

Children and the Environment: Young People's Participation In Social Change

Sandra Meucci and Michael Schwab

Introduction

THIS SPECIAL EDITION IS ABOUT INVOLVING CHILDREN IN ENVIRONMENTAL PLANNING and change. Taking children seriously as self-determining social actors is not a new idea. Within the past few decades, there has been increasing acceptance of children's place in movements to shape the future. Since the 1970s, local government planning departments in Europe, and to a lesser degree in the U.S., have involved children in designing urban spaces and policies for environmental improvement. In South American countries, such as Ecuador and Brazil, national movements of street and working children are influencing policies on the allocation of public space (Hart, 1977). Young people are also involved in city planning throughout the Philippines.¹

Much of this work is conducted using participatory action research and is based on the late Paulo Freire's ideas about raising political consciousness through open dialogue (Freire, 1970). Though it has often been co-opted for other ends, participatory action research can be an effective tool for the cultivation of personal and social awareness, better equipping people to cope with their world and to change it (Rahnema, 1990). The production of serious and trustworthy knowledge with and for youth can help them engage in transforming power relations.

Another area where participatory approaches have found support is public health. The participation of community members is now widely recognized as a

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critical factor in planning successful public programs (Green and Kreuter, 1991; Schwab et al., 1992). Simultaneously, new grass-roots constituents of the environmental movement have been arising to fend off toxic assaults to their communities' health. As a result, new participatory forms of research have emerged to challenge the autocracy of traditional boundaries. "Environment" is being redefined more democratically and more ecologically, to include more facets of our everyday lives, and whole communities are becoming involved in health projects that concern them — to prevent AIDS, to ban smoking in public places, to fight local water pollution, or to address the fear and violence that pervade our culture. It seems only natural that children and young people should be encouraged to participate in these kinds of practices, developing their own research and campaigns around issues that affect them.

In January 1995, the California Wellness Foundation embarked on the planning of a \$20 million initiative to improve children's environments. The editors of this volume were members of a planning group commissioned to perform relevant research and to develop the parameters of this five-year initiative. Our charge was to prepare an ecological model of a healthy environment for children and to select those elements to be addressed by the initiative. The process began with a series of workshops to discuss various approaches to conceptualizing the environment of the child. Some 70 people took part — community organizers, teachers, physicians, epidemiologists, sociologists, artists, psychologists, social workers, policy analysts, journalists, and city planners.

The process was fraught with problems. First, what is a "child"? Or rather, who are "children"? We were challenged to examine our various assumptions. There are widely differing conceptions of childhood and of what children need and are capable of in different developmental periods. Most of the relevant literature on this topic ignores the cultural context in which children throughout the world are embedded. What sense can be made of the fact that children as young as 10 in Liberia, for example, are both victims and perpetrators of war (Whitman and Fleischman, 1994)? Clearly, it is not enough to fall back on age as childhood's defining feature; to say that a child is under 18, as does the *International Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989), glosses over many distinctions, such as gender. In a world where power tends to correlate with masculinity, to speak of "children," rather than of girls and boys, can be an act of complicity in structures of inequality (Walkerdine, 1987).

The term "environment" also raised difficulties of interpretation. It conjures up images of the natural world before the built world, the countryside before the city, rain forest before roadway. As our understanding grows, so does the web of interrelated aspects of our lives. Children's environments include *all* the physical places where children go or are placed, all that happens to them in these places, and their relationships with other people there. An ecological model would need to take account of children's homes, streets, parks, shopping malls, day care, and

basketball courts; it would include the food, water, air, drugs, and TV programs that children consume; it would address the political and commercial climate in which decisions regarding all these are made.

Defined in this broad sense, the problems of children's environments are many and deep! Urban and rural degradation, social and economic inequality, unemployment, poverty, homelessness and hunger, exacerbated by thousands of potentially toxic chemicals being introduced into the air, water, and ground, are having devastating effects on us all, and especially on children and communities of color (Munguia and West, 1996; Lindheim and Syme, 1983). Respiratory diseases, for example, are increasing dramatically among children in the cities of America (Weiss, 1992; CDC, 1995). Children in poor neighborhoods, near freeways, refineries, and dumps are especially vulnerable.

The threats come from all sides, but our understanding of them is fragmented and our responses to them are reactive and short term. Social movements for children's welfare tend to be single-issue specific, without any communication or coordination between them. Policy is at best a patchwork of discrete pieces of state and federal legislation, or local ordinances and political initiatives. Most legislation affects children, yet its possible effects on them are rarely considered. Neither is there communication between children and the institutions that purport to serve them. This heightens the vulnerability of our children and of the world they are inheriting.

Though we succeeded in our planning project in developing the framework of an ecological model for a healthy children's environment, the limits of an interdisciplinary, ecological approach to planning an initiative became clear. There are so many salient features of a healthy environment for children. Within epidemiology, for example, which sets itself to map the ecology of health and disease, new variables are discovered every year; even racism and sexism are now recognized as determinants of infant mortality (Krieger et al., 1993). The web of causation quickly becomes a maze. How were we to navigate it? As Schwab and Syme (1997) have pointed out, an ecological approach leaves us far away from knowing what to do to best promote healthy environments.

The participation of children helped us resolve the dilemma. We suspected that without their points of view our efforts were likely to fail, and we decided to engage them directly in defining the significant features of their environments and the ways to improve them. Any serious appreciation of children and their environments, we agreed with Stephens (1994), had to be grounded in their own representations of the reality of their lives.

This idea resonated with all of us. We often talk about children being our future, but we rarely take their ideas and experiences into account in our work. Who more than children have an interest in the future of the environment? Not only do they inherit the legacy of our social and environmental policies, they are also often the markers of their damaging effects. Children's vulnerable bodies are

often first to be deformed by toxins. Their lives are cut short in disproportionate numbers by war, famine, and the culture of the gun. Yet in the movement toward community involvement in public health programs, children, who live in closest contact with so many of the problems, are virtually never consulted. Like women a century ago, our young people are for the most part unheard. The effects can be devastating: “When nobody listens, your self-esteem goes low,” says one 15-year-old African-American boy. “You feel like trash. It can make you snap” (Face to Face, 1995). Children’s tremendous energy, boldness, and creativity are rarely tapped by adults with interest and expertise on public health and environmental issues.

We decided to move ahead by working directly with young people, engaging them in community action research projects throughout California. Building on methods developed by Moore (1990) and Hart (1997) for environmental community action, we engaged children and youth to define what were relevant environments for them and possible solutions to problems affecting them. Using a variety of approaches, the young people defined their identities within their community, mapped problems they found relevant, interviewed residents and local officials, analyzed the issues, and formulated strategies through problem-based learning, theater, video production, and community organizing. Their efforts were bolstered by making specialists in media, policy analysis, and research available to them. An interdisciplinary group of researchers also worked with the young people to document the process and its outcomes.

These pilot projects, and parallel literature research, made us acutely aware how the public discourse about children’s health and social welfare — as it emerges from science, government, and the media — is nearly always framed by experts and special interest groups. What appears in the popular print media about youth characterizes them as “fugitive cultures” (Giroux, 1996) and the “scape-goat generation” (Males, 1996), even by authors sympathetic to their alienation and estrangement. It is not clear that young people see themselves in any of these ways, or that they identify as “Generation X,” another prototypical adult description of the children of the 1990s. Moreover, these depictions were not helpful as we moved to engage young people in planning healthier environments.

Some of our theoretical work addressed the interplay between children’s personal development and social change. These dimensions are rarely addressed simultaneously, yet the development of loving, creative children, capable of thinking ecologically, working together, and acting from strong-hearted conviction, appeared to us as necessary for the improvement of our environment, as is the organization of social movements and political constituencies for better policies.

Throughout the planning process, we met with coworkers from the U.S. and overseas. They gradually helped us become aware of an incipient but worldwide children’s environmental movement that is partly based on the expanding notion

of children's rights. Since the enactment of the *International Convention on the Rights of the Child* (which the United States has yet to endorse), town councils in many countries have been soliciting and incorporating the input of young people — often themselves organized as youth councils.² The long-term support of a major foundation could, we felt, do much to advance and document this trend, which promises to promote public health and social justice as the women's movement and the disability movement have done in the past.

In each of our pilot projects, the children spontaneously raised the need to reverse the erosion of safe common spaces in which young people can gather, work, and play together. There is a broad literature on the changing nature of our public spaces and on how it causes problems for children in particular (CERG, 1991). We found that the engagement of young people on this issue was passionate, and their ideas were worth listening to. They clearly showed themselves to have relevant, perceptive, and creative contributions to make to a public discourse that is otherwise generally distorted by fear and ideology. Currently, the fear-driven discourse and action devoted to "gang prevention" could be usefully informed by the way the children themselves define their need for safe spaces where friendships, recreation, scholarship, and self-determination will flourish.³ We concluded that children and youth have a major contribution to make to research, public debate, environmental planning, and to contemporary theories about the social and spatial dimensions of life at the end of the 20th century.⁴

The articles in this special edition describe research conducted in various parts of the planning project, including participatory action research by and with teenagers in four community pilot projects, as well as statements by international colleagues whose work influenced us along the way.

The first article, Michael Schwab's "Sharing Power: Participatory Public Health Research with California Teens," describes the work of young people in four pilot projects conducted as part of the planning project. Young people from Richmond, Oakland, and Los Angeles developed strategies to address issues that they selected — for example, violence in their community, a lack of recreation centers, and local water pollution. With help from adult "coordinators," they explored their own identities in relation to their issues, created media representations of their findings, and developed strategies for advocacy and change. The implications of this kind of work for public health are discussed.

Roger Hart and the Children's Environments Research Group have done pioneering work in this field. "Developmental Theory and Children's Participation in Community Organizations" discusses the changing ecology of children from different cultures as their identity and their understanding of the social world take shape. Identity is essentially a social concept, one that feminist psychological theorists link to political struggle, and children need to be involved in community in order to better develop self-concept, autonomy, social competence, social responsi-

bility, community identity, and political self-determination. This review of the psychological literature also addresses how and why children establish youth cultures.

“Working Children in Ecuador Mobilize for Change,” an interview with María Fernanda Espinosa, provides a startling and moving account of her work with urban children who are the most marginalized. Together, over a period of many years, working children as young as eight were able to organize themselves in alternative spaces and draw attention to their rights. UNICEF supported their efforts.

The importance of media in the lives of children has received considerable attention. From theater to radio, and video to self-published zines, young people’s self-representations yield images, caricatures, and myths that shape public opinion. Refocusing the lens of current debates on media and youth — the effects of TV watching on youth violence and the impact of corporate media power — we were interested to learn how youth are revisioning the possibilities of using media for their agendas. In “Navigating the Media Environment: How Youth Claim a Place Through Zines,” Julie Chu depicts the subculture created within the tens of thousands of zines produced by youth. The rise in zine production exemplifies the new social networks and forms of community that have been emerging since the 1980s. Chu analyzes the importance and content of zines as a window into youth subjectivity in the 1990s.

The script “Mantel on the Table,” written and performed by the young people in one of the pilot projects, the Sangre Latina Youth Theater Group, provides another window into children’s subjective expression of environmental concerns. In this sophisticated satire, a television talk show becomes the backdrop for these Latino teenagers to say something about their community in Richmond, California — a registered Superfund site. They want to see toxic chemicals, rather than youth, discussed as the public enemies! This pilot project used theater as a venue for showcasing the results of their participatory action research.

Yet another medium used by young people to express themselves is video. In “Invisible Youth Reappear!” Dana Saunders reviews two youth-produced videos, one about life in a refugee camp in Bosnia, the other about racism. Material of this kind is increasingly finding its way to mass audiences, opening up new possibilities for children’s voices to be heard. The techniques and travails of young people’s video production are discussed.

In “What Is a Children’s Policy, Anyway?” Sandra Meucci shows how children’s needs for protection is a problematic basis for social policy. Not only does “child protection” derive from an implicitly patronizing power relationship with children, but “protective” policy has also historically been driven by adult fears over the “dangerous classes” of immigrant children, illiteracy, and degeneracy. In almost equal measure, children’s policy designed to protect children from neglect, exploitation, and abuse has resulted in the displacement and

incarceration of young people into juvenile correctional facilities. The author draws implications from this policy legacy for more promising ways to develop new policy issues and constituencies within the current children's policy landscape.

Adults fear for the safety of children is a central theme of Don Reneau's "Z and Me," an excursion into the author's relationship with his two-year-old son. Bewitched by a society in which children's perceptions and abilities (especially those under five, six, or seven) are vastly underrated, we adults have become accustomed to projecting our own observations, attitudes, values, desires, and fears onto our youngsters. Of course, these observations and attitudes are heavily conditioned by the media. This article juxtaposes the bright, uncluttered observations of a young child with the seasoned reflections of a sensitive scholar to raise disturbing questions about our own fear for our children's safety and the reality of their experience.

In "Safe Spaces: California Children Enter a Policy Debate," Sandra Meucci and Jim Redmon discuss how the teenagers involved in our pilot projects are defining their need for "safe spaces" in ways that usefully inform the current policy debate about community safety. Rather than the focus on prohibition and incarceration implicit in current policies, these adolescents are interested in the multi-generational effects of toxic pollution and in preserving public spaces and youth programs *for safety's sake*. They offer a fresh analysis on the causes of youth crime that do not further instantiate community policing, youth curfews, and tougher sentencing as the only solutions, and provide compelling reasons for bringing policy analysts together with youth and community constituencies to define and explore policy issues from young people's perspectives.

In "Children of Incarcerated Parents," Diane and Edward Reed alert us to the plight of the five million children who are victimized by the criminalization of their parents. Often they lose one or both of their parents, their homes, and all that anchors them; many respond with sadness, withdrawal, depression, diminished school performance, alcohol and drug use, and aggressive behavior, thus setting themselves up to be the next generation of incarcerated parents. This hidden population of traumatized children and youth is increasing in number, as trends in criminal "justice" punish even minor offenses with incarceration. The Reeds faithfully document the extent, causes, and effects of the plight of these children, describe the few programs that offer some solutions, and outline the need for more attentive, relevant, and effective policies.

"How Oakland Turns Its Back on Teens: A Youth Perspective," by Jermaine Ashley, Dawn Samaniego, and Lian Cheun, describes how Youth for Oakland United, the site of another of our pilot projects, is working for positive alternatives to crime and incarceration. Speaking of the critical need for safe common spaces for teens and citing preventative measures in cities across America, they comment: "A lot of elders like to point fingers and talk down to us...if the city helps

one, he'll help another and she'll help another, and that will make a difference." They researched and analyzed problems with existing recreation centers in Oakland, surveyed and documented what youth in Oakland want, and used this documentation to successfully launch a citizen ballot initiative for resources for Oakland youth.

Children are engaged in community environmental action and policy work around the world. In "Children's Rights and the Building of Democracy: A Dialogue on the International Movement for Children's Participation," Michael Schwab and Roger Hart provide a heartening and incisive account of this trend, from the movement of street children in Brazil, which resulted in a plethora of national policies for children, to children's urban planning in France and Italy, where young people are beginning to constitute themselves as a force within city governance, environmental planning, and social policy. The authors grapple with questions about whether this activity constitutes a "children's movement."

One Italian project of this kind is described by Ilaria Salvadori in "A Dragon in the Neighborhood: City Planning with Children in Milan, Italy." This was part of an international UNICEF-sponsored research program to engage children in planning activities to improve their environments. The author records and analyzes how children in one district in Milan became involved in traffic-flow design when a new freeway was planned near their school. These children, who formerly had little knowledge of their own neighborhood, worked with architects experienced in environmental education to research their issues, create maps and models of local streets, and present their findings to the community and the mayor. The dialogue between the children and the public administration over the children's plans is ongoing.

The eclipse of children's access to the out of doors and its implications for their development are the subject of Robin Moore's "Childhood Without Nature: The Right to Experience." Moore enumerates factors restricting access to the outdoors as he discusses social and environmental aspects of the changing ecology of childhood. He calls for a new sense of child-biosphere relations and points to the international conventions and other venues where this theme is being taken up.

Even when they can go outdoors, new immigrant families often find themselves living in heavily polluted neighborhoods, where the water is not safe for drinking or fishing and the soil is too contaminated to garden. The children often become aware of the dangers before their parents. The last article is a poignant interview with one Southeast Asian teenage girl, who is growing up in a chemically highly toxic environment. "And Do You Feel Like This Is Your Country?" documents the voice of Sipfou Saechao, who found her way into the Asian Pacific Environmental Network. Her comments on America offer a provocative challenge to us all.

NOTES

1. Personal discussion with Amina Rasul Bernardo, Presidential Advisor on Youth in the Philippines (March 1996).
2. Personal discussion with Ernesto Caffo, president of the International Forum of Child Welfare (March 1996).
3. The findings from our participatory action research projects suggest that Jankowski (1991) was correct about the needs that “gangs” are created to fulfill. If, as Jankowski suggests, children form gangs as a way to establish social cohesiveness and cultural identity, and if gang behavior is directed toward neighborhood protection and economic enfranchisement, then giving children “alternative spaces” where these needs can be met and where their creativity can flourish in nonviolent directions — as we did in our pilot projects — is a way to marshal the energy of the children to create “safe spaces.”
4. The implications for children of these monumental changes are rarely discussed. For example, David Harvey’s review, *The Condition of Post-Modernity*, provides the most thoroughgoing analysis of contemporary changes in space and time, but contains barely a reference to the effects of these changes on children! Likewise, feminist and women scholars focused on the effects of globalization on women, for example, in *Conceiving the New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction* (Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp, eds., University of California Press, 1995).

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