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# Chapter 2

## Stepping Back from ‘The Ladder’: Reflections on a Model of Participatory Work with Children

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**Keywords** participation, youth, children, models, citizenship

### 2.1 Introduction

It is with some reticence that I write these comments on the ‘the ladder of children’s participation’ for this metaphor was introduced by me long ago in order to problematise an issue that now has a significant body of practice and critical reflection. But my colleagues, the editors of this volume, suggested that because the ladder is still used a great deal as a model it might be useful to stand back and make a few comments about the ways it has been interpreted. The ladder probably drew so much attention because when it was first published in *Children’s Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship* by UNICEF in 1992, there was very little written of a conceptual nature on the theme of children’s participation in their programmes, projects, or organisations. The book was simply meant to stimulate a dialogue on a theme that needed to be addressed critically. But many people have chosen to use the ladder as a comprehensive tool for measuring their work with children rather than as a jumping-off point for their own reflections.

This chapter tries to correct some of the misinterpretations of the ladder of children’s participation but, more importantly, it addresses the debates that the model has engendered. I hope in this way to contribute to the ongoing discussions and to encourage the development of new models. First, I discuss what types of participation are, and are not, addressed by the model. Next, in order to clarify my purpose, I recount how I came to write about the subject and to use the ladder as a metaphor. This leads to a review of some of the misunderstandings about the ladder model. I then discuss some of the more important issues that have been raised by others before adding some concerns of my own. The chapter concludes with a request for further critical reflection and the generation of new models.

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## 2.2 The Need to Think More Broadly About How Children Participate in Society

It is important to begin by noting that the ladder of participation addresses only a rather narrow range of ways that most children in the world participate in their communities. It focuses on programmes or projects rather than on children's everyday informal participation in their communities and it is largely limited to describing the varying roles adults play in relation to children's participation. This is because the ladder was drawn from the perspective of an author living and working in the 'Minority World' where, at this point in history, children's participation in meaningful community activity is largely limited to formal programming of their activities by adults. For the past one hundred years or so most children in North America and Europe (i.e. the minority world) have been segregated from everyday participatory activities with adults in their communities. The creation of schools, play and recreation programmes, and, most recently, 'after-school programmes', alongside the retreat of children into the private spaces of their homes, have all resulted in the removal of children from informal participation with adults in their communities. They are also segregated for much of the time from children of other age groups than their own. In these parts of the world children spend less and less time in activities where they learn through informal participation to take on roles of greater competence in their communities. In fact, most people who work with children in participatory ways speak about children's participation as though it were a new thing. The emphasis on formal participation and verbal dialogue in these countries of the minority world is new but we must also be aware of what has been lost in these cultures. Children all over the world traditionally learned with adults through a kind of 'apprenticeship', or participation, in work. Gradually adults conceded greater and greater degrees of opportunity for a child to take on responsibilities. This is still common in countries of the majority world but it is so greatly reduced in minority world countries that many seem to have forgotten its importance.

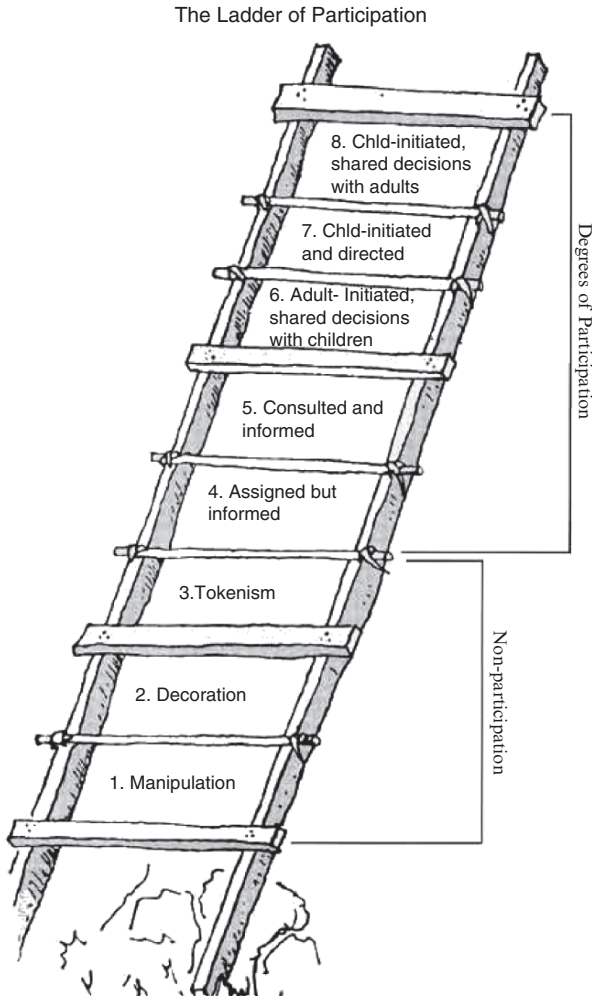
Children also build competencies from their participation in play or work with one another, often without adults. While this also continues to occur in many countries it is a kind of 'participation' that has been increasingly replaced by the segregated world of formal participation in projects and programmes with adults and so it seems to go unrecognised by the writers on 'children's participation'. We would do well to try to integrate our thinking on children's formal participation with what is known of children's informal participation and culture-building through play with their peers (e.g. Hart 1979; Corsaro 2003). We should therefore be equally concerned with how adults differently 'set the stage' for children to self-organise such as how they arrange public settings for play and recreation. In *Children's Participation* (Hart 1992), I noted the high degrees of group participation that children can often achieve in their early years in their socio-dramatic play with one another. Fortunately, theory and research in developmental psychology is now increasingly recognising the social context of children's development and that children learn through their interaction with more experienced members of their

community, including other children (Vygotsky 1978; Rogoff 1990; Valsiner 2000). Consequently, when children of mixed ages and different abilities play together there can be greater opportunities for them to learn through participating in activities with one another than can come from the normal school structures where children are typically graded by age and ability into classes. The term *scaffold* helps illuminate the kind of structures that are provided to a learning child by the social world (Gauvain 2001), and in some ways a scaffold may be a more suitable model than a ladder for much of what we are discussing because it implies multiple routes to growth. Also, whereas the ladder metaphor is usually used to characterise only child–adult relations, the scaffold metaphor can be thought of as a mutually reinforcing structure where all people, including adults and children of different abilities, help each other in their different climbing goals (Hart 2005).

### 2.3 Genesis of the Model

The ladder model was first published in the *Childhood City Newsletter* (1980). A quarterly newsletter on children's environments, it had a small circulation and was produced by a small group working at the City University of New York, with the close collaboration of Robin Moore in North Carolina. Robin and I had both struggled to find effective ways to involve children and youth in community environmental research, planning, and design. Designers were increasingly trying to involve children in design but this was sometimes being done in rather tokenistic ways. We knew from experience that it was a challenge to find effective ways to work with young people and we felt it would be a good idea to raise the level of dialogue on this issue by bringing together the ideas of as many people as we could find to discuss it. We produced three sequential issues on the theme of participation as the North American contribution of the International Association for the Child's Right to Play (IPA) to the international Year of the Child. As part of this series, I sketched out the ladder of children's participation and Selim Iltus, a doctoral student who was then working as an assistant on the newsletter, turned it into an attractive graphic form. But it was not until it was published in a little book for UNICEF in 1992 that it caught the interest of a large number of child advocates and others who work closely with young people, and became translated into many languages. The United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) had recently been launched and UNICEF, along with many international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), were struggling to interpret what this visionary document meant for their work. The parts of the Convention that seemed to be the most difficult for them to interpret were those that concerned the participation of children. Because of this, James Himes, the Director of the UNICEF International Centre for Child Development in Florence, Italy, felt it would be good if there were a book on the subject (Hart 1992).

The ladder was simply offered as a schema to help bring a critical perspective to a subject that at that time altogether lacked one. There was no intention for it to serve as any kind of comprehensive evaluative tool. Sherry Arnstein (1979) had



**Figure 2.1** Eight levels of young people's participation in projects (the ladder metaphor is borrowed from the well-known essay on adult participation by Arnstein (1969), the categories are new) (Hart 1992:8.)

used the ladder metaphor for her own writing on participatory planning with adults and I found it useful to play with this metaphor in organising my own thinking on the subject of children's participation. The ladder model has since been extended and modified in many fascinating ways. The most beneficial quality of the model has probably been its utility for helping different professional groups and institutions to rethink how they work with young people: youth workers, television and radio directors, scout leaders, play workers, street workers, health professionals,

and even some schoolteachers. Its simplicity of form and clarity of goals enable them to find a language to look at their current ways of working systemically, and in so doing, come up with something more complex and useful to their particular context. I enthusiastically embrace these many applications and extensions of the model but I will not focus on them here for the editors have asked instead that this chapter focus on the debates that the ladder metaphor has engendered. So the next part of the chapter necessarily offers some corrections to how the ladder has been interpreted. Like any metaphor, the use of the ladder involves distorting reality as one tries to reduce the complexity of the issues and so these comments are offered in the original spirit of stimulating dialogue rather than as a hardened defence of an old model.

## **2.4 The Tendency to Think in Terms of a Developmental Model with Sequential 'Stages' or Levels of Participation**

In some ways the ladder metaphor is unfortunate for it seems to imply a necessary sequence to children's developing competence in participation (Reddy and Ratna 2002:18; Kirby and Woodhead 2003:243). This was not the intention but given the metaphor of a ladder it is not at all surprising that the model has been interpreted as stepwise climbing. In fact the ladder is primarily about the degree to which adults and institutions afford or enable children to participate. I gave the example of how when adults leave very young children alone to play in an environment that affords children a high degree of opportunity to manipulate it, they are often able to cooperate with each other at a very high level to build structures such as dams and canals in sand and water. But for most children in urbanised countries their lives are increasingly planned and managed by adults with little opportunity to initiate activities themselves. Play is the one domain where it is common for the normal patterns of adult power to be suspended for a while, although, as described earlier, this has been changing in many countries (Hart 2004).

But some people ask if there should even be different 'levels' of participation. As a result they have created different models (see, for example, the summary in Reid and Nikel 2004). Jensen has suggested that the rungs of the ladder be described as different *forms* rather than different *levels* of participation (Jensen 2000). Treseder (1997) came up with a circle model and Mannion (2003) has devised something like a fountain of participation! While I understand the desires of some authors to try to improve upon this potentially misleading aspect of the ladder, I do wish to stress that I do not consider these different forms of participation to be equal. I think of the upper rungs of the ladder as expressions of different 'degrees' of agency or participatory engagement by young people. But again, the ladder metaphor may be a problem in that it seems to some to suggest that in all cases the higher rungs of

the ladder are superior to the ones beneath. This is unfortunate for the intention is to show that there are different degrees to which children are allowed, enabled, and supported to initiate their own projects and make decisions in carrying them out with others. While a child may not want at all times to be the one who initiates a project they ought to know that they have the option, and to feel that they have the confidence and competence to do so on occasion. Adult facilitators of projects should not be made to feel that they must always support their child participants to operate on the 'highest' rungs of the ladder, but they must manage to communicate to children that they have the option to operate with these 'higher' degrees of engagement. It is not appropriate that some children feel that they must always only follow the initiative of others any more than it is good for any child to feel that they should always be a leader (see, for example, the National Youth Council of Ireland and the Children's Rights Alliance 2003). The ladder should be thought of as some kind of scale of competence not performance: children should feel that they have the *competence* and confidence to engage with others in the way outlined on any of the rungs of the ladder, but they should certainly not feel that they should always be trying to *perform* in such ways. Because the types of engagement expressed in the higher rungs of the ladder are commonly denied to young people there is obviously some value in having some way of representing these 'higher', forbidden forms. But why, I am often asked, is the eighth rung higher? Surely a child in power is the highest level, they ask ...!

## 2.5 A Preoccupation with 'Children's Power'!

One of the most surprising critiques of the model for me has been the desire of some to transform the top rung of the ladder to be 'children in charge' or children's decision-making without adults (e.g. Melton 1993). The top rung of the ladder as it was drawn in the original essay was called 'child initiate, shared decision with adults'. My purpose in creating this scheme had not been to argue naïvely that we should think of children as repressed individuals who needed to be liberated through a series of steps whereby all adult engagement was removed. My concern was rather to argue that children's potentials as citizens needs to be recognised to the fullest and, to that end, children ought to be able to participate at times at their highest possible level. The highest possible degree of citizenship in my view is when we, children or adults, not only feel that we can initiate some change ourselves but when we also recognise that it is *sometimes* appropriate to also invite others to join us because of their own rights and because it affects them too, as fellow-citizens. When people recognise the rights of others to have a voice and involve them, then this, in my mind, is *morally* superior to children being 'in-charge'. Yet others disagree for they wish to stress that liberation from adults is the end goal of their efforts (Ackermann *et al.* 2003; Ministry of Children and Families of British Columbia 2005). This issue is related to a common problem throughout the world with how children's rights have been conveyed to many parents. Children's

rights to have their perspective taken into account 'in all matters that concern them' are often wrongly understood to mean that children should have the last word. The CRC recognises the need for children to also understand and respect the rights of others but this is not generally discussed. Not surprisingly Africa responded to the CRC by creating their own children's rights charter that stress children's responsibilities as well as rights.

It is important also to note here that when children participate with one another, without adults, that does not in any way change the story of power and participation. When children are on the top rung of the ladder organising a project together they still have similar struggles of leadership and opportunities for democratic participation. This is an equally important area for us to conceptualise that was not considered at all by my ladder model. Furthermore, sometimes adults set up children's and youth groups that seem to function as self-determining groups when, in fact, they have been designed to operate under adult power, with an ideology designed by them but with children as the appointed agents of influence and control over one another. They might sometimes be better called 'regime-organised'. The Hitler youth movement obviously had some of these qualities. But even the scouts, with all of the wonderful opportunities that they have offered to so many children, have an adult-imposed hierarchic structure of 'Leaders' and 'Seconds'. This creates the conditions whereby children carry out activities with one another when adults are not around in a less participatory manner than they might have. There is still a great deal to be done to creatively work out how to work with children in participatory ways that enable them to be maximally self-determining (Hart *et al.* 2001).

## **2.6 The Dangers of Adopting a Single Comprehensive Tool for Evaluating Projects**

It is an easy step from thinking of the ladder as a developmental model to using it as a comprehensive tool to evaluate how participatory a programme is. But this was not the objective. We have so much to do to develop new appropriate tools of evaluation. It is true that the ladder has proved itself to be valuable in enabling groups to monitor the degree of agency young people have in initiating projects or activities in their programmes or projects. Its clear vocabulary and simple logic is useful in enabling people of a wide range of ages and abilities to periodically discuss issues of power in their day-to-day work with each other. Furthermore, Jensen (2000) has usefully modified the ladder to be relevant to different stages in a project rather than just its initiation. But there is clearly a need for more schemes that can help groups look systematically at their practice. Gaitan (1998), for example, has developed a model that distinguishes between the degree to which children understand their rights and capacities to participate, their opportunities to make decisions with others, and their ability to be involved in action with others. But while many group facilitators say the ladder is valuable for their work with children and youth, the emphasis should be on a *beginning* dialogue. With older children, group facilitators



might even conclude that it is most effective to involve children themselves in making more appropriate schemes for evaluating their participation.

## 2.7 Cultural Limitations of the Model

It is most surprising to me that I could not find more cultural critiques of the ladder, particularly from Asia and Africa, for I can think of some important ones. The reason may well be that many of those who write about the issue of children's participation are themselves educated in the West and rely on Western theories of children's development which, sadly, almost completely dominates the child development literature globally. There have however been some important critiques of the Western orientation to childhood and child development in the overseas development work of international governmental and non-governmental agencies (Boyden 1990; Woodhead 1999; Boyden and Myers 1999; Hart *et al.* 2004). These parallel a small but important debate within academic psychology on the need to correct the normalising and universalising tendencies of the field of child development and to build theory that recognise the historical, cultural, and socio-political contexts of children's development (Henriques *et al.* 1984; Burman 1994). Recently, this kind of critique has been applied specifically to the universal adoption of the language of 'participation' in the development agendas of non-government agencies (Cooke and Kothari 2001). The ladder reflects the assumption that individual agency in participating with others to make decisions is a key factor in the achievement of good programmes and programmes that are designed to fulfil children's rights. But this degree of emphasis on individual agency may not be appropriate to many cultures. Allow me a brief personal digression to explain how I came to learn about the problem for I think it highlights the depth of the issues we need to address.

In 1981, the director of the participation section at UNICEF headquarters in New York contacted me because they had heard of the work of our Children's Environments Research Group on children's participation. She expressed some embarrassment that UNICEF had never thought of children's participation at that time but only about community participation *for* children. She had no reason to be embarrassed for that was true of all international NGOs working for children at that time, and most NGOs in all countries. I was in turn embarrassed that she wanted to distribute our publications to UNICEF field offices internationally for I knew that these newsletters were hopelessly biased as international commentaries – they drew exclusively from industrialised countries, primarily Europe and North America and did not include such important experiments as Tanzania's work with youth and Sri Lanka's Sarvodaya movement. As a result it was decided that I should travel overseas to see what I could learn. But after three weeks in Sri Lanka I knew that I had embarked on a course that was way beyond my abilities. It was true that children in Sri Lanka were participating in hundreds of villages to a very high level in such centrally important projects as building water wells and decorating and maintaining them. But to an outsider, raised in England and living in the USA, this was a very

different kind of children's participation than I had ever seen before. In the villages I visited, all of the children were involved in community projects and from my questioning it did not seem that they were initiating or designing any projects of their own. But they did show great pride in their projects and no sense of being compelled to do them against their wishes. I tried to look to my own experiences as a child and my work with children to interpret what I was seeing but I could not. Clearly these projects were being designed by adults and being carried out by all of the children according to a plan from above. Was this not regime-organised, I asked myself, and hence was it really participative? One of my indicators of a project being participatory is that the participants volunteered for it. But the fact that all children participated made it unlikely that these programmes were entirely voluntary – at least in my understanding of the word. After a week or so of difficulty with these questions I began to realise what many more experienced travellers could have said from the first day: this was a more collective kind of culture where children are raised from an early age to see themselves deeply as members of a community with a responsibility to the development and care of others. But while I liked this degree of collective concern I found myself asking where is the right of the individual to make their own choices? But my time was running out and I had to return with no answer to such complex questions. Fortunately the UNICEF staff understood my cultural dilemma and they made it easy for me to say how uncomfortable I felt in drawing any conclusions from what I had seen and putting these down on paper.

The contrast between *individualist* and *collectivist* cultures has long been a subject of interest amongst social scientists but has been little studied by developmental psychologists (e.g. Triandis 1995). The Western model of child development that is being sown internationally through development programmes of education and child development stresses the development of personal independence and the autonomy of individuals. But we need to ask what the implications might be for children's development within a more collectivist culture. There is of course great danger in jumping to any simple comparisons between this dualism. Some might be tempted, for example, to take the romantic view that all cultures that look collective are necessarily superior for the caring for others that they exhibit. But the work of such child advocates as the Sri Lankan lawyer, Savitri Goonesekere, has shown us that in Asian countries there can also be great value in giving children the individual right to know and to speak out in order to protect their own rights (Goonesekere 1998). For example, girls in the *Development and Education Programme for Daughters and Communities* in Northern Thailand learn to speak about their rights and act directly in their villages to rescue their peers from being taken to the city to work as prostitutes by those families who are close to sacrificing one of their girls to the city (Development and Education Programme for Daughters and Communities 2005). But the issue of how children can work with adults in different cultures to participate with others to achieve their rights remains an area where so much more exploration is needed. Fostering a debate about cultural differences in children's participation is important for anyone who is both concerned with the achievement of human rights and with maintaining the integrity of cultures. The debate

needs to begin by levelling the ground: allowing local cultures to declare their own local 'bill of rights' before engaging in a dialogue with the universal and universalising CRC. The use of such simple tools as the ladder of participation must be done with care and with a great readiness to critique and invent anew.

The cultural-bias critique can even be levelled to a degree at the UN CRC for although it was ten years in its drafting by an international committee, its authors relied upon Western notions of child development and the importance of the development of individual autonomy in children (Alston 1994). Sociologists and anthropologists have discovered in recent years an interest in the study of childhood and they are understandably offering cultural critiques of psychology (Jenks 1996; James *et al.* 1998). But for many years there has been a gradual turn taking place towards the study of the cultural context of children's development in the generation of theory within the field of developmental psychology (Rogoff 1990; Cole 1996; Valsiner 2000). Much of this focuses on the cultural context of thinking but there is also a small literature that is concerned with cultural differences in children's social relations, and in particular, questions of children's independence and agency (e.g. Kagitcibasi 1996; Markus and Kitayama 1994; Murphy-Berman *et al.* 2003; Welch and Leary 1990). Sadly, in spite of these important academic developments, the old universalistic models of child development from the West already dominate schools of education and early childhood development all over the world and so there is a lot of work to be done to reverse this cultural form of imperialism. Fortunately in recent years some Western development advisers have begun to critique these old models (e.g. Woodhead 1999; Boyden 1990; Boyden and Myers 1999; Hart *et al.* 2004). I predict that these new cultural theories of child development and methods that are more grounded in the local study of child development and child-rearing will be enthusiastically embraced by non-governmental agencies and NGOs working in development programmes with children and youth all over the world because they meet with the analyses that many of those who work with children have already made for themselves.

## 2.8 Conclusion: The Need for New Models

Two members of the *Concerned for the Working Children* in India who work with Bhima Singha, a union of child workers in Bangalore, have developed valuable schemas for thinking about the varying roles adults play in relation to children's participation, including some valuable critiques of the ladder model (Reddy and Ratna 2002). They suggest two rungs of non-participation below the ones that I suggested: *Active resistance* is where adults actively work against children's participation because they feel that children should not be burdened with participation, or that they do not have the capacity or that they can be easily manipulated to further adult agendas. Some adults in this category actually mobilise support to lobby against children's participation. *Hindrance* is when adults block opportunities for children and discourage them from participating, intentionally or unintentionally

undermining their abilities and making them feel inadequate and reluctant to participate. This second rung seems to be just a weaker form of the first one but taken together I feel that they do add to the original ladder typology – maybe these rungs of the ladder should be drawn on the diagram underground! Reddy and Ratna also introduce rungs, of the ladder called *Tolerance* and *Indulgence*. These seem to be elaborations of what I generally call 'tokenism' but while it may not be necessary to imagine these as entirely new rungs this elaboration is useful. At the top of the ladder Reddy and Ratna suggest two categories: *Children initiated and directed* and *jointly initiated and directed by children and adults*. It may be useful for some programmes to consider more rungs like this but, as I have tried to explain above, the important distinction in my mind is how the children think of themselves and the adults. I was trying to express in the ladder that the top of the ladder should not be 'children in charge' but children as citizens who think of themselves as members of a larger community that includes adults and other children who they may sometimes invite to join them.

Clearly the *Concerned for Working Children* is one of these groups that recognise that it is a struggle to find better ways of working with young people and that we must work on this with the children and youth themselves. More important than what any static model like 'the ladder' looks like is the recognition that we must be engaged in a never-ending process of working across generations to generate improved ways of adults and children working together, both on the realisation of children's rights but also on their shared involvement in the future of their communities. When I first wrote about the ladder most of my thinking came from dialogue with facilitators from NGOs working in the field. At the time they were well ahead of academia in recognising that the participatory capacities of children, and the relationships they can build with adults, had been grossly under-recognised. In recent years research and theory-building in the social sciences, and in psychology, has begun to catch up. What is now needed are programmes of collaboration between academics and those who work directly with children as well as with children and youth themselves. In particular we need to find ways of monitoring and evaluating the way that we work with children and the quality of the realisation of their participation rights. Hopefully we can avoid turning this enterprise into yet another specialised profession; we need to build monitoring and evaluation into the everyday practices of groups of young people and those who work closely with them (e.g. Sabo 2003).

I have probably not laid the ladder debate completely to rest with these words but, from my perspective, I see the ladder lying in the long grass of an orchard at the end of the season. It has served its purpose. I look forward to the next season for I know there are so many different routes up through the branches and better ways to talk about how children can climb into meaningful, and shall we say fruitful, ways of working with others.

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