decisions made within the family. Other decisions made at this level in which people other than family members become involved include e.g. when children are to be placed outside the home or in custody disputes.

Participation in service development and provision is when children and young people are involved in their capacity as consumers of certain services. Examples include planning, design, distribution and evaluation of specific services.

Participation at the community level is when young people are involved in their capacity as members of a community. This might be in a neighbourhood or in an interest group, e.g. when young people become engaged in issues such as social development or the environment.

Participation at the political level is another level.

The studies described in this report deal with all these levels and give examples of children's participation in different contexts.



The state of children's participation at the municipal level in Sweden

I would like to begin this knowledge overview with a short description of what is happening in Sweden's municipalities today. Since 1995, the Swedish Ombudsman for Children (Barnombudsmannen)¹ has carried out a biennial poll with the aim of tracking how the country's municipalities are working to implement the Child Convention. The 2007 poll showed that 78 per cent of municipalities have taken some kind of overall decision to operate on the basis of the Child Convention (Barnombudsmannen, 2008). The results indicate that quite a lot of work remains to be done and that one of the great challenges that municipalities face is turning official decisions and policy document phrases into practice and action. In other words, most municipalities agree on the importance of implementing the Child Convention, but the question is how.

Success factors for a child perspective

The Ombudsman for Children has identified a number of factors that are significant when municipalities, county councils and government agencies

¹ One of the tasks of the Ombudsman for Children, stipulated in law (SFS 1993:335), is to push for and follow up the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Englund, 2008).

are going to adopt a new perspective in their activities.² These success factors are:

- The unequivocal support and engagement of management
- Adopting the perspective in central policy documents
- Training and information
- Use existing work processes
- Financial and personnel resources
- Dialogue and experience transfer
- Follow-up and evaluation

These success factors are an important basis for the poll, and the Ombudsman for Children intends to track whether municipalities have succeeded in creating these conditions.

Systematic work on the Child Convention

Those municipalities that have taken an overall decision on the issue are active to a greater extent (e.g. have set aside personnel resources to manage Child Convention efforts) in the work on the Child Convention than municipalities that have not taken such a decision.

71 per cent of municipalities state that there are formulations in one or several policy documents about how the Child Convention is to be applied in the municipality. Those municipalities (27 per cent) that have a specific policy document for the Child Convention (e.g. a special action plan) tend to be more active than other municipalities. 20 per cent stated that there are formulations about the Child Convention in budget documents, which is something the Ombudsman for Children believes more municipalities should have since budget documents are among the most important policy documents in a municipality.

Largest number of formulations about influence and the best interests of the child

In response to the question (multiple choice)³ about how the policy documents specify that the municipality should work to implement the Child

² “These factors have been formulated on the basis of experiences from organisations involved with e.g. equal opportunities, health and environment perspectives, but also on the basis of experiences from government agencies such as Sida and the Swedish Road Administration of their work with a child perspective.” (BO, 2008:12)

³ Several responses may be ticked.

Convention, 64 per cent (of 190 respondents) opted for “By developing children’s and young people’s possibilities for influence in issues that affect them”, 66 per cent chose “By making the best interests of children visible in decision making processes that affect them”, 33 per cent stated that formulations were about increasing knowledge about the Child Convention, and 19 per cent stated that it was about increasing child competence in the organisation. 20 per cent gave other responses and often quoted connections with preschool or school, or more general formulations in the policy documents such as “the intentions of the Child Convention shall be the basis of all activities”.

Resources, activities and cooperation with other stakeholders

28 per cent of municipalities have set aside personnel resources (either as a group at the overall level, a single official, or some local variant on the theme) to further the work on the Child Convention.

Cooperation

37 per cent stated that they had cooperated with other stakeholders (volunteer organisations such as Save the Children, county councils, the Police, the Ombudsman for Children, the National Board for Youth Affairs, the county administrative boards, and others) in order to push ahead with the work on the Child Convention.

Child consequences analyses and influence

Part of the job of living up to the idea that the best interests of the child should be at the forefront of all decisions that affect children is to analyse the consequences of municipal decisions for children and young people. 67 per cent of municipalities have followed up their work on the Child Convention.

According to the report by the Ombudsman for Children just over half of municipalities (of those who responded) stated that they have made decisions to carry out what are known as “child consequences analyses”. A third responded that they use a systematic working method for this purpose. The methods that municipalities use to analyse the consequences for children and young people are: checklists⁴, FOCN (Focus On Children’s Needs, abbreviated BBIC in Swedish), web pages, quality accounting and participation in LUPP⁵.

⁴ Checklists are intended as a simple way of making it clear that all decisions must be analysed and described in terms of their consequences for children.

⁵ “Lokal uppföljning av ungdomspolitiken”, or “local follow-up of youth policy” run by the National Board for Youth Affairs.

Municipalities have been urged to assess how different areas of activity deal with child consequences analyses. In activities that directly concern children and young people, such as schools, preschools and the social services' individual and family care, a relatively positive picture emerges of these efforts. It is also the municipalities' assessment that the competence to carry out child consequences analyses exists within these activities. In community planning, however, it appears that efforts with child consequences analyses have had little impact. In the Ombudsman's view this is a cause for concern, since children and young people are very much affected by decisions on e.g. traffic solutions or the development of residential areas.

67 per cent of all respondents stated that there is an overall decision to the effect that the views of children and young people must be sought. 74 per cent responded that efforts are underway to increase children's and young people's possibilities for influence. In as much as 91 per cent of all municipalities, methods for giving influence to children and young people had been developed. 24 per cent of municipalities stated that they used at least four methods.

The methods that municipalities use to give children and young people influence are questionnaires (58 per cent), youth councils (47 per cent), reference groups with children and young people (36 per cent), web/chat (11 per cent), while 6 per cent state that they use children's councils. In addition to this, municipalities described in greater detail how they deal with individual issues in which it emerges that one arena for influence is the school. Some municipalities describe how young people are allowed to have the use of and control financial means to do with e.g. youth projects. Most methods are directed at young people, and the Ombudsman points out that younger children also have a right to influence and that more municipalities should strive to make their views heard and seen too.

The Ombudsman believes that most municipalities show that they have the will and the preparedness to expand and develop children and young people's possibilities for influence, which is not to say that children and young people themselves feel that they have influence. In the Ombudsman's 2006 annual report, "Voices that count", the observation is made that a majority of the children and young people who responded felt that that they had not been consulted about their opinions. Just under half of them felt that they had fairly limited or very limited possibilities of saying what they think to those who decide in the municipality. The Ombudsman further notes that an important part of implementing the Child Convention is that children and young people receive information about the rights that they have.

If all children and young people became aware of their rights and could express them in contacts with the adult world, the pressure on the adult world to observe their rights in different ways should increase.
(2006:28)

Influence in different activities

The Ombudsman for Children selected a number of different areas of activity judged to be of particular interest for further questions about the possibilities for influence of children and young people. The Ombudsman asked questions such as: To what extent the views of children and young people are sought by politicians when making decisions that affect children and young people; to what extent there are clear directives from management about obtaining the views of children and young people; how much knowledge employees have about obtaining the opinions of children and young people and to what extent the opinions of children and young people are considered when making decisions that affect them. In the areas culture and leisure, social services' individual and family care, preschools and schools, most municipalities replied either "to a very large extent" or "to a large extent" to all the questions. In the community planning area, however, municipalities replied "to a small extent", "to a very small extent" or "not at all".

Knowledge, training and support

Among the success factors for implementing the Child Convention are knowledge and information. The poll showed that there is a great need for competence development but that resources are not allocated for this purpose. Just under a third of municipalities have carried out training about the Child Convention, and even fewer have planned such training. A small number of municipalities state that knowledge of the Child Convention is included in the municipality's introductory training courses. In comparison with municipalities that have not done any training, a greater proportion of municipalities that have done training over the last two years stated that they have personnel resources to further work concerning the Child Convention (44 per cent compared with 22 per cent).

The next step

The poll also included an open question about what further steps were needed in order to take one step ahead in the work on the Child Convention/the child perspective. Among the most frequent replies was that resources were needed, e.g. in the form of a special post or "cooperation with other stakeholders with the aim of using existing resources efficiently".

Some expressed the view that politicians and/or managers need to make their standpoint in the matter clearer. Others called for the development of methods and/or working routines for the development of child consequences analyses, for example, or to obtain the opinions of children and young people. There were also calls for an increased investment in training.

Blomkvist (1999, according to Englund, 2008) argues that a successful implementation of the convention requires a clear understanding within administrations that the convention and its implementation is a separate area and that a person should be put in charge of it.

Knowledge processes

The Ombudsman for Children points to the need for training as a step in the implementation of the convention. Englund (2008) has written a thesis on international law for children in which she looks at learning and knowledge processes in an organisation that has decided to implement the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Englund interviewed 47 individuals at the regional level: politicians, heads of administration, activity managers, a strategist for issues regarding children's rights, and Child Convention pilots. The pilots attend a two-day training programme and are then meant to spread the message on to their colleagues. The aim is that there be one Child Convention pilot in each unit. Englund identified four different attitudes to the Child Convention among her interviewees:

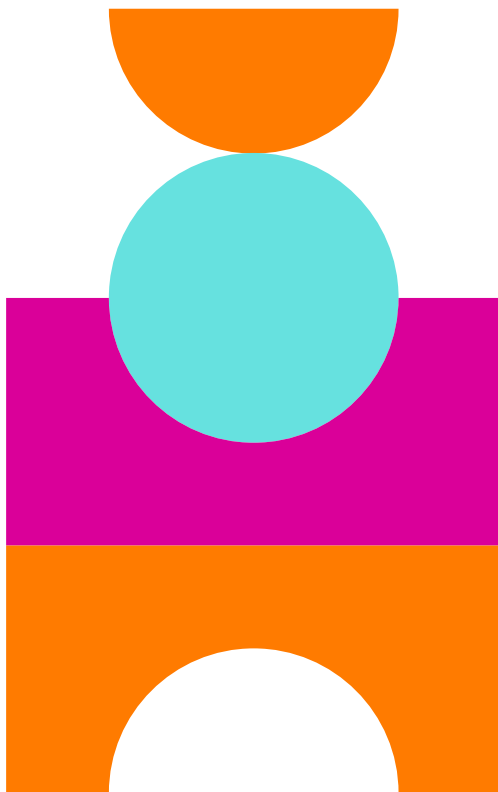
The biggest group saw the convention as an **offer of signification**. Many of these interviewees stated that their work was with and for children and that the convention provided them with a legitimacy for efforts to improve children's conditions and for action on the basis of their position. Children who encounter people with this attitude are most likely to have their rights provided for.

The next group was of those who say that "we are already doing this". This attitude can be found among people who work in departments whose activity is largely directed towards children, and who also regard working with and for children as equivalent to applying the convention. There is often a certain child competence in these activities, and extensive competence in the activity's specific subject area, but since most people believe they are already applying the convention they don't see a need for more knowledge about the rights it enshrines. This attitude amounts to an unwillingness to absorb new approaches and to take on new tasks. These departments did not have more pilots than others, and neither was it possible to demonstrate that there were any knowledge processes going on about the application of the convention.

The third group takes the view that "there is no need for this issue" as it is not demanded higher up in the organisation. Bureaucracy is central to this group, and it is important that work is carried out in accordance with the traditional bureaucratic model. As long as there are no incentives, the implementation of the convention is impossible. On the other hand, once work on the convention is demanded, the informants will get to grips with the convention and its application.

The fourth and last group takes the view that "this has no bearing on us". In these activities, employees have no work-related connection with children, and so have no motives for pursuing these issues – even if some have acquired initial knowledge of the convention. Englund sees this group as the least likely to implement the convention. There is no place here for children or irrelevant side issues.

Englund points out that it is important to be familiar with these four attitudes when implementing the convention as they will affect what needs to be done. In order to implement the convention in an activity, it is also important to understand what it involves. Learning, knowledge processes and implementation are interdependent.



Children's participation in planning the city/ their local environment

One area in which several projects have been carried out and into which a certain amount of research has been done is children's participation in planning homes and exterior environments (see e.g. the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning and the Swedish Transport Administration for descriptions of several projects carried out together with children and young people). Below is a more detailed description of a study carried out by Movium⁶.

In a report from 2008, Lenninger describes where, how and in what contexts children and young people are involved in planning.

Children are not a separate group that can be distinguished from other groups of citizens. Children, just like all other citizens, are dependent on adapting to the environment, but also of making the environment theirs.

The notion that people in general, and children in particular, can themselves satisfy their wishes and express their creative urge is not something that has been accepted to any greater degree among planners.

(Lenninger, 2008:3)

⁶ Movium (Centre for the Urban Environment) is responsible at the national level for spreading and developing knowledge about outdoor environments that contribute to the development of children and young people (Lenninger, 2008). The Centre is based at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences and is a national entity whose task it is to stimulate contacts between research and practice on issues concerning the city's outdoor environment and its significance for urban lifestyles.

Article 31⁷ of the Convention on the Rights of the Child establishes the right to play alongside the right to culture, rest and recreation. Lenninger's report sets out from the Child Convention. It points out that it is often we adults who are the obstacles. Reports to the Committee on the Rights of the Child in Geneva on how the implementation of the Child Convention is progressing at the national level place very little emphasis on Article 31, or on children's right to play. Lenninger's view is that this could be partly to do with play not being accorded the same importance as other social issues. From the perspective that playing is children's way of relating to the world around them, and that this contributes to children's physical and mental development, health and well-being, the lack of spaces for children to play, meet and rest constitutes a global obstacle to play. Lenninger refers to the National Institute of Public Health and its knowledge compilation "The effects of the built environment on physical activity", in which it shows that children's freedom of movement in urban areas around the world is decreasing as a result of increased traffic and more compact cities. Other factors which limit children's opportunities for playing outside are noise, air pollution and parents' increasing concern about dangers, as well as the fact that computers and TV offer comfortable indoor alternatives.

The Child Convention leaves plenty of scope for interpretation by individual signatories, which means that adults' (and children's) conceptions/constructions of children/childhood and children's needs determine how the convention is to be interpreted and what it should lead to. For example, the convention establishes the right to play but not the right to spaces in which to play. Lenninger writes that this too is open to interpretation, but that research (both Swedish and international) supports the importance of outdoor play. "Recreation and leisure pursuits are activities that often take place outdoors and require a place and space" (2008:5). Lenninger therefore considers it important that planners invoke Article 31 when outdoor environments such as streets, squares, parks, residential courtyards and school and preschool yards are being altered or planned, in order to guarantee spaces for children's play and development.

Lenninger studied where, how and in what contexts children and young people are involved in planning and/or management of the city's outdoor

⁷ Article 31

1. States Parties recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

environment. The study was not comprehensive, but several municipalities and county councils were included. The conclusions are based on concrete planning situations. The Swedish Transport Administration and the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning were sources of inspiration. The municipal poll by the Ombudsman for Children was studied and the departments of community construction at the county administrative boards were contacted. With a few exceptions, the county administrative boards proved to have little knowledge about how young people are involved in physical planning within municipalities. They referred to the fact that young people's participation often occurs at the local development plan level and that knowledge of this therefore does not reach county administrative boards.

Lenninger concludes there is a strikingly low awareness in Swedish municipalities of existing knowledge about the connection between time spent outdoors, health and well-being, children's play and the physical environment. In Lenninger's view the problem is not a lack of research, but how existing knowledge reaches officials and politicians and how this knowledge is turned into practice.

The study also shows that officials responsible for planning and management of the municipality's outdoor environment would like central municipal coordination of issues concerning children and young people. Lenninger concludes "that this indicates that increased cooperation between different departments is seen as significant for the successful handling of issues regarding young people's participation in planning and management of the city's outdoor environment" (2008:9).

Lenninger also observes that it is the interest and knowledge of individual officials that determines if and how children become involved, which also means that valuable experiences may be lost when an individual official leaves his or her post.

When projects are carried out in which children participate, there is rarely any feedback from the children about how their views have been taken into account. Furthermore, knowledge is often raised to an abstract level which can be inaccessible to children. It has also turned out that outdoor environment issues are not a given on youth coordinators' agenda. Lenninger notes that when young people bring up ideas which are already on politicians' or officials' agenda in some form, the likelihood that they will be realised increases.

Involving young people in physical planning requires other working methods than municipal officials are used to, and the attempts that are made to this end are often perceived as time-consuming. Officials have to find new methods, establish contacts with children and young people, carry out inquiries or consultations, compile results and provide feedback.

All this takes time, and at the municipal level there were calls for both method development and experience exchange. Some planners took the view that it wasn't possible to dedicate regular working hours to consulting with children, while others said that there are simple ways of working once the contact with children has been established. These latter planners often referred to projects in which help had been sought from schools. For example, walking tours were organised during which children were asked to describe how they regard their outdoor environment. Lenninger notes, however, that the capacity and interest of schools in dealing with non-school issues varies greatly.

The various projects Lenninger studied led to different types of insights and knowledge. After a project in Gävle in which young people had been asked (using various methods: interviews, groups and written suggestions) about their view of different city districts, one of the planning architects involved observed that the inquiry process had been instructive for the planners, not least because they had realised how much children really understand when they are given good guidance. A project in Uppsala in which young people had been involved in the renewal of Stadsträdgården, a park, and Boulongerskogen, a wood, offered an important insight to the project group: the children saw the park as a place for all ages and for many different groups of visitors. The young people saw no problem in young and old people sharing the same spaces; "something the project group said that adults often do" (2008:22). In Kungälv a city planning project was carried out in collaboration between an upper secondary school and the municipality. Today the collaboration has stopped, in part because certain engaged individuals have left their posts but also because the pupils now have other priorities. Still, the example shows that young citizens are competent to involve themselves in social development and that they possess a good ability to see things from others' point of view. Lenninger describes how the young people did not limit themselves to typical youth issues and that the young citizens became engaged in their city. All the same, it did happen that their own misgivings were confirmed: "There's no point anyway".

As part of Gothenburg's Agenda 21 efforts, an architecture adviser was hired by the city's Cultural Affairs Committee in 2003. The adviser's brief is to strive to "help schools and preschools discuss and create architecture" (Lenninger, 2008:32). In connection with the transformation of Södra Älvstranden into a new city district, the city planning office and Älvstranden Utveckling AB, the developer, used a new method for citizen dialogues. Six different teams of citizens, of which one (Team Children and Young People) consisted of 26 children between the ages of 6 and 15, were asked to produce their visions for Södra Älvstranden. Young people

over the age of 15 were included in the other teams. The children in Team Children and Young People had previously participated in the City Museum's exhibition activity "The City in Young People's Eyes", in which the transformation of Södra Älvstranden had been a theme. About half of the 500 suggestions sent in by Gothenburgers were from children. Team Children and Young People also included three architecture pedagogues and the architecture adviser. The teams' task was to compile and develop the suggestions that had been sent to the museum. The children were divided into smaller groups according to their different levels of development, and working methods (drama, role play, pictures, maps, walks and discussions) were adapted to their needs. The children visited each others' city districts and schools, and these trips were intended to provide perspectives on the city's different functions.

The architecture adviser highlighted the value of beginning with the children's own situations. If the children describe what is good in their lives and what they think of the place where they live, it becomes possible to discuss city planning issues without making things too abstract.

(Lenninger 2008:32)

In the young people's proposal, public transport had been expanded and the cars were gone, and by the river was a green area. According to them, a safe city district is one in which people move around at all times of the day and night, which made it important to have places to meet. They also proposed a Youth House and wanted small shops rather than large shopping centres.

Lenninger comments that the young people were better than adults at adopting the point of view of other age groups, and that the small children were visionaries who dared to propose creative ideas that adults hesitated over. The children's task was not to produce concrete solutions, as they cannot design houses or roads, but instead to have opinions about what they thought a city district should have and what makes you feel safe and welcome in a city district. In my opinion, the young people's visions can be interpreted thus: the younger children were in what was a new arena for them, where what was OK and not OK had not yet become clear to them. They therefore did not need to consider conceptions of how the proposals should be presented. By extension this means that children's and young people's visions can have an important place and be a significant added contribution to planning by providing new approaches/visions that adults, due to limited conceptions, cannot always offer.

Children convey observations of their local environment which could lead to concrete changes with a time frame they can grasp. They possess a knowledge of the physical environment that the planners do not have... By consulting with children and young people you release their knowledge and suggestions - but you can't know in advance what they are going to be... An important aim of the Child Convention, and of allowing young people to participate in planning processes, is to strengthen the democratic process. It is important, therefore, that children and young people are not disappointed in their own, or adults', efforts. It is a question of guiding these efforts to a goal which is on a level with children's expectations... In the end, politicians' attitudes are decisive for how children's voices are going to be heard in planning.
(Lenninger, 2008:12)

On what conditions do young people participate?

The following section will give examples of the conditions on which children participate in various activities and projects. The purpose of young people's participation in the various "projects" has varied, as has the form of that participation. The studies give examples of how the conditions for children's participation can be understood, and also point to the importance of carefully considering and thinking through children's and young people's participation with the aim of matching the project's objectives with the form for participation.

Young people's participation in decision making

Young people's understanding of and participation in "civil society" is of direct benefit to children and this has a long term significance for society as it encourages knowledge development, skills, values and attitudes which are fundamental for upholding a democracy (Taylor et al., 2008). Young people's rights to participate in public decision making are increasingly being put into practice. Bryson (2007) highlights the existence of a growing body of literature about how and why children should be involved in public decision making, but there is little research into and few evaluations of how best to do this and what effects can be achieved.

However, there are a number of studies in which the circumstances/ conditions for young people's participation in decision making practices has been the focus. Below are some of the conclusions which it is important to be aware of in efforts to involve young people in these and similar practices.

Taylor and Percy-Smith (2008) note that while young people's participation in issues that concern them has increased over the past decade, so have questions about the extent to which this development is meaningful and efficient. Participation practices have frequently been criticised, principally for being inefficient and misdirected, and less frequently for being fundamentally wrong. A number of authors argue that despite the often considerable enthusiasm of children and young people about being involved in improving their world, innovations such as school and youth councils often end up undemocratic and unable to fulfil their original purpose. Young people often regard them as symbolic, non-representative in terms of membership, adult-led in terms of process, or inefficient in terms of following what young people want (Tisdall et al., 2006).

In a study of local youth policy, Sörbom (2003) goes through research in the area. She refers to a study by Ljungberg and Norling (2001), who argue that most of those who are active in youth councils are well-off and used to being active in associations and the like. Faulkner (2009) also comments that the issue of representativity is seen as a problem in terms of which young people participate in decision making and the link between them and other young people in the municipalities. Which is to say that the young people who participate cannot be seen as representative of all groups of young people, such as the socially excluded, the functionally disabled, young people from other cultures, etc. In my view this situation is directly comparable with issues of representativity in decision making where adults participate.

Faulkner studied a group of young people (the Action Group) that was involved in public decision making in a Scottish municipal agency over a number of years. Faulkner focuses on the issue of representativity by using lessons/insights from literature about political interest groups. He describes the Action Group as an "insider group", involved in the majority of consultations and with privileges in the form of access to the decision making level. However, the Action Group lacks a number of resources that normally accrue to "insider groups", such as economic significance, property or work, possibilities for mobilisation or possibilities to realise power. The group's two foremost resources are, according to Faulkner, its knowledge of young people's opinions and its ability to fit into the decision making process by "acting in a proper/appropriate manner".

Faulkner's study exemplifies the conditions for children's and young people's participation in decision making processes. From the beginning of their participation on the panel, the members of the Action Group wanted to show, among other things, that they were knowledgeable members, and they gradually adapted their behaviour and approach to those of the adults. For example, the adult panel members thought it was

important to respond to previous contributions during the course of a meeting instead of making unrelated comments, which they felt was something the young members initially did. However, the adults found that as the young members' participation continued, they became better at observing the "order" (i.e. the order imposed by the adults).

The Action Group's position was weak in some respects as it was completely tied to and dependent on the group it was striving to influence. It was the local government that provided a place to meet, funded the group, consulted it on youth issues and offered it places on the Advisory Panel. In various ways, the young members of the group pointed out that they had to make sure they maintained a good relationship with the local government and did as it said. Those group members who mentioned this did so in terms of their own expendability - if they were too much trouble, the local government could replace them with other young people. The local government was keen to be able to consult a group of young people, but it was not under any obligation to do so exclusively with this group, or these individuals. In other words, the young people had to play by the rules in order to be taken seriously by decision makers and not risk being replaced.

Faulkner's view is that the members of the Action Group were under pressure from two sides. On the one hand, in order to show that they could be taken seriously and that they could act appropriately in meetings, they were eager to show how different they were from other young people, and that they could not easily be replaced. On the other hand, in order to be able to use their resources as conveyors of young people's opinions, they had to show how much they were like other young people. The young members were criticised for claiming that they were like other young people while at the same time trying to act differently from the majority of young people. In playing by the rules, the young people risked being accused of no longer being authentic young people.

Faulkner's study is an example of how young people who participate in decision making processes have to adapt to adults' conditions, and of the fact that as long as they do, they are welcome to participate. The power relationship between children and adults becomes evident.

Ljungberg and Norling (2001) also discuss (according to Sörbom, 2003) the fact that youth councils end up with a dual and paradoxical role. On the one hand they are meant to represent renewal and are not supposed to be party political, on the other hand the councils are viewed as nurseries for party politics. The latter includes the expectation that the young people involved learn the parliamentary ropes. The councils' members are in a position where they have to try to balance these dual expectations. Ljungberg and Norling argue that politicians must be prepared both to socialise and to encourage a certain amount of revolt.

Sörbom (2003) also refers to the Norwegian youth researchers Lidén and Ødegård (2002), who have studied forms of political action for young people, including youth councils. Lidén and Ødegård note that one difficulty with the councils is that politicians and officials often refer to the young people on the councils principally as users and not citizens, which limits their political room for manoeuvre. The upshot is that expectations on the young people are that they should be active and improve their everyday existence, but that they should not participate in the political discussion. If the youth councils are not empowered to make decisions or influence them, but instead are expected to participate only for learning purposes, there is a risk that they and their constituency will lose faith in the representational political system, Lidén and Ødegård argue.

The 1995 and 1996 reports of the National Board for Youth Affairs describe it as problematic that the status of youth councils is unclear. They emphasise the importance of clarity from politicians and officials as to whether they regard the councils as a source of knowledge about what young people think or as an opportunity for real influence for young people. (Sörbom, 2003)

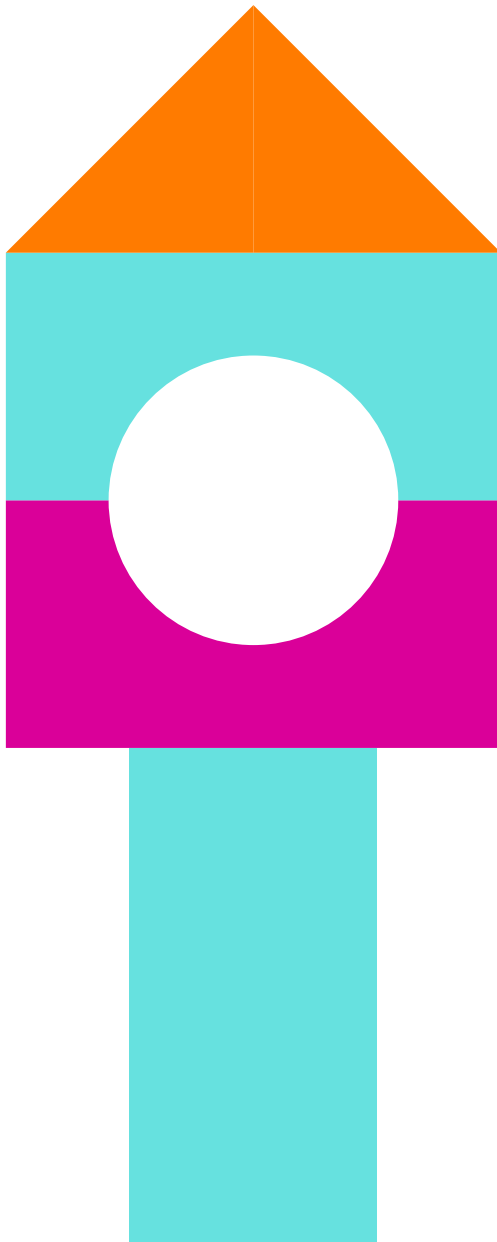
Sörbom's (2003) own study⁸ of nine municipalities' efforts to develop municipal youth policies also shows that one thing the municipalities have to work on in order to move ahead is to know what they want when creating an influence forum for young people. It emerges in the study that municipalities are struggling to get away from young people's mistrust of politicians and their intentions. One of the reasons why progress is slow on this could, in Sörbom's view, be that municipalities have not actually decided what they mean by influence. It is also clear that both officials and politicians sometimes forget to take the time to listen to the youth councils and consult them. Sörbom also points to the advantages of municipalities having adopted a youth policy action programme. This is partly about turning youth policy into an item on the agenda and about making it clear that young people are a group whose views are taken into account. It has also meant that municipal activities have started operating according to the principle that young people have to be heard. The state has stipulated goals for how youth policy should be framed, but as municipalities have ample room for manoeuvre there is a tendency for

⁸ Sörbom's study focuses on youth policy in nine Swedish municipalities. These municipalities are participants in the LUPP project - "local follow-up of youth policy" - which is run in collaboration with the National Board for Youth Affairs. The purpose of the project is to find methods of following up and developing local youth policy.

interpretations to begin to shift, and in practice there are considerable differences in how youth policy is framed. Sörbom points out that this translates into a risk that not all young people in Sweden grow up under equivalent circumstances. He suggests that a more rigid follow-up of local youth policy efforts and financial support for method development are possible ways forward.

Tisdall and Bell (2006) have carried out two case studies of projects that tried to involve children in public decision making at the national level. The studies show that children's opinions are a set among other stakeholders' sets of opinions. One of the case studies describes how the children's agenda competed with those of other groups (at higher levels) and how the support for children's participation cooled when resources and scope shrank. Thus children's participation can be regarded as a "favour", where adult agendas are given precedence over children's agendas, and not as an automatic activity in which children and young people participate on equal terms. In the other case study it turned out that the participating children could be regarded as participants in a peripheral group (to be compared with a core group) that did not have sufficient resources to exercise a continuous influence on policy, but instead had temporary access to the political process.

The studies mentioned above provide examples of the conditions under which children participate in decision making processes. It is important to be aware of these conditions and what they mean for those who participate, and to be able to analyse if this is about participation, and if so what kind of participation it is about. The power relationships between children and adults become evident in the above examples, and the question to ask is this: Are we adults prepared to flatten the power relationships between adults and children? What would that mean in practice? If we are to work on the basis of the Child Convention's intentions, that implies a power shift - and the extent of that shift is for us to determine.



A model for participation

When we talk about children's participation we need to think about what that means in practical terms. Participation in what and how? What can be counted as participation? In order to create an increased awareness of children's participation we need an analytical tool. Several studies (see e.g. Eriksson & Näsman, 2008; Smith, 2002; Ågren, 2008; Taylor and Percy-Smith, 2008) analyse children's participation in various contexts using Hart's (1992) "ladder" for participation.

- 8 Children initiated shared decisions with adults
- 7 Children initiated and directed
- 6 Adult initiated shared decisions with children
- 5 Consulted and informed
- 4 Assigned but informed
- 3 Tokenism
- 2 Decoration
- 1 Manipulation

(Hart 1992:41)

According to Hart (1992), the three lowest rungs are not about participation. Focusing on children is not the same thing as letting them participate. The five upper rungs on Hart's ladder indicate increasing degrees of participation. Rung six is characterised by projects created by adults, but in which children have a clear say. Hart argues that in order to achieve

genuine collaboration, it is important to allow the children to participate in the entire process. Often children are only brought into the process when the design is already finished. This is a mistake, Hart claims, because even if children cannot have a decision making voice in these discussions they must be given the chance of participating in discussions on technical details in order to understand how and on what grounds these decisions are made. In that way, children get a more realistic picture of how the world around them is made. Projects that are initiated and led by children (rung 7), Hart says, are difficult to find outside of children's games. Playing, however, is an important training arena, and it follows that schools and preschools should create the conditions for play and pay attention to children's play initiatives, and avoid controlling them. "Children initiated shared decisions with adults" is at the top of the ladder. Hart argues that the goal is not to get children to act completely on their own, but instead reach a point where children dare to take their own initiatives and also to ask adults for help, which assumes that children trust their role as members in a society and know that adults respect their opinions and will not disregard them. Depending in the circumstances, different degrees of participation will be appropriate. That is to say, the ladder should not be interpreted as implying that the topmost rung should always be the goal or the best result. Freedom of choice is an important element of participation. It is equally important to consider the context with which we are dealing. Participation in all forms is neither possible nor desirable in all situations (McNeish, 1999).

Voices of children who have participated on TV

Another example of how Hart's ladder can be used to create increased understanding is Ågren's study of children's participation on TV. Superficially it might seem that children and young people are taking part, but when you scrutinise certain projects closely this proves to be partially an illusion. Ågren's (2008) study is about children's participation in a completely different context than the above examples, but like them it highlights the conditions for children's participation. Ågren interviewed eleven children aged between 8 and 17 about their comments and thoughts on their participation in different children's programmes on Swedish Television, SVT (REA, Melodifestivalen and Lilla Aktuellt⁹). Factors such as

⁹ REA is a consumer information programme on which children test products and scrutinise advertising. The children are paid for their participation. Lilla Aktuellt is a news programme for children with two adult presenters and a number of children who are reporters. The children are not paid for their participation. Lilla Melodifestivalen is a music competition for children between the ages of 8 and 15.

influence, a sense of participation, possibilities of affecting outcomes and the significance of participation are highlighted. The aim of the study is to "focus on the voices of participating children and thereby bring to light, seek an understanding of and knowledge about conditions for children's participation on TV" (2008:76). The study's theoretical approach touches on all aspects of power, against the background of the children's participation in an arena dominated by adults, and it shows, by means of the example that is TV, what place children are allotted in our society.

Conditions for the children's participation varied. REA is a consumer information programme for children. The young participants are made to look very competent and quick-witted in their comments. They interview representatives of various products and ask them tough questions, and the viewer gets the impression that the young people are the real players. Ågren explains that in fact the programme is planned and written by adults, who decide which products are to be tested and what other issues are to be dealt with on the programme.

Ylva: *But how do you feel about being given a script? Don't you want to say things of your own?*

Pedram: *Of course, they write what subject you're going to talk about but then of course you get to decide what you're going to say, as long as you make yourself clear, that this is what we're going to test, for example /---/ Usually it works fine with a script, because if we decided ourselves it would be pretty chaotic, we wouldn't get anything done, so I think it's quite good that they write a script and then you decide how you're going to say it.*

(2008:84)

The young people who participated in REA emphasise that they were not expecting any power, and they accept that they are in an adult arena where they have little or no influence. Ågren argues that the young people, in their view of themselves in relation to adults, confirm children's subordinate position. Ågren refers to Rönneberg (2006), who discusses Berit Ås' descriptions of controlling techniques in men's treatment of women and suggests that these are equally applicable to adults' treatment of children.

Withholding of information is one of these techniques, and by not giving the participating children all the information or the opportunity to take part in shaping the programme, the adults are upholding their dominant position in relation to the children. (2008:89)

REA is an example of Hart's third rung, "tokenism", where adults want to give children a voice but have not thought very closely about why. The result is that children appear to have a voice, while in fact they have very little influence over events. According to Hart, this level is not to be regarded as participation. Ågren writes that Pitt Nielsen (2001) asks if children's rights really are supported in a production made mostly by adults and fears that the children will become mere extras on their own programme.

In Lilla Aktuellt the reporters were allowed greater participation and influence. In my interpretation of Hart's ladder, this is rung six, adult initiated shared decisions with children. The young people learned how to do interviews and wrote their own questions and scripts, and the adults were there to help if needed.

Klara: *I mean, the items we were going to do, they were completely decided by the others, but then we were allowed to shape them ourselves. And then the stuff we did was mostly reviewing films or meeting celebrities, things they (the producers) thought would be fun for us to do. We did an awful lot ourselves. For the interviews we got to write our own questions, and when we were going to review a film we also wrote the text ourselves, what we were going to say and so on, and then of course they were there to help out if for example I hadn't thought of any questions at all because I didn't know anything about the subject, so they did have a few questions to give us, that we could ask about this or that.*
(2008:89-90)

Ågren's study is a good example from practice, where it becomes clear on what conditions children and young people participate in various arenas. The study also shows that the space given to children is largely dependent on and derived from adults' conceptions and wishes, and not on the young people's competence. In REA the adults run the show their way, while in Lilla Aktuellt the young people receive training in order to be able to carry out their tasks - which of course adults in similar situations also receive.

Carefully prepared project

One of the most important questions to ask when embarking on a "participation project" is why - i.e. the purpose of the project (McNeish, 1999).

Below is described an example of a project in which the participation idea has been included on a conscious level ever since the beginning of the project.

Brady (2007) carried out a case study of how Barnardos¹⁰ worked to put theories about children's participation into practice in an information technology (IT) project. The aim of the IT project was to focus on the emerging "digital divide" by improving access to and use of IT among those children and young people who are worst off. The project involved 33 children between the ages of 3 and 13.

Barnardos assumed that a "participation approach" would help shape the outcome of the project, to meet the needs of the target group, raise the children's self-esteem, improve their communication and decision making skills, and show respect for children and young people. An initial knowledge inventory was carried out of different ways of getting children to participate, and the staff were given training in how to consult children. Brady points out that the evaluation of the project showed that it would have been useful if the staff had also held discussions aimed at bringing out conceptions and prejudices about children's rights and ability to participate, which according to McNeish (1999) constitute an invisible obstacle to participation in most organisations.

The level of participation chosen can be compared to the sixth rung on Hart's (1992) ladder: Adult initiated shared decisions with children, which in practical terms means that the idea and the effort to bring the groups together were the adults' doing, while the young people were involved in all the steps of planning, implementation and decision making.

Ethical guidelines (according to Brady, Sinclair [2004] underlines the obligation of those involved in participation efforts to draw up ethical guidelines) were drawn up in which the conditions for participation were made clear. As with ethical principles of research, these were about consent, security, confidentiality, voluntary participation and complaint processes. As far as participation was concerned, the children's parents had to give their written consent.

The children were selected by a group of people who knew what individuals/families were in the target group. Brady points out, however, that the areas without established groups of young people were excluded from participating. This reflects Sinclair's (2004) point that it is likely that children who are minimally involved in local organisations tend generally to be less involved in participation activities.

During the project, the children had many opportunities of express-

¹⁰ Barnardos is Ireland's largest volunteer childcare organisation.

ing their opinions and feelings. They were asked to describe what they were interested in, and training was devised to fit in with these interests to the greatest extent possible. For example, the children were taught how to use the internet to find information about their favourite football team, to scan images of their idols and to use Word documents to paste images into and write about their lives. The young people participated in shaping the learning processes and could ask for help when they needed it. Sometimes it takes information and experience for children to see possibilities. If the children were unsure of what they wanted or were interested in, the adults helped by giving examples, among other things. Parents were encouraged to participate by giving feedback. Those parents who participated in the group sessions were encouraged to let the children control things. Throughout the project, the focus was on having fun, on sharing and on praising efforts/skills. The group leaders made an effort to make the children feel welcome and important.

For the leaders it was a challenge to strike the balance between enabling and learning, between leading and being led. An example of this was a group of older children who were geared towards individual interests such as playing computer games and downloading music. For the younger group, playing computer games might promote the development of language and motor activity, for instance, while the older group needed other challenges in front of the computer. The leaders in this case encouraged them to develop a home page.

According to Brady, the “participation approach” meant that the children were regarded as independent actors. A “key criterion” for genuine participation is the relevance it has for children’s everyday life. Children are motivated to learn how to use IT because it allows them to communicate with friends, for instance, and training should be related to the relevance it has to children in the present. Allowing the children to control content meant that they also took the lead in creating relevance. Another important factor that derived from the fact that the children were allowed to “take control” was that it was easier for leaders to encourage and answer questions to do with cultural differences than to be dependent on their own or other’s conceptions of what is culturally suitable.

According to Brady, children’s rights advocates argue that participation efforts with children increase their self-esteem and self-confidence, and can help them develop leadership qualities. Over the course of the project the children’s belief in themselves increased as far as their rights to expression and to take initiatives were concerned. The value of sharing with others and of having respect for each other, which were encouraged by the leaders, became visible in most cases.

A number of lessons grew out of the project, in which it emerged that:

A clear framework where participants reflect on focus and objectives is important.

Good leadership with secure funding, access to advisory expertise group and skilled staff are all prerequisites.

Small scale participation projects increase the capacity and appetite for further work.

Informal participation work can work well in the context of a formal framework.

Research, evaluation and training were important for learning and for creating a common frame of understanding. Even if the extent of participation was small, the spread of awareness and learning has been great both within Barnardos and among external stakeholders. Brady’s conclusion is that it is suitable to begin on a small scale and encourage the development of participation instead of trying to achieve too much before the organisation has a well developed awareness, understanding of and competence regarding participation.

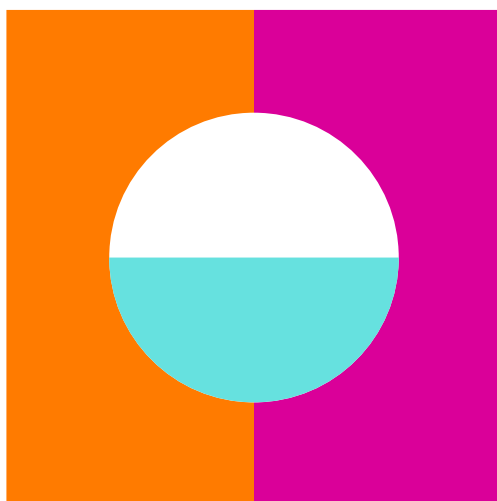
As a further example of how to proceed practically, it is worth mentioning Eriksson’s and Näsman’s (2008) text in which they use research interviews and Hart’s “ladder” to describe how children can be made participants and be allowed to take part. They describe a process in which the children gradually, through information and a permissive and mutual approach become participants in, and together with the researcher also creators of the empirical material. Eriksson and Näsman argue that together with the child it is possible to create a common basis and activity in which the child’s participation increases. Eriksson and Näsman discuss how it is possible to handle the tension between children’s vulnerability and dependence on adults for support and help on the one hand, and a treatment of children as active subjects, with their own will and agenda on the other.

Studies in which children themselves have been allowed to comment on their participation

To work as an advocate for children also means working with children, and this is where children's participation comes in. To have a child perspective means that children and young people are allowed to comment on their reality. Below is a description of some studies in which children and young people have been asked how they perceive their participation and position in society. What do the children themselves say - in what arenas do they want to participate?

Emilia Frost (2005) studied how young people see themselves as inhabitants of Uppsala. A part of the report is also about Mötesplatsen, an established channel that has existed in Uppsala since 2001 for a dialogue between young people and those who make the decisions in the municipality. Frost was active herself in Mötesplatsen when she was a pupil and young person, and was employed as coordinator for Mötesplatsen during 2004. Frost had just left upper secondary school when she wrote the report.

The aim of the report is to study young people's view of their possibilities of influence. 369 pupils (from years eight, nine and the first year of upper secondary school) answered a questionnaire. It was based on five main questions: Do young people want to have an influence? If so, on what and how? Do young people feel that they can have an influence? And do they know Mötesplatsen?



The report is a result of the Swedish Riksdag (parliament) having approved, in December 1999, a new system for control, follow-up and analysis of youth policy. The system is based on three overarching goals for national youth policy:

Young people shall have good conditions for living an independent life.

Young people shall have real possibilities for influence and participation.

Young people's engagement, creative ability and critical thinking shall be valued and treated as a resource.

(Publications of the National Board for Youth Affairs 2003:35)

It emerges in the report that 84 per cent of the young people who answered the questionnaire think that it is "very" or "fairly" important for young people to be involved in influencing things in the municipality. To the question "How much do you want to influence?", as many as 92 per cent reply that they want to influence their lives a lot or quite a lot, 87 per cent their situation at school, 91 per cent their free time and 59 per cent want to influence things in the municipality. There is no significant difference between the sexes in how much they want to influence, and the interest in having an influence increases with increasing age.

To the question: "Is there anything that would make young people more engaged?"¹¹ about half of those who replied said that they would be more engaged if "there was someone who listened to them and took them seriously". The same number hoped for more information about current events in the municipality and that more politicians and officials would visit schools. Other replies included that they could imagine being more engaged if they were given more information at school about how the municipality works, if they could vote in municipal elections when they were sixteen, or if they could meet and talk to politicians. About 30 per cent wanted to have time at school in order to become engaged.

The author sees a connection in which the lack of knowledge is tied to the belief in one's own ability to have an influence. Those who consider that they have learned a lot about the municipality in school are more interested in influencing things in the municipality than those who consider that they have learned little. Of those who replied that they did not want to have an influence, two fifths also thought that there isn't anyone who listens to them or takes them seriously. This can be compared to the report by the National Agency for Education (2003) in which it emerges

¹¹ This question allowed respondents to tick several response alternatives.

that pupils with little knowledge of democracy also have less faith in democratic processes. Without either knowledge about or faith in society and democracy, the young person is unlikely to participate and make use of the possibilities for influence that do exist (Frost, 2005). On the seventh rung of Hart's ladder, participation is about children taking their own initiative but daring to ask adults for help. According to Hart this assumes that children trust their role as members of a society and know that adults respect their opinions and will not disregard them.

Half of the pupils said they would become more engaged if they knew that someone was taking them seriously and if they received more information at school about what was going on in the municipality and how it works. The desire to have an influence presents an entirely different picture. Only eight per cent replied that they did not want to have any influence at all. Judging from this, the will to political influence would seem to be considerable, even if young people themselves don't regard it as an interest in political engagement.

What do young people want to influence?

Young people are most interested in being able to influence their free time and their lives. 85 per cent also want to have an influence on their school situation a lot or quite a lot, and 58 per cent want to have an influence in the municipality.

Pupils were also asked to choose which areas they were most interested in having an influence on. Most important, by a wide margin, for Uppsala's young people are bus timetables and ticket prices. The school environment and situation, sport activities and facilities, leisure activities and centres, and unemployment are other important issues that young people want to be able to have an influence on.

There are differences between the respondent groups when classified by upper secondary course programme and area of residence. Generally, pupils on the construction/vehicle programmes show less interest in most issues. They were least interested in housing, discrimination issues, bus timetables and ticket prices, cultural activities and unemployment.

How do young people want to have an influence?

Two thirds of respondents are members of some kind of association or organisation. Just over half of those who responded are members of a sports association. Frost comments that in view of how active young people are in various ways, warnings that they don't care about anything any more seem very exaggerated. Young people are drawn above all to

sports associations. Perhaps they are a very good but forgotten channel for reaching young people. 43 per cent want to have an influence on issues that concern sport activities and facilities. In Frost's view it seems sensible that politicians increasingly turn to young people via their associations in order to have a dialogue about leisure policy. Perhaps more important is for the associations themselves to make something of their own young members' engagement.

One fifth are or have been active within the pupils' council at their school. Frost asks the question: How can schools help pupils gain knowledge of and access to channels for influencing society beyond the school walls? 40 per cent don't know where or how they can have an influence.

Taylor and Percy-Smith (2008) discuss various dilemmas and challenges regarding children's participation. The context is British, but has implications for other countries too. To a large extent, initiatives towards children's participation have involved consulting children and young people about their views on adults' agendas. The decisions subsequently reached have been constructed by adults, which may lead to children continuing to feel marginalised. To be allowed to express your opinion is important, but it is only part of the participation process. There is an established tradition of theory and practice regarding participation in which it is understood as a process comprising reflection, learning and action, in which participants are given the possibility of participating in the entire development cycle. It is a rare thing for young people to be involved in deliberations about how points they have raised should be considered (Taylor and Percy-Smith, 2008).

Taylor and Percy-Smith (2008) write that in much of the literature children's participation has tended to be understood in terms of involving young people in formal public decision making processes, in accordance with adults' agendas and adults' rules and regulations, as we have seen in the example above. They argue that standardised policy formulations driven by goal and performance indicators often collide with young people's different cultural viewpoints and perceived realities. Taylor and Percy-Smith point to the paradox inherent in urging young people to express their views in local youth councils, while when they articulate their values through their actions and choices as to what they do and where they are, they are limited by adults' values and priorities.

Taylor and Percy-Smith claim that formalised decision making is not the only possible legitimate path by which young people can participate in processes of change and contribute to public life. Young people have the capacity for more varied forms of democratic participation, e.g. through social action and social movements, and young people often organise themselves in sporadic, short term youth activities. They argue that young

people are already participating within their local areas but that this is not counted, as if young people were totally passive and inactive.

Participation for young people seems therefore only to have currency when it coheres around what power holders consider an acceptable agenda for participation.
(Taylor and Percy-Smith, 2008:382)

Many issues and decisions that concern young people occur in their everyday life, in the interaction between family members, in school and in the neighbourhood. For young people, participation is most meaningful and has the greatest effect in these everyday contexts (Taylor and Percy-Smith). According to the authors, Hart (2006) writes about the need to recognise the importance of possibilities for children to become engaged in informal participation through self-organisation within the municipality. This standpoint can be compared with Frost's results on what areas young people themselves say they want to have an influence on, and where they perceive that they also have the possibility of having an influence.

Do young people feel they can have an influence?

In Frost's study only six per cent of the 369 pupils who responded believe that they can have a great influence in the municipality. One in four don't believe that is possible at all, or that young people only have a small possibility of having an influence. Young people do believe they can have an influence over their own lives and their free time. Almost half believe they can have a large influence over their life and free time. Just over 15 per cent believe they can influence their school situation. Considerably fewer girls than boys believe that young people in general can have an influence in the municipality.

Elsley (2004) studied 14-year-olds' opinions and experiences of public spaces in Scotland. They were asked if they thought that adults listen to what they say, and a majority replied they did for adults they had a close relationship with. But they were unanimous in the perception that adults outside of the personal network do not listen to what they have to say. Only one person had the experience of being asked about their opinion regarding a local project. Elsley compares this with similar results in Matthews' (2001) study which found that a small share of children (one in four) had talked to someone about changes they wanted to see in their area, and Chawla and Malone's (2003) which includes the comment that in one project (Growing Up in Cities) it turned out that children's and

young people's sense of powerlessness was about equal across all the participating cities and countries.

Ågren's (2008) study also points to children's subordinate position in society and to how children themselves perceive this position:

Ylva: *Would you like to be the one who phoned round to check prices?*

Carolina: *(REA): Ah um... well, yes... but I don't think there's time for that, if you're going to shoot a whole day then that means you haven't got time for anything else.*

Ylva: *But if we disregard the lack of time, do you think it would be possible?*

Carolina: *Yes, I think it would be possible but I don't think they would... if I phone a company I don't think they'd listen as much, I mean if it's a child calling... although if they know it's REA then maybe... but I don't know.*

Ylva: *Why do you think they wouldn't listen because a child was calling?*

Carolina: *They wouldn't take it seriously. They might think "ah, you just want to test toothbrushes", but if it's an adult calling and saying they're from a TV programme, they'll take it more seriously. I don't know, but maybe something like that. (2008:86)*

The replies to the question if young people perceive that they can have an influence must be seen in relation to the context the question refers to. That is to say, if the question is asked in reference to the society level, a larger number reply that they are unable to have an influence, but if you ask it with reference to a particular context, e.g. school, the number of positive replies is likely to be higher. It is nevertheless important to point out that the perception of being able to make one's voice heard, of participating and of being able to have an influence on one's own situation and that of one's closer circle is tied to the perception of the same thing in a larger context.

Participation as process – from the small to the large

From private to public

Moses (2008) contends that children's participation may largely be regarded as played out in two areas/domains: the private or personal (home and family) on the one hand, and the social or public (society and school) on the other. Practice and studies of young people's participation in the private/personal domain and the social/public one are often separated, but Moses argues that they are tied up with each other. The UN Committee says that the child's journey towards full citizenship begins in the family, referring to the central role of the family in the creation of awareness and respect for human values (Englund, 2008). The experience of engaged social relations and interaction is necessary for promoting children's understanding of civil rights, including the right to participation. Joint engagement together with others in challenging activities, feeling comfortable, accepted and working well together with others probably contribute to effective participation and a feeling of taking part (Smith, 2002).

Taylor et al. (2008) have studied how children view themselves as citizens in New Zealand, i.e. how children regard their position in society. Taylor et al. argue that citizenship is shaped and practiced through social participation in a number of different arenas such as the family, school and

society. Without the possibility of meaningful participation in everyday life, it is unlikely that children will develop a good understanding of the citizenship concept.

Taylor et al. argue (along with several others, e.g. James & Prout, 1997 and Mayall, 2002) that if children are going to become fully-fledged members and citizens of a democratic society, their participation must be based on an understanding of the meaning of citizenship and civil rights. Whether they feel that they are part of society, probably affects whether they feel sufficiently secure and motivated to believe that they can contribute to change. Young people's understanding of and participation in "civil society" are directly beneficial for children and has a long term significance for society as it encourages the development of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that are fundamental for upholding a democracy (Taylor et al., 2008). Taylor et al. refer to a number of researchers who believe that if young people develop a faith in themselves as stakeholders who have some control over their own lives it is likely that they will be less dependent on others for dealing with problems (see among others: Melton, 1998, 2002; Kaufman & Rizzini, 2002; Limber & Kaufman, 2002; Smith et al., 2003; Rizzini & Thaplyial, 2005). Active participation can give children valuable experience of making difficult decisions, favour a sense of control, support a developing sense of altruism and set off a pattern of involvement in civil activities (Taylor et al. refer to: Youniss et al., 1997; Alderson, 2000; Fletcher et al., 2000; Nairn, 2000). Children's and young people's participation in school and civil activities also presages positive academic attitudes and results (Lamborn et al., 1992; Eccles & Barber, 1999). In other words it is not about training children to be fully-fledged members of society when they turn 18, but about the fact that children's participation from an early age leads to engagement and motivation and even higher degrees of participation. According to Taylor et al., several researchers (see e.g. Weithorn, 1998, Morrow, 1999; Grover, 2004) argue that by encouraging children to express their opinions and feelings about civil rights (and other issues) we also signal respect for them as human beings.

In the qualitative study by Taylor et al., 66 children (aged 8-15)¹² participated in eight focus groups with the aim of exploring children's understanding of rights, responsibilities and citizenship. The discussions were about what it means to be a citizen of New Zealand. The young people were also asked to work in smaller groups, using large sheets of paper

12 (32 8/9-year-olds, 12 girls and 20 boys) (34 14/15-year-olds, 23 girls and 11 boys). 34 of the children were from schools with lower socioeconomic status and 32 were from schools with higher socioeconomic status. 27 children were from rural districts and 39 lived in cities.

with headings about rights and responsibilities and thinking about how their lives might look in an imaginary land. Researchers helped the children to develop thoughts about what is meant by citizenship, rights and responsibilities. The answers were categorised as belonging to one of three groups: right to participation, right to maintenance, and right to protection. A further categorisation was whether these were rights in the home, in school or in society.

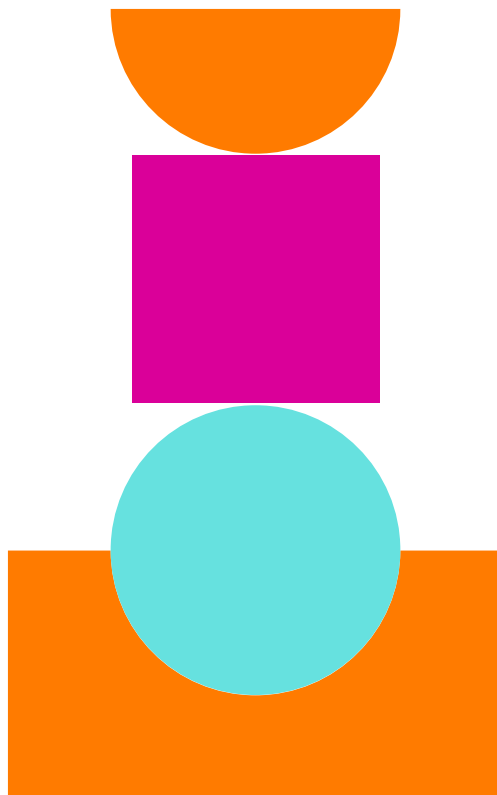
Taylor et al. argue that the study confirms the view that young people can meaningfully contribute to discussions about their rights and responsibilities, in order to understand how young people become citizens and to participate in a positive way in their homes, schools and in society. Almost all the focus groups discussed these things with insight and understanding. The older group (14/15-year-olds, in particular the girls) contributed lengthy and detailed discussions and demonstrated a more sophisticated understanding of citizenship, rights and responsibilities. They brought up typical age-related issues and worries about autonomy, participation, sport, free time and recreation, entertainment, choices at school, sexuality, alcohol, driving, leaving home and voting. The younger children were also able to contribute to the dialogue in a meaningful way. They emphasised issues characteristic of middle childhood, such as babysitting, play, being kind, doing household tasks and not being disobedient.

The right to take part was a prominent issue for children of all ages and in all three life contexts (family, school, society) that were discussed. Having some say and getting listened to also featured prominently in the discussions. The authors argue that these results show that children in New Zealand regard themselves as active representatives/stakeholders in society, rather than a category that society reacts to or against. Even if being a citizen means that you have a right to maintenance and protection, this aspect was less prominent in the children's understanding/interpretations. This is in contrast with the image of young people as victims of various wrongs in society, which is a dominant adult conception of childhood (Taylor et al. refer to: Piper, 2000 and Smart & Neale, 2000). Taylor et al. draw the conclusion that the study supports the view that children regard themselves as a part of society and that this view is shaped by social relations, shared activities and roles of responsibility in various contexts of their social lives.

If we compare the results of Taylor et al. with Frost's study, a difference emerges in which a large share of the young people in Uppsala perceive that they are unable to influence their surroundings in various respects, which implies that they ascribe themselves a peripheral role in society, while the young people in New Zealand describe themselves as active representatives in society. It is important to reflect on what this

might be due to. Is it in fact the case that young people in Uppsala feel more marginalised than children in New Zealand? Of course that conclusion cannot be drawn on the basis of the results of the two studies. The target groups were different, as were the questions, and against this background the studies cannot be compared, but an important factor I would like to highlight, and which in my view has a bearing on the results, is the methods used in the studies. In Frost's case it is a poll, while Taylor et al. used focus groups. Focus groups are a method in which the significance of the participants is highlighted, i.e. the participation of the participants becomes extra clear. A process begins when the group's members get to know each other and a sense of security is created, which in turn leads to an atmosphere in which more members "dare to" and do take up space, which contributes to an increased sense of participation. The method in itself assumes that the children are stakeholders and subjects whose opinions count and are necessary in order for a result to be achieved. A poll also assumes that the young people are stakeholders, but does not involve a process of taking part in which the interaction between the group members contributes to the sense of participation in the same way. The group process shows how children's contexts create and contribute to young people feeling that they are participating and that they have a significant position in society. In the same way, a comparison can be made in which young people (in families, in schools and during free time) who feel secure and who have the possibility of influencing their own everyday situation in interaction with others also perceive that they have a significance and are taking part in the larger context. If we apply Hart's participation ladder to the two methods, the focus group method - in which the children can influence the questions and answers in a completely different way than they can in the poll - ends up on a higher rung than the poll method. This line of reasoning in turn leads to the conclusion that how we adults approach children, and not just that we do, is important for how children perceive participation on a number of levels. It also gives us a hint about how to go about the practice, in a number of different fields, of making it possible for children in different situations to become participants on their terms. It might seem an obvious point, but how we approach children is also dependent on how we view children and what children can manage, which in turn affects the space we give to children. It is about the need to be sensitive to children's signals about how they want things, what they want, and to try to go beyond our own limitations in terms of what we think is good for children and in which contexts children should participate. From the children's point of view it is also about the right to decide not to participate in situations where adults have decided that they should participate.

As has been mentioned earlier, Article 12 of the Child Convention is about children's right to express their own views on issues that concern them and to have the view respected and heeded in relation to their age and maturity. The UN Committee has noted that this right applies in all areas and all contexts. This is not very easy to observe in practice. In several issues that concern children, the child is represented by the person or persons who has or have custody. Englund (2008) asks the question: What happens when the interests of the child, and those who have custody of it, diverge? In her thesis, Englund shows that the child's political and citizen status is sharply curtailed and she further claims that the child still has very limited means to be a stakeholder. Children can't represent themselves in political contexts, they do not have the right to vote, since they have been declared by the Age Limits Inquiry (SOU 1996:111) to be politically immature. Englund points out that "in contrast with the Convention, issues of citizenship do not take the child's maturity and continuing development into account, instead age is the arbiter" (p. 249). Or rather, the adult world's inclination to generalise about what children and young people of various ages can manage. We have ideas about what a three-year-old and an eleven-year-old, respectively, will or should have developed in terms of abilities, but we forget that children - like adults - are very different as individuals. When it comes to children's possibilities for participation, our conceptions of children's (lack of) competence and needs control and limit our actions towards children and children's possibilities for participation.



Our conceptions about children

The “new” sociology of childhood

Conceptions about children and childhood are the basis for the conditions a society creates for its children. These conceptions are dependent on the observer and the context. The biological immaturity of a child is a biological fact, but the ways in which this immaturity is understood and given meaning vary. It follows that the experience of childhood and the perception of what childhood is are affected by current circumstances. That is to say that we cannot point to just one childhood but several, shaped in the intersection between different cultural, social and economic systems (Kitzinger, 1997). Within the sociology of childhood there is the view that a paradigmatic shift has occurred in the way children are seen, where children were previously perceived as passive objects of adult care but have now come to be regarded as competent stakeholders who contribute to the creation of existence together with adults. Several researchers (James and Prout, 1997) claim that it is becoming increasingly common today to find acknowledgement that childhood should be regarded as a part of society and culture rather than a precursor to them.

Society's conceptions about children are linked to how children's participation is shaped. The conceptions we have about childhood affect power relationships between children and adults, and thereby also the possibilities that children and young people have for participation and the arenas that become available for children's participation/taking part (Moses, 2008). It is essential that there is an awareness about the norms and values that surround our conceptions of children and childhood in

the organisations that want to work with children's right to participate. A failure to lay bare conceptions about children's competence and vulnerability otherwise risks raising an obstacle to children's participation (McNeish, 1999).

The view of children can be about individual officials' conceptions of children, but is also about the way political systems view children and families. Englund (2008) refers to a sociology thesis written by Bartley (1998). It sets out from the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and explores how different political systems' views of children and families affect the application of the Convention. Bartley concludes that in comparison with Germany and Great Britain, Sweden, Norway and Denmark have a clearer child policy. Norway was the first country to establish a national ombudsman for children, which is interpreted as one of the reasons why Norway is seen as an example of regarding children as stakeholders. France has a well developed child policy while also having a traditional view of the family in which parental authority is preserved and women have the ultimate responsibility for children, which according to Bartley contributes to limiting children's position as stakeholders.

Ågren (2008) refers to Buckingham (2000) who argues that children are seen as a special category with special characteristics, both by themselves and by the adult world. These conceptions "are transformed into laws and regulatory systems, which are then reified in cultural and social practices" (p. 94). The individual compares him- or herself with current conceptions of what is typical of children and in that way behavioural patterns are produced and upheld.

Stern (2006) has studied traditional attitudes to children when their rights to participation are going to be realised. The analysis shows that in this context, conceptions about children's independence are broadly the same, irrespective of which type of society ("traditional" or "modern") one is looking at. Stern's view is that the challenge lies in changing adults' conceptions about children and children's participation.

In the following section I will describe some studies that expose the adult world's conceptions about children and what consequences they might have.

TV as an arena for conceptions of childhood

Ågren analyses what conceptions of childhood and what childhood discourses can be discerned by studying young people's accounts of their participation in various TV programmes (REA, Lilla Aktuellt and Lilla Melodi-

festivalen). Initially, discourses¹³ about the competent child and the child with rights were discernible. These are also the discourses which are conveyed to the TV viewer. We see children acting as interviewers and critical consumers (even if this was a fiction in the REA programme, it was still the image that was conveyed to viewers). Eventually other discourses emerged as well, such as the one about the natural, innocent and unspoiled child. By not allowing the children to use make-up in the studio (even if they do in their normal lives), the adults "with their power and precedence" let the "participating children become messengers for this discourse". The discourse about the innocent child also becomes a discourse about how adults view children, "since the innocence lies not only in the child's actions, but also in how adults would like children to appear" (2008:94).

SVT wants to give its viewers a good set of basic values, and wants its programmes to convey what rules and norms apply in society (Pitt Nielsen, 2001). That means that children participating in programmes may not present themselves and their values, but instead serve as tools for steering the viewer towards a discourse and a view of childhood that adults consider good or morally correct. In this way the children become a symbol, a representative of something, and the discourse created behind the camera can be described as the discourse about the unnaturally natural child.
(2008:95)

Ågren refers to Bourdieu's (2000) term "symbolic violence", which works through the unawareness of both perpetrator and victim. "Bourdieu further argues that the visible actors on television, who may seem to be acting freely and independently, are in fact puppets in a structure that needs to be brought into the light" (p. 95). According to Ågren, SVT is concerned with the best interests of the viewing children. The ambition is to transmit values and discourses that can strengthen children who watch the programmes. The upshot is that the participating children become the instruments of this and that their rights to some extent take a back seat to the adults' intentions.

... even if the informants saw themselves mostly as equals of the adults, they also implicitly transmitted their subordinate position and the adults' power and precedence. The children

¹³ A discourse can be described as a certain way of discussing and understanding a specific phenomenon.

had not been expecting any power, and thus found it hard to imagine a situation in which they could actually participate in making decisions.
(2008:95–96)

Ågren believes that it is important to show what views of children and childhood are being transmitted to viewers, and that awareness of one's own values is an antidote to letting subconscious conceptions affect the product one is working on. In my view the biggest benefit of making us aware of our conceptions is that it casts a light on the consequences our actions will have for children and young people. It is only at that point that we can begin to change things and work for children's rights in the "true" sense.

Conceptions of parenthood

It is not just conceptions of children that tell us something about how we act towards children and the consequences of those actions, but also conceptions of parenthood and parents' responsibilities. Moses (2008) refers to Shelmardine (2006)¹⁴, who has shown in a qualitative study how adults in three districts of Cape Town, each with its own cultural and economic circumstances, relate to children. Adults who are mostly from the white middle class perceive it as their role to provide for their children and guide them and socialise them into becoming good citizens. Children living under these circumstances are given little space as independent stakeholders, since autonomy is regarded as one of the final goals of children's development. In poor areas (townships) with mainly coloured and black populations there are distinct boundaries between adults' and children's authority. In these areas, children's obedience and adult control are highly valued. As a consequence, children's own initiatives should be less valued.

Children's need for protection/children's right to participation

Several authors (see e.g. McNeish, 1999) point out that obstacles to children's participation often arise from conceptions of the vulnerability of children and young people. If children are regarded as vulnerable, the conception of the need for protection is not far away. Moses (2008) discusses adults' normative notions of children and describes how children's need for protection is often regarded as conflicting with children's right to participation, which leads, not infrequently, to a limitation on

¹⁴ The reference is missing in Moses' text.

children's possibilities of expressing themselves about conditions that affect them. The focus on children's need for protection is supported by the hierarchies that shape adults' attitudes to children, which leads to a general devaluing of children's contributions both in the home setting and within public administration. Moses writes that in the South African context there is a lack of knowledge, experience and debate about how children can be offered both protection and participation.

Children's competence

According to Percy-Smith (2008), Valentine (1996) writes that one obstacle to children's roles in social involvement has been conceptions of children and young people as problems and as lacking competence. Moses describes how despite the normative notions of children and children's place in society, children in most types of areas (and particularly from poor families) contribute significantly to the household. Moses argues that these children's contributions are not acknowledged, either in the public or the private sphere, and consequently the competence that children demonstrate does not get any attention, which becomes significant for how parents regard children's ability to participate in other processes such as decision making. These views can be compared with Taylor's and Percy-Smith's (2008) argument that young people already are active in their local areas but that this is often not counted, as if children were totally passive and inactive.

Moses refers to Bray and Gooskens (2006), who argue that part of the way forward may be to recognise that children are moral actors who have a good sense of how relationships are negotiated. They can formulate their experiences and handle difficulties that arise in relationships with other people. This can be compared with Lenninger's (2008) study of projects in which children had participated in deciding the design of public spaces and in which it emerged that children and young people saw the park as an area in which the needs of different age groups should be met. There are a number of studies that focus on children's position as stakeholders and their interaction with other people and that show that children are moral actors (see e.g. Nordenfors 2006, Mayall, 2001). Percy-Smith (2007) has been involved in projects in which learning processes, in particular adults' conceptions of young people and their reality, have been challenged. These projects have consisted of dialogues between young people and adults.

Society's conceptions about children's competence are challenged when we study what children do and how. Moses describes that research results from a radio project in which children had been involved revealed

that the children's possibilities for participation within their city district increased as adults' conceptions about their capacity changed (see Meintjes, 2006).

There is a connection between children's participation and adults' (and children's) conceptions of children's capacity. If children are given the opportunity to participate on their own terms and show what they can contribute, adults' (and children's) conceptions about children change. As long as children's lives are separated from adults' lives, this is not a likely development. Instead possibilities must be created for children and adults to engage jointly in issues that affect everyone. These possibilities have to be created on the basis of both adults' and children's agendas.

Participation in legal processes

Yet another aspect of society's conceptions is how we regard the best interests of the child. If we assume that children in general do not have the competence or that they will actually be harmed by speaking out about their circumstances and experiences, we will not be creating possibilities for children to participate. Article 12 talks about the child's ability to express his or her own views and that the child's age and maturity should be borne in mind. It follows that the interpretation of Article 12 will be dependent on how adults construct age, maturity and ability (Smith, 2002).

Two arenas whose decisions very much affect children, and in which the child's right to participation has been studied, are the judicial system and the social services. Mattsson (1998) contrasts the demands that courts and authorities make on children with those they make on adults. Mattsson (1998) refers to Wetter (1986), who argues that courts and authorities place higher demands on children than on adults. Children don't always know what is best for them, but neither do adults, and yet adults are given the opportunity of expressing their points of view to authorities while children get to do so to a much lesser extent. According to Mattsson, Wetter claims that courts and authorities take the view that children change their opinions. So do adults, but that does not constitute a reason for not letting adults express themselves on issues that concern them. Mattsson concludes that there is a problem in "trusting" what a person says, but that problem has to do with adults as well as children and should not justify not listening to children. Mattsson takes the discussion further, contrasting the protection aspect with the rights principle and arguing that the protection aspect, i.e. the belief that the child risks coming to harm in a process where he or she is allowed expression, must be weighed against the risk of harm the child is subjected to if he or she is not given the possibility of expression.

It is generally accepted that children should not be asked to make difficult decisions or be pressed for opinions. The child is not likely to be harmed by meeting a social worker... To find a suitable way of giving the child space to express his or her opinion and perception of his or her situation, e.g. before a decision about choosing a foster home, need not amount to subjecting the child to mental stress. Instead you ensure that the child's best interests really can be taken into account during the processing of the case.

(1998:54)

According to Mattsson, the Child Convention does not leave room for authorities to determine if the child is to be heard or not; it is the child's absolute right to be heard. However, the Convention does not specify any demands for how the child can be heard.

In other words there is no requirement that the child should have reached such an age or maturity that he or she can communicate with adults. The age and maturity of the child is only to be considered after he or she has been given the opportunity to express an opinion.

(1998:55-56)

Röbäck (2008) has studied written documents such as applications, court rulings and file material on applications for execution sent to the county administrative court in Gothenburg during 2001.¹⁵ Röbäck also carried out 12 interviews with judges, lay judges, mediators and family law secretaries, as well as a poll of parents affected by an application for execution during 2001. Röbäck highlights the ambivalence between different approaches to children:

... between a care discourse, where the adult takes precedence in determining what is in the child's best interest in relation to his or her needs, and a rights discourse that sees the child as a citizen and thereby as a subject.

(2008:122)

¹⁵ "A parent may apply for execution if the other parent refuses to observe the applicable agreement or ruling on custody, residence or visits (Ch. 21 of the Parental Code). The main principle is that the decision shall be executed if it is not manifestly incompatible with the best interests of the child, and the court must consider the child's wishes and the risk that the child comes to harm before making its decision on execution." (Röbäck, 2008:120)

Röbäck refers to Lee (1999) and Mattson (1998) and argues that ample margin is left for deviating from the principle about children's right to express their opinions in specific cases, since the child's age and maturity affect the importance ascribed to the child's views.

The study exposes the dilemma between children's right to express themselves and children's responsibility. Several of the professionals in the study take the view that there is a risk that a child who expresses a will in favour of one parent has to carry a heavy responsibility in the parents' conflict. This dilemma is dealt with in various ways, where the mediators choose to be clear about expressing the child's wishes to the court. Röbäck interprets this as an attempt to combine the rights discourse with the care discourse: "They highlight the child's right to expression, but at the same time make it clear that the adults are responsible for the decisions, since they have to take up a position and decide in the conflict." (2008:125)

A discussion emerges in the study's material about the accuracy of children's expressed wishes and what is the child's "real" will. In several rulings, the county administrative court writes that "it is a difficult and very delicate task to analyse the direction of a child's will" (2008:126). Those children who are ambivalent or negative to seeing one parent are called into question by the court, whose position is that it is difficult to determine what the child's wishes depend on. What often happens in these situations is that the court considers the possibility that the child is under the influence of the other parent. Which is to say that it is not the child's own will that is being expressed. According to Röbäck, the UN Committee emphasises the point that courts should not attach any significance to the degree of influence, as "the child's fear of and resistance against meeting the other parent in such cases is very real to the child" (see SOU 2005:43). Röbäck describes some examples in which children (aged 9, 11, 12 and 17) have expressly stated that they do not want to meet the other parent but their wish is disqualified by calling into question what their real will is. They are regarded as influenced by the parent they are living with, and the court then makes the additional assessment that meeting the other parent is in their own best interest. In these cases the care discourse, in which adults judge what is best for children, is prominent, and the child's will is turned into "the big problem". The rights discourse is set aside, and the adult takes precedence in deciding what is best for the individual child. Röbäck compares the results of his study with previous research and concludes that "the perception of the rights of the child does not include the child's right not to see the other parent" (2008:128). The dominant discourse about children needing both their parents emerges very clearly here. From a participating

perspective those children who are positive to seeing both parents don't achieve the level of participation where their own will is given any importance, since the court does not discuss their will at all or refers to it as an argument for execution to proceed. That is to say the children are not made party to the decision. More than half of the children in the study do not get a word in edgeways in the rulings. Röbäck argues that children are refused the possibility of expression based on the notion that (a negative) responsibility should not be imputed to the child. Children should not have to choose sides in their parents' conflict. The "right of the child" is then construed as the right to be spared a choice, instead of the possibility of strengthening the child's position as stakeholder and possibilities for taking part in decisions about their own life (2008:134). The twelve year limit (which was removed in July 2006) that applied at the time of the study constituted, in several cases, an obstacle to listening to young people.

In those cases where children have placed a condition on seeing one parent, e.g. by saying that they want to see a parent who is sober, a risk assessment is made by the court and the children are left to themselves, to take responsibility for and protect themselves. In keeping with Mattsson's (1998) reasoning, Röbäck asks the question:

Can you then really listen to the child's express will and take their position as stakeholders seriously, while at the same time considering their vulnerability and need for protection? I would turn the reasoning on its head and say that the risk if you don't listen to children is that both their best interests and their protection will be disregarded.
(2008:136)

Participation in decision making within the social services

Thomas and O'Kane (1998) have studied and write about whether there is a conflict between adults' responsibility to act with the child's best interests in mind, and children's right to participating in the issues that affect them. The authors look at situations that involve decisions concerning the circumstances of looked after children (8–12 years old) in a British context. They look at a number of examples and discuss, among other things, assessments of children's competence and the importance of individual assessments based on specific conditions. They found that although children increasingly participate in meetings, their degree of participation varies greatly. The children stated that they wanted to be

offered more opportunities and possibilities to express themselves and be listened to. A nine-year-old girl said: “it is important for me to be allowed to take part in making these decisions... they’re about me”.

Thomas and O’Kane refer to Gardner’s (1987)¹⁶ research into looked after children’s participation in “reassessment meetings”. Studies show that when time was spent discussing the reassessment beforehand, when decisions were carefully explained, when the children knew beforehand who the other people at the meeting were going to be, and when the children were allowed to take a support person along if they wanted to, they expressed a considerably higher degree of satisfaction.

¹⁶ There is no reference in the article.

Where do we go from here?

Children need support in order to be able to exercise their rights to participation. Smith (2002) argues that children’s participation is dependent on the extent to which the child understands and owns the objective of the activity, has the possibility of making choices and taking initiatives, and contributes to the achievement of the goals.

Socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) regards development as a process that originates through participation in the social and intellectual life that surrounds the child. Smith uses socio-cultural theory for the purpose of showing that children need the same support in order to be able to exercise their rights. She believes that children need support in the form of guidance, information in a context where they are listened to and aided in their attempts to formulate their views. According to Smith, Raynor (1993) argues that adults have to expect children to participate instead of counting them out. In order for adults to be able to do this, we need to learn to speak and understand “children’s language”.

Smith refers to Hart’s participation ladder and to Shier (2001), who proposed a simpler type of ladder for participation. Shier formulated a series of questions for adults to answer in order to determine at what level of the model they are acting to support children’s participation.

Shier’s model has five steps:

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

At the upper levels of Shier's model, children initiate and control their participation to an increasing extent. The degree of children's possibilities for this is dependent on their ability and not least on adult perceptions of their ability. Progression up the ladder is also dependent on the support that adults can offer and a shift in the balance of power between children and adults.

Smith quotes Bronfenbrenner:

Learning and development are facilitated by the participation of the developing person in progressively more complex patterns of reciprocal activity with someone with whom that person has developed a strong and enduring emotional attachment and when the balance of power gradually shifts in favour of the developing person.
(Bronfenbrenner, 1979:60)

This view of development contrasts with the step based, context-independent type of development described by Ericsson and Piaget, among others (see e.g. Havnesköld & Mothander, 2009). The view within socio-cultural theory and ecological theory is that there is no ready marked route for development, but that development instead is dependent on cultural goals (Smith, 2002). By participating in a number of activities and through mutual interaction, adults and children construct meaning, understanding and knowledge. A context in which the child feels comfortable, accepted and in harmony with the others in the group probably contributes to efficient participation (Smith, 2002). According to Smith, Rogoff (1997) argues that children's participation and increased responsibility leads to development. It is not a matter of children automatically becoming capable of participating and therefore easily taking part, but rather of a process in which children's participation leads to development and the possibility of increased responsibility. In other words we need to make children take part before they "know how to", so that they will be able to develop, with support, into taking part even more.

In New Zealand a lawyer (Counsel for Child) is appointed to represent the child in custody cases and cases concerning children's care. The Counsel for Child is responsible for ensuring that the child's point of view is represented as well as for supporting the best interests of the child. Smith (2002) has studied the children's perspective on the support they received, and illustrates how sensitive lawyers can support and help the child form his or her own opinions. About half of the children in the study

indicate that it was possible for them to reach a decision after having actively discussed and considered the alternatives together with the lawyer.

[Lawyer] gave me a number of options, sort of like a maths problem. 'Cos there's problem, and you get three or four answers and you have to find the right answer. He'll just round up a few possibilities and then I'll choose the best for me, the best possibilities that would suit me.'
(Craig, aged 13, custody and access case, Smith 2002:80)

According to Smith (2002), Stone (1993) argues that the process of creating shared assumptions/conditions between children and adults is also important. This is because the outcome of the communication is dependent on the listener's construction of aspects of the contexts the speaker assumes. Adults and children need to find a shared knowledge base, shared skills and reference points. Stone further argues that the creation of a shared platform is in turn dependent on a process of inferring and on trust.

In the study by Smith referred to above it emerged that the relationship and communication the children had with their counsel was important to how secure they were about the fact that their views had been heard by the court in a satisfactory way. A quarter of the young people expressed positive feelings regarding the friendly and trusting relationship they had with their counsel. Others described less flattering relationships:

She probably listened for a moment, but like forgot all about it afterwards.
(Rebecca, aged 13, Care and Protection case, Smith 2002:81)

She didn't really listen much, she sort of had her own ideas of what should happen.
(Daniel, aged 15, Care and Protection case, Smith 2002:81)

Smith points out (like others referred to above) that the importance of not stereotyping our expectations on children based on their age is illustrated in socio-cultural theory and in sociology of childhood. These types of expectations have a bearing on the issue of "age and maturity", the criteria for participation embedded in Article 12 of the Child Convention.

James and Prout (1997) argue that we should be thinking in terms of a "social child". That is to say that we regard children and adults as equal, but with different competences and skills. Children are competent and

have skills, but in other ways than adults, and we should use these competences to create understanding for children's own views. Following research about children in families, schools, the judicial system and the social services (in New Zealand), Smith (2002), along with many other researchers, has arrived at the standpoint that even young children are capable of understanding their experiences and expressing them. According to Smith (2002), Davie (1996) describes how courts in Great Britain are in the process of concluding that age is not relevant, but that what is significant is to what degree children can understand the problem or question. Davie draws the conclusion that there is no particular age when it is unsuitable to listen to children. A number of researchers (see e.g. Carr, 2000, Ledger et al. 1998, 1999, Clark and Moss, 2001) have shown, with methods in which the children's right to participate has been considered and participation has been taken in context, that even very small children can communicate their points of view, intentions and difficulties.

Taylor and Percy-Smith (2008) suggest several starting points for the development of effective work with children and young people. They argue that informal social networks and interactions need to be built upon, and that the starting points need to be arenas that young people themselves create, instead of relying on structures that have been specially created for participation and are decontextualised from everyday life. This also means that we need to use these possibilities to generate new information flows and debates built on young people's views. Which in turn implies that we have to acknowledge a number of different forms of participation and taking part. By broadening the scope of informal as well as formal arenas for participation, more people get the chance to participate and responsibility becomes spread more broadly across the population, with the result that we don't need to rely as much on experts. In order for this to become possible, Taylor and Percy-Smith argue, young people must have the freedom to experiment and be creative in finding answers to existing situations where adults have fallen short. Hart (2006) argues that we should create arenas in young people's everyday life where they get the opportunity independently to make decisions and act in ways that seem meaningful to them, without the influence of adults. In this way young people can also regain control of their own concerns.

Taylor and Percy-Smith also write that it is important to create a dialogue and integration between the worlds of children and adults, so that young people become part of the solutions in society and to avoid moral panic and the demonisation of the young. Children's important and popular arenas have to become part of society. To make this possible, Moss and Petrie (2002) suggest (according to Taylor and Percy-Smith) that special types of spaces be created where children can become engaged together

with other municipality members. They are talking here about physical spaces, social spaces (a domain of particular social practices and relationships), cultural spaces (where values, rights and cultures are created) and discursive spaces (for different perspectives and expressions, where there is room for dialogue, confrontation and where different opinions and experiences can be exchanged, where there is room for critical thinking and where young people have the possibility of making themselves heard and being listened to). These spaces can be seen as a part of school, but they can also be transferred to young people's informal arenas created according to both children's and adults' agendas within a wider social context. Children are frequently asked for their opinions and points of view, but they rarely hear about what happens with their views, and changes are few and far between. Taylor and Percy-Smith refer to White et al. (1996) and Percy-Smith (2002), who describe how tense relations often develop in municipalities based on nonchalance and suspicion between groups, particularly between adults and young people. One way to reduce the tension of these relationships is through dialogue and social learning. It is important that children and young people do not only participate in their own spheres, but that young people's perspectives are also introduced in dialogue with adults', and that young people become involved together with adults in formal arenas.

Any social policy related to children and young people should enable children themselves to define solutions to social exclusion. It is through such opportunities that children and young people will be able to promote more effective responses to their own life problems. At local level, too, it is necessary to encourage collaboration between adults, children and young people within a climate of listening, understanding and acting that is of mutual benefit to each group. This requires a complex and dynamic understanding of both exclusionary and inclusive processes. At the centre of this understanding should be a consideration of how participatory mechanisms reflect the interplay of economic, social and political relations affecting adults and children with multiple identities and roles, including but not confined to those of citizens, consumer and person.

(Davis & Hill, 2006:13–14)

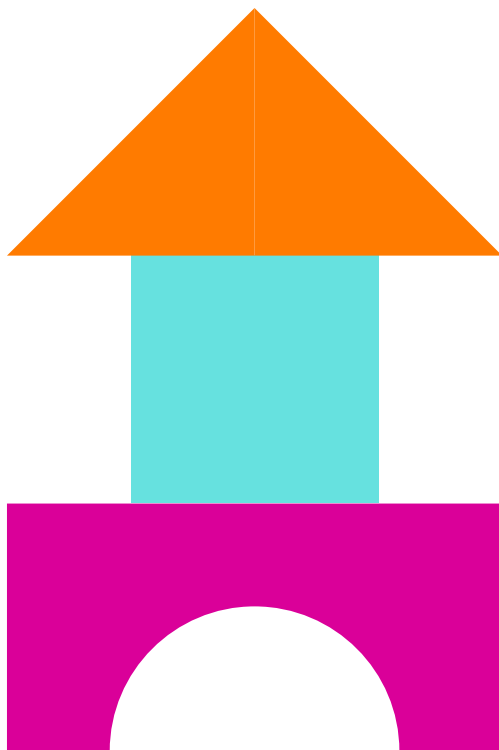
Prout and Tisdall (2006) emphasise that children's participation cannot be understood outside of the network of relationships that they are a part of, and they argue for the necessity of a shift from focusing on children

per se to children in relation to others. Moses (2008) argues that we need to think about children not just in relation to others, but also in relation to socio-political and economic conditions. Children and young people's participation does not occur in a vacuum, and analyses of their participation cannot ignore their surroundings and relationships with surrounding society. Just as conceptions of children and childhood affect children's possibilities for participation, economic and social conditions also affect these possibilities. Moses points out the importance of bearing in mind that children's circumstances vary and that in the creation of arenas for children's participation we need to make special efforts to identify and include children who are excluded because they cannot read or write, or are not informed about local possibilities and dependent on e.g. gender, poverty or functional disabilities.

Closing comment

The studies I have read and refer to are a selection of studies carried out in a number of areas. It is satisfying to note that there are projects going on all over the world to do with the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – regionally, nationally and internationally. Research about children's participation is going on, but continues to be limited in many areas and there is a great need for further studies. As the Ombudsman for Children (2008:4) has noted, most of Sweden's municipalities agree that it is important to implement the Child Convention, but the question is how. Some studies describe this how and give examples of possible ways forward. At the present time, the if and how of implementing the Convention is very much a question of the will, interest and knowledge of individual activities and persons.

One thing that emerges in the above text is the position of power that adults have in relation to children. Even if children are gradually being given greater possibilities for participation, it is most often on the adults' terms. The studies I have gone through point to a number of areas where we are going to have to work hard to approach a realisation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. One of the biggest challenges, and a prerequisite for children's participation, is in my view (and many others') that we increase our awareness of and begin to change our conceptions and assumptions about children. It is perhaps not always the case that we adults know what is in the child's best interest in all situations. An important part of this is not to belittle what children say, but to take children seriously. Children have to be included in a dialogue with us adults and have to influence their situation here and now. Listening to children's perspectives is a prerequisite for being able to form an understanding of children's perceptions of their situation and being able to determine what is in the child's best interest both generally and individually.



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Relevant Swedish websites

www.ungdomsstyrelsen.se

The Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs is a government agency that works to ensure that young people have access to influence and welfare. The board produces and communicates knowledge about young people's living conditions and has published a number of books on young people's living conditions in society.

www.barnrattsakademien.se

The Swedish Academy on the Rights of the Child works at the national level to strengthen knowledge about children's rights among decision makers and professionals whose work involves children. The website has a knowledge bank with links to further studies and websites within the subject area.

www.bris.se

BRIS (Children's Right in Society) is an NGO without party political or religious affiliations that supports children in distress. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is an important guide for its work.

www.allmannabarnhuset.se

The Allmänna Barnhuset Foundation works to support socially vulnerable children, in particular by supporting research, running method development projects, arranging conferences and through publishing activities.

www.bo.se

The main task of the Ombudsman for Children is to represent the rights and interests of children and young people on the basis of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (the Child Convention). The agency is charged with spreading knowledge and information about the Child Convention, but also monitors how the Convention is observed in society. For example, the Ombudsman for Children presents proposals to the government for changes to Swedish legislation and works to ensure that government agencies, municipalities and county councils use the Child Convention as a basis for their work.

www.trafikverket.se and **www.boverket.se**

The former National Road Administration (now part of the Swedish Transport Administration) and the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning have carried out several projects in which children and young people have taken part.

www.vgregion.se/Barnkonventionen

This website describes the Västra Götaland Region's work with the Child Convention, and provides (Swedish) reading tips.

