



## Notes on **children, teenager and youth leadership**<sup>1</sup>

These notes will discuss some key concepts in understanding the second fundamental feature of service-learning, **student leadership**. The concept of **participation**, as well as **different types and levels** will be explored following Roger Hart and others. A characterization by Jaume Trilla will also be described in connection to service-learning projects.

Making these concepts clear will allow future service-learning teachers to become aware of the types and opportunities for participation or pseudo-participation given to students, to offer guidance while not imposing ideas on them and to allow room for student initiatives without neglecting them.

The perspectives of popular education and student participation promotion may constitute common ground for community-relevant service-learning project development, keeping youth education away from mere intellectual talk or revolutionary chit-chat and adequately moving them to social action committed to their community's well-being.

### 1- The ladder of youth participation (by Roger Hart and other authors)

In service-learning perspective, it is not enough for students to take action. Attention should be drawn to whether they are doing what they are told and have no other choice, whether they have

---

<sup>1</sup>Adapted from Tapia, M.N., with Bridi, G., Maidana, M.P. and Rial, S. (2015): *El compromiso social como pedagogía. Aprendizaje y solidaridad en la escuela*. CELAM –CLAYSS. Chapter 2.2.2 pages 115-121 (Hart and Trilla)

been persuaded to take action but would otherwise not mind, or whether they are really committed to the experience and developing active participation.

When trying to launch a service-learning project, teachers, directors and even community members may sometimes feel tempted to take a shortcut and organize the project themselves and then ask students to simply follow instructions. This can be practical in terms of teachers' and community satisfaction, but can hardly be thought of as authentic service-learning. No one learns to be an active citizen by just following other people's directions.

Experience shows that if students do not **feel the project as their own** right from the start, they will be overly dependent on teachers and, therefore, will not develop their full learning potential. One of the most valuable and enduring learning processes associated to service-learning is the development of students' self-organization, management and leadership skills, the kind of knowledge traditional classrooms cannot always offer.

As a tool to better explain the concepts of youth participation and leadership, actually encompassing children, adolescents and youth, the ladder of youth participation was first used by Sherry Arnstein and later adapted by Roger Hart to include children participation (1992).

Roger Hart (1993) defines participation as "the process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives". Youth and children participation means having them collaborate and contribute to common progress, as well as giving them self-confidence and a principle of initiative. In addition, participation turns children and youth into social subjects with the ability to express views and make decisions on matters concerning themselves and their families, schools and society in general (Apud, 2003:4).

Hart conceives of eight different degrees of participation, ranging from no participation whatsoever to active leadership, as shown in the chart:

FIGURE 20: Children and youth participation (Hart, 1992).



Youth leadership: **they share management, make decisions and have proposals approved**

Youth participation: they submit proposals and are consulted

Youth non-participation: they receive information, are present but not aware or else are manipulated.

**FIGURE 21: Eight levels of young people’s participation in projects** (Adapted from Suriel, 2006:15-16)

Type	Content
<b>Manipulation</b>	Adults pretend the cause is inspired by students but students have no understanding of the issues and hence do not understand their actions.
<b>Decoration</b>	Students are used to bolster an adults’ cause but have little idea of what it is all about and no say in the organizing of the occasion.
<b>Tokenism</b>	Students are apparently given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about the subject or how to communicate it, and little or no opportunity to formulate their own opinion.
<b>Assigned but informed</b>	Student participation is planned without their voice, but they understand and are aware of the actions that are proposed.
<b>Consulted and informed</b>	Students’ opinion on project participation is consulted and their views are taken into consideration.
<b>Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children</b>	Students take part in decision making in adult-initiated projects.
<b>Child-initiated and directed</b>	Students initiate and lead the project, while adults provide assistance.
<b>Child-initiated, shared decisions with adults</b>	Students actually decide to involve adults in decision making.

Needless to say, teachers are not likely to consciously manipulate students, although sometimes temptation to use them as cheap labor is hard to fight and hides behind what adults consider the common good, as in these two real cases:

- On one occasion, the director of a kindergarten led protest against pollution from a nearby factory, and made children join a demonstration to call for factory and public measures. Some kids were accompanied by their mothers and others were only there following their teachers.
- In another case, at a hospital understaffed due to delays in appointment processes, the director asked the local high school to send volunteers for administrative work. Teenagers found themselves managing confidential medical records containing information they were not supposed to have access to, doing work they were not prepared for and taking up responsibility way beyond their age and education.

We understand that engaging students in causes which, although noble, exceed their understanding and involvement or take their work for cheap labor puts both students and schools at risk and does not render true leadership or effective long-lasting solutions for target organizations.

## 2- Four types of student participation (following Jaume Trilla and Ana Novella, 2001)

On the basis of Hart's characterization, Spanish specialists **Jaume Trilla and Ana Novella (2001)** classify **children's participation into simple, consulting, projecting and meta-participation**. Collaborative work carried out at the Service-learning Promotion Center in Catalonia, including Jaume Trilla, describes these four categories and **places service-learning pedagogy** among them:

- **Simple participation:** *Young people take part in an activity without having been involved in preparation. As mere recipients, their participation is limited to following the instructions they receive from adults who planned activity contents and procedures. Service-learning is not to be found here, as it requires direct involvement of the group in activity development.*
- **Consulting participation:** *Young people's opinion is taken into account in proposal design and adults specifically allocate time for student consultation before and during the process. However, project design is still in teachers' hands. This type of participation may involve a certain degree of service but still **falls short of service-learning participation requirements**.*
- **Projecting participation:** *This is the first level in which young people are no longer mere recipients but play an active role in the activity. They regard the project as their own and know they can*

take part in project definition, planning, execution and assessment. Adults at this level give prominence to youth and focus on creating opportunities for youth to reshape activities, develop participation skills and conquer new spaces of involvement and accountability. Adults' role consists in guiding the group during the process. **Most service-learning activities exhibit this level of participation.**

- **Meta-participation:** *In this last category, it is young people themselves who demand and create new participation mechanisms. This scenario often arises from situations regarded as unfair and which the group takes a stand against, vindicating the rights they believe have been trodden on. This is the most demanding level of participation, as it requires a strong belief in participation rights, mechanisms that allow rights to be actually put into practice and a high level of personal and collective skills. Adults may either have no say whatsoever or see their participation limited to maximizing opportunities for youth participation. Meta-participation is a gold standard for service-learning activities and is usually found in projects stemming from social movements committed to the environment and the community (Puig et al., 2009:112-113).*

In short, a service-learning project should not only have students informed, consulted and taken into account, but should also allow them to feel the project as their own right from its early planning stages.

Even in kindergarten and elementary school projects, children can learn to participate according to their age in identifying community problems, choosing the activities to be carried out and evaluating action with community members.