

NURTURING CHILDREN'S RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE ENVIRONMENT: EXPLORING THE NATURE OF PARTNERSHIPS

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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses the importance of partnerships in nurturing children's engagement in environmental issues. Based on the author's reflections and discussions with children, adults play an important role in sustaining partnerships. But, adults must believe in children's capacity, and provide them with opportunities to enter into partnerships. The paper analyzes the experience of planning an International Children and Environment Conference from children's perspectives. It is argued that partnerships between children and adults are often strained, but necessary to enter into, if we want a better world.

Key words: child engagement, partnership, environmental activism

We kids need to act for what we think is right and good, but we can't do everything on our own! Partnership is important because we have big dreams, but we need the help of adults to achieve them. Brian and I needed partnership with adults and their support to complete our projects. We will always need partnership with adults, and if we start having good partnerships with lots of adults, and they believe in the same hopes and dreams we do, we can all make a big difference!

Nicole Clark, 11, Delta, Canada

Either as an adult or as a child, one rarely uses the word partnership but, upon reflection, it appears essential to meeting the needs of young people and of our society. What do partnerships look like? How do children define partnerships? This paper builds on the experiences of the authors: Brian, 12, member of the 2002 International Children and Environment Conference (ICC) and Natasha, 32, member of the conference planning committee representing the International Institute for Children's Rights and Development. We highlight key points arising from our reflections and discussions with children engaged in environmental issues and the planning of the ICC.

The multi-faceted aspect of partnership in which children relate with adults, institutions, peers, siblings, and nature is identified. We realize that, in the real world, adults and children alike are struggling to define

their partnerships. While these partnerships may always be in progress and may constantly be redefined, they need to be supported.

THE CONTEXT

A discussion on partnership and the increased attention being placed internationally on engaging children must be placed in the context of the world-wide ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by state parties, and the implementation of its Articles 12-16, addressing a child's right to participate. As a result, children's participation is becoming important to policy-makers and programmers, and it is being recognized that children need to be involved in decisions that affect them (Lansdown, 2001). There is a growing literature discussing the forms and ways of promoting participation (Driskell, 2002; Hart, 1997).

The concept of partnership is linked to participation but goes one step further: partnership recognizes that participation depends on relationships.

PLANTING AND NURTURING THE SEEDS OF PARTNERSHIPS

A child's engagement in environmental issues does not begin in a conference. Partnerships germinate at a very young age. One such partnership is the one established between young children and nature. As children crawl and take their first steps, their environment fascinates them. Nature provides the enjoyment of many hours of unlimited discovery; children learn to care about animals, soil, air, and plants. They learn how to co-habit and how each one needs the other. Brian recalls, "Even before I knew how to talk, I would point at things and say, 'da, da?' 'da, da?' wanting to know what it was. As I grew older I asked, 'What type of bird is that?' 'What kind of tree is that?' When I was 5, I did my first beach cleanup with my family."

Unfortunately, this relationship with nature is often severed in growing up (Nabhan & Stephen, 1994). As the physical contact with nature decreases, children forget about their roles and their responsibilities to their initial partner. Thus, the call by Yvonne Maingey, 13, Junior Board member from Kenya: "You know, we're not the only people on the planet. And you have all these other things that people seem to forget and don't think that are important. But they have to realize that we need to live with those things, and they need the planet as well. So it's really a partnership."

Some adults will nurture children's interest in the environment and encourage their desire to care for the environment. Not surprisingly, parents are the number one entity identified by the Junior Board members that fosters children's ongoing participation in environmental activities. As Justin Friesen, 11, says, "I could not just help the environment without recognizing it came from somewhere. My parents, especially my dad, have inspired me since I was little, about four or five." When parents have not been committed to environmental activities, a teacher can play an

important role in rekindling an affinity to the environment. In interviews, many children identified a teacher who had a particular impact on their continued commitment to the environment.

Adults who work in partnership with children need to have special qualities. Nicole Clark, 11, who recently won the Canadian Junior Award with Brian for their "Wonder of Water" project, describes the qualities of her mother and Brian's mother as follows: "They always encourage us. They help us draft and then compose essays, articles, and letters. They support us in everything we do. They are interested in the environment themselves and try to learn as much as they can to help educate us and themselves on the environment!" Describing a health inspector who helped Brian and Nicole with research for a video project, Nicole says, "The qualities that made her good was: she sat on the floor at eye level with us, which made me feel comfortable talking with her and made me feel relaxed. She was very honest, kept in touch with us, gave us information when she could, and she was very encouraging, understanding, and helped us a lot!" Jessica Van Nus, 12, from Saskatchewan also commented on the need for adults to be compassionate and supportive: "They are nice, caring, and smart. They aren't just stuck up, turning you down and not giving you chances."

A challenge voiced by many children is that of adults wanting to take control, and adults not valuing children. "Some think kids don't know as much, and when you're talking about big things, big environmental issues, they think that we don't really understand it and they say 'Ya, that's nice' and then go do what they think", says Rebekah Parker, 12, from Ontario. Sarah Bowler, 13, from the United Kingdom, adds, "Really, the most important is to work together and not think of taking over. It is great working with adults, and I wish we did more of it." One is reminded that entering into partnership with children may be difficult for adults because it involves sharing their power. Partnership goes two ways: both children and adults need to invest themselves in the subject matter.

In concluding, Brian says that, for adults to have a good partnership with a child while working on a project, they should be good listeners and include the child in the planning process . . . When I was at a planning meeting for the ICC, I raised an idea that I had. While most of the adults ignored it, one of the adults brought the idea up again so that it could be used. Another thing is that adults should keep the promises they make to children. A good partnership is when the adult encourages the child to do what they think is right and discusses how their ideas could be made better. Our minister and his wife were very helpful to Nicole and I in my most recent church project, called the Wonder of Water. He helped us plan our speeches and checked them over to see if they were all right. He also encouraged us to do some things that we normally wouldn't do. As partners, children and adults can cross boundaries and explore new territories.

In other cases, partnerships can be sustained and fostered by older siblings. Sarah Bowler, 13, describes how she was inspired by her older

sister's involvement in environmental activities. Younger siblings can also encourage partnerships. Brian's friend, Nicole, points to the instrumental support given by their respective younger siblings. The qualities that make Linda and Rachel good partners is [that] although they have a frenetically wonderful sense of humor, they are still enthusiastic to volunteer and help whenever they're needed, and love to help the environment as much as we do!

In all cases, the role of the individual must be highlighted. Ultimately, engagement in environmental activities depends on the child's own initiative and leadership. I started to realize that there was a big problem with the environment, and I had to help it when I was little. If we don't stop hurting our planet earth, there won't be anything left and it will just be a lifeless parched rock floating in space. To help the environment, I have taken direct action, expressed my environmental interests through different art mediums, researched environmental issues, learned about nature, and shared my environmental knowledge and concerns with others.

The story of Ryan Hreljac, aged 11, a participant at the conference and well known for his commitment to building tube-wells in Uganda, inspired both of us, showing the possibility of a child initiating partnerships. He recalls having to convince his parents to help him raise funds for the wells: "I kept saying yes, I want to do it. Really, I don't think they thought I could do it at first. Only after I kept begging until they listened to me, then they said if you're serious they would help me raise the money." Since then, Ryan has inspired children, adults, and institutions from around the world to raise funds to provide clean water to millions of children in Africa. In the following section, we look at the nature of the partnership between children and adults in planning an international conference.

PARTNERS IN CONFERENCE PLANNING?

Children's participation in conferences has dominated the literature to such an extent that child-rights experts have voiced their concerns, feeling that this emphasis says little about children's participation in their everyday lives. More rare are conferences involving children in planning, designing, and organizing the logistics of a conference. This is where more meaningful participation of children can take place. Children can contribute to setting the agenda and can learn about partnering with adults and institutions. An impact on their everyday lives is more likely as they develop new skills and learn how the real world works.

The experience of the International Children and Environment Conference is interesting because children were involved in the planning nine months prior to the event. Brian, for instance, was selected to be part of the Junior Board on the basis of an essay he wrote on his involvement in environmental issues.

Being home-schooled, I was able to attend many of the committee meetings, including a planning week with the entire Junior Board three months before the conference. Throughout, there was a stated commitment

to involving children. Repeatedly, we were told this was our conference, for and by the children. As the Junior Board, we felt we made a difference to the conference itself. Without us, it would not have been a great success for the 400 children attending from 60 countries around the world.

One of the highlights for the Junior Board was the opportunity to work with our peers from different parts of the world. "I liked how we all had big ideas, and we could merge them together to make a really good idea and then put them into action. So it was really nice not to have an adult say this is the way it should be done!" says Rebekah, 12, from Ontario Canada. As Justin Friesen, 11, says, "We learned to work in a team and to specialize in our different strengths." While some took the microphone in front of the 400 child delegates, others preferred to work behind the scenes, summarizing the environmental challenges for water, climate change, healthy communities, and resource conservation to be presented at the World Summit in Johannesburg in South Africa, September 2002.

As Sarah Bowler, 13, comments, working with peers also had its challenges. Not all Junior Board members had the same public-speaking skills, and some were shyer than others. It was a learning experience for both the adults and the children. In a media-training session, for instance, the adults had asked each Junior Board member to make a presentation, and to receive feedback from his or her peers. While this was fun for those who enjoyed public speaking, it was not the case for those who expressed their engagement in environmental initiatives differently. Both the organizers and the Junior Board learned how to honour different forms of engagement and provide opportunities for each member to demonstrate his or her skills.

When the children were asked in what area the Junior Board had specifically made a difference, changing the food menu came first to their minds. The organizers had prepared a menu that was presented to us for our approval. Brian recalls pointing out that the menu was limiting and did not take into account the cultural differences of the group, nor the dietary restrictions of some children like himself, who cannot eat dairy products . . . This was a good example of adults needing to work with the children to better meet our needs. We ended up with a varied menu that made our new friends comfortable and happy.

Underneath the success of the plenary, in which children dominated the platform, there were frustrations and disappointments. Although never voiced, the partnership was in fact strained. One situation in particular divided the Junior Board and the organizers: the election of the representatives attending the World Summit in Johannesburg. As the Junior Board, we felt that all conference participants should vote, but that the election should be within the Junior Board. United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) officials, however, decided that the election would be open and voting would take place region by region. From an outsider's perspective, the UNEP position was potentially more

democratic but, from the perspective of the Junior Board (as adults in the real world could likely argue), the vote should have been limited to members of the Junior Board because they were better trained, having taken part in the planning of the conference over the past months. Interestingly enough, the two who were eventually elected were members of the Junior Board. The Junior Board's argument proved, in the end, to be correct: the participants felt board members were best prepared to represent them. In the decision-making process, however, the Junior Board's opinion had been ignored. This is where the Junior Board most felt the inequality of the partnership. If their views went against those of the people in power, their opinions would be disregarded.

These are the challenges that we face when we work with adults.

- *Language*: When children attended the big planning meetings, they would often, in the beginning, adjust their language for the younger participants. The adults, representing over 15 organizations ranging from the United Nations to government ministries and non-governmental organizations, used acronyms they did not explain, which made it difficult to follow the discussion.
- *Listening*: While we were encouraged to express our opinions, sometimes the adults did not listen or did not tell us why they did not accept our beliefs.
- *Follow through*: It took a long time to follow through with things. Some adults made promises that were very important to the Junior Board, but the promises weren't kept.
- *The adult world*: The meetings were long and boring, and it felt like we kept discussing the same things again and again. It was also frustrating when the adults couldn't do something because money was a problem.
- *Children's needs--free time, energy time, sleep*: During the planning week, there were so many things going on and so much stuff to do, there were not enough breaks and quiet time. The days were really long, and we did not get enough sleep. The adults planned every minute so there was not much unstructured time. The adults forgot we were just kids and expected too much from us in a short time.
- *Power*: The most frustrating and stressful time was when we had finished planning the conference and the conference had actually started. An adult with a lot of influence came in and changed an important part of the conference and didn't explain why. The change didn't work and there was chaos. I didn't think it was worth planning the conference as a team if one adult could come in at the last minute and change it all without consulting the planning board.

Brian's comments point to two sources of frustration. In the first place, there was the challenge of working with adults who claimed to involve the children meaningfully but did not consistently follow though

with this vision. It seemed that the input from the children was needed only when the adults wanted to hear it. It is possible that many of the frustrations would have been avoided if there had been greater dialogue with the children, and if the adult organizers had discussed the challenges facing them and had adequately consulted with the children. Prior to the conference, the adult committees received a cross-cultural training workshop. Perhaps they could have received similar training on the cultural differences between children and adults. It is as though working with children should come naturally to adults, but often this is not the case. It is between the adults and the children that the cultural differences appeared greatest. As Justin Friesen recalls: "While we have different stories of what is going on in each place, we all shared the same basic environmental problems. We could understand each other amazingly well even though we came from all over the world."

Another issue raised in Brian's comments concerns the power hierarchy within which adults operate, and what the children learned about that. While individual adults may be well-intentioned, they are limited by a system that often is not democratic and even less child-centered. The Junior Board would soon realize that budgetary constraints were an important impediment to realizing their requests. For instance, they wanted each participant to receive a bag and a hat. In the end, the conference package was determined by the donations the organizers were able to obtain.

Maybe this is all part of a child becoming a partner--when they realize the social, political, cultural, and economic constraints of decision-making. It is when the child discovers the complexity of the real world that he or she becomes an ally. It is the partner who has lost some of his illusions who recognizes that expressing one's views is not sufficient to participate. Though the partnership is likely to be a struggle, it is a necessary struggle to implement participation.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As illustrated in this paper, the partnership between children and adults may often be strained--and may always be, given the nature of our differences and our society. As Justin Friesen, 11, says, "Children and adults have different points of views on the world. Us as children, we are still developing; we look at the world in different ways. Adults are caught up in working politics." We must, nonetheless, continue to reflect on our experiences and to create spaces for fostering partnerships to nurture the environment and secure our future.

We are also reminded that, in entering into partnerships, it is not the end result but the process and intent that is of greatest importance. In the words of Jessica Van Nus, 12: "Partnership is when you get along, try to get to the same thing, and work together." Through this process, both adults and children will change. We all need to have the courage to take that risk, even if it may mean adults sharing their power and introducing

children earlier than later to the complexities and the injustices of the adult world.

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