

ASSESSING PARTICIPATION

Introduction

The children's comments when assessing schools grounds projects can teach us much about the possibilities for children's involvement. As Hart (1998) points out, not all children will be as keen to take part in different aspects of the process: some will enjoy drawing and designing, others will be more keen to get involved in the labouring aspects of the work. Undoubtedly, children seem underutilised and spatially separated from the activities commonly associated with schools grounds changes especially if the work is deemed in any way dangerous. Similarly, there are now hosts of outside agencies that are willing to help with projects but their involvement may be detrimental to children's participation:

We done too much planning and not enough doing. When they decided to do something, they brought in [volunteers] to help. (Primary school child)

It seems that children are generally excluded from making a difference to their locale because of parental control, school organisation, and adults' attitude to children generally. This child reports on the spatially controlled realm for participation s/he experiences:

The children could work with the volunteers at playtime, lunchtime and if their parents let them, they could maybe help them after school. (Primary school child).

For any school grounds project seeking high levels of participation I would *now* advocate these objectives below. They are written in hindsight as objectives I would strive to attain with greater enthusiasm than before. I failed to meet these objectives in a number of ways. They allow for the children to be construed as stakeholders *with* the concerned adults in the project.

- ◇ the children would voluntarily work on the project or be given other work to do if they preferred
- ◇ the stakeholders (children and adults together) collaboratively conduct an analysis of the situation (in the form of a survey of the grounds, reflection on the history of previous interventions, an analysis of locally available help, funding, or advice).
- ◇ the stakeholders collaboratively decide on what they would like to do to change their

school grounds.

- ◇ the stakeholders collaboratively create a strategy for getting the project off the ground.
- ◇ the stakeholders collaboratively formulate detailed project tactics for funding, purchase of materials, transporting of materials, finding people to do any necessary labour.
- ◇ the stakeholders collaboratively engage in any ‘work’ to make the project a reality, spending time discussing problems, discussing alternatives, working together or in a coordinated fashion.
- ◇ the stakeholders collaboratively reflect on their practice and evaluate their work.

Assessing Projects

Using an adapted form of Hart’s ladder (Hart, 1992; see chapter 13, main volume), I got children in a number of schools to assess their own participation in schools grounds projects (detailed in Appendix E). I visited schools that had claimed to have involved children a lot in the processes of change and decision making. I felt I assess the participation of a broad sample of children who had experienced the ‘best of’ opportunities in Scottish primary schools for participation.

Research as Catalytic Intervention

In doing the assessment of a project I felt I was doing a couple of things at the same time. Firstly, I was using a participatory method to heighten awareness of the possibilities for how a project could be organised: the teacher and children may have been more aware of the level of participation they would aim for in subsequent work. Secondly, I felt I was collecting ‘data’ in the more traditional sense but not without the children’s agreement and cooperation. My intervention in ‘the field’ was not to be purely objective or subjective. There were possible political consequences for my actions; there was the possibility of greater reflexive awareness too. My assessment of school grounds projects was a catalytic intervention in the lives of those who undertook them. My own keenness to find the extent of pupils participation in school settings was inspired by the idea that we might encourage a lot more of it. This ‘advocative’ dimension to the research as a whole was explicitly part of the ‘play’ of my research actions. It is an example of an approach to action research that is catalytic. The people with whom I worked to get the information I sought became part of the action research cycle I was involved in myself. The new thinking represented in the tools for assessment I used (in this case Hart’s Ladder) were not innocent positivist tools for inquiry.

They were ideologically inspired. In using a particular research tool, I could be seen to be buying into a particular ideology. Yet I would be prepared to step outside of these 'worldviews' if new information suggested the schemae were wrong. This approach to inquiry (and assessment at the same time) by using participatory methods dissolves the differences between ideologically inspired activism, objective inquiry, and the collection of respondents' constructions of the world. I had decided not to try to work my subjectivity *out* of the story but rather to work *with it* as a research tool. Critical theory, interpretivism, and postmodern ambivalent catalysis as intervention meld into one in this approach. The research took a **critical approach** in that there are implicit desires to work against the dominant culture of non-participation in schooling as I saw it; it was a form of **action research** in that it was a phase in the emergent thinking I had on the issues and in that one needs to deconstruct one's ideas as one goes along and this may have been as true for the participants in the research as for me; it was an **interpretivist approach** in that I am doing the interpreting here through a discussion that will follow that challenges a positivist or postpositivist approach to the statistics I present. No one closed framework will suffice. Similarly, I remind you, as the reader, that you too are creating your own of all this. Your reading may be inspired politically, or poetically. Your reading may inspire action or inaction. But, for me at least, overseeing all this is a form of postmodern **reflexivity** of my own writing and research action that I instigate through reflection. In this section of the text, where I tell stories from my visits to schools, the

focus will be interpreted slices, glimpses and specimens of interaction that display how cultural practices, connected to structural formations and narrative texts are experienced at a particular time and place by interacting individuals. (Denzin, 1997, p247)

Neither do I need to be specific about the tools of interpretation I use. Here, in quoting from Denzin above, I suggest ethnography may work best. But my statistics are as apt a way to record these moments too. As Denzin (1997, p249) and Trinh (1989, p141) advocate, the positivist or postpositivist empiricist narrative methods represent an approaches to storytelling that must be avoided. I do not wish to make stories that are analysed in closed ways. I do advocate an interpretivism that is public, participatory and morally critical. I will advocate greater participatory democracy without giving definitive solutions to problems. I do wish to encourage 'collaborative, reciprocal, trusting, non-oppressive relations' (Denzin,

1997, p273) between myself as researcher, those I have studied, and you the reader. In this way the best formulation for what kind of research I have conducted is catalysis.

Evaluation of School Grounds Projects

Method

Some schools were chosen as samples of how children can be involved at heightened levels of participation. These schools were selected because they had been recommended to me by a local authority, by a teacher, or by the organisation Grounds for Learning as representative of 'good practice' in this field. As such these results represent samples of 'good or best practice' in attempts to encourage children's participation in schools grounds changes in the Scottish context (excluding much of the Highlands and Islands). I would arrange to visit the school to meet with the teachers most involved in the project (or a parent if that was the case) and then discuss how I would review the work they had done by doing some discussion and assessment procedures with the children. Mostly, the teachers were happy with this but there was a sense that I was discussing the children's teacher 'in front' of him or her, which may have effected the process. I did employ procedures to ensure children's anonymity, however.

First, the children were invited to review and understand the ladder I adapted from Hart (1992, 1998) has used to describe children's participation in environmental management and change. I have made adaptations to Hart's language to make it more easily understood by the children; I present my adapted format for the ladder in capital letters (below) which I displayed to the children on a large poster with a picture of a ladder superimposed on it.

8. Child initiated, with shared decisions with adults: children have the ideas and come to the adults for advice, discussion and support. LOTS OF SAY, WELL-INFORMED, SHARED DECISIONS ALL THE WAY & CHILDREN DECIDED ON THE PROJECT IN THE BEGINNING AND THROUGHOUT THE DURATION OF THE PROJECT.

7. Child initiated and directed: adults are available but do not get involved at all. ALL THE SAY ALL THE WAY - adults are excluded from the project or adults fail or decide not to get involved.

6. Adult initiated, shared decisions with children: children are involved every step of the way. The children have a full understanding and are involved in all aspects of the project. INVITED, INFORMED, LOTS OF SAY ALL THE WAY - but the adults started the project.

5. Consulted and Informed: children are consulted but the project is designed and run by the adults. The consultation involves them in gaining a full understanding of the project.

CHILDREN ARE INVITED, INFORMED, THERE ARE SOME SHARED DECISIONS - but not all decisions are shared and the project is started by the adults.

4. Adults decide and run the project: The adults are the initiators in getting the project going. The children may get involved and may be allowed to continue to be involved but their presence is only incidental. They were *not invited to take part* however; children's views *may* well be respected but it is not a built-in feature of the project.

CHILDREN MAY HAVE SOME SAY, SOME CLUE, SOME CHOICE - but there was no invitation.

3. Tokenism: Children are asked to be involved but little or no account of their views is made. CHILDREN HAVE SOME (false) SAY, THEY MAY HAVE A GOOD CLUE and SOME (false) CHOICE.

2. Decoration: children take part but don't understand the issues. CHILDREN MAY HAVE SOME (*uninformed*) CHOICE PERHAPS but NO CLUE & NO SAY.

1. Manipulation: children do or say what they are told to but have no real understanding of the issues. THEY HAVE NO SAY; NO CLUE; NO CHOICE.

Next, the children were asked to discuss any misgivings they had about the ladder and how it might represent their participation. I encouraged discussion about this. I then asked the children to select a number that best represented their level of participation in the project we had in mind (for example, the installation of a pond, the painting of some murals) which were chosen the children or their teachers had claimed this was the project in which they had been involved in the most.

Then the children were requested to write the number down (with any additional comments of explanation they preferred) on a piece of paper which I collected and used to construct the charts that follow. If the class agreed, I would do a quick count of the single most popular response and discuss this with the teacher and the children separately.

Assessing Projects

I present the results hereunder for two classes who were involved in the installation of a pond in their school grounds. The results show that the majority of children seemed to feel

that they were participating at 'level six' according to Hart's ladder. This general finding was reflected in the many assessments I conducted of schools grounds projects with children; I only include a sample here:

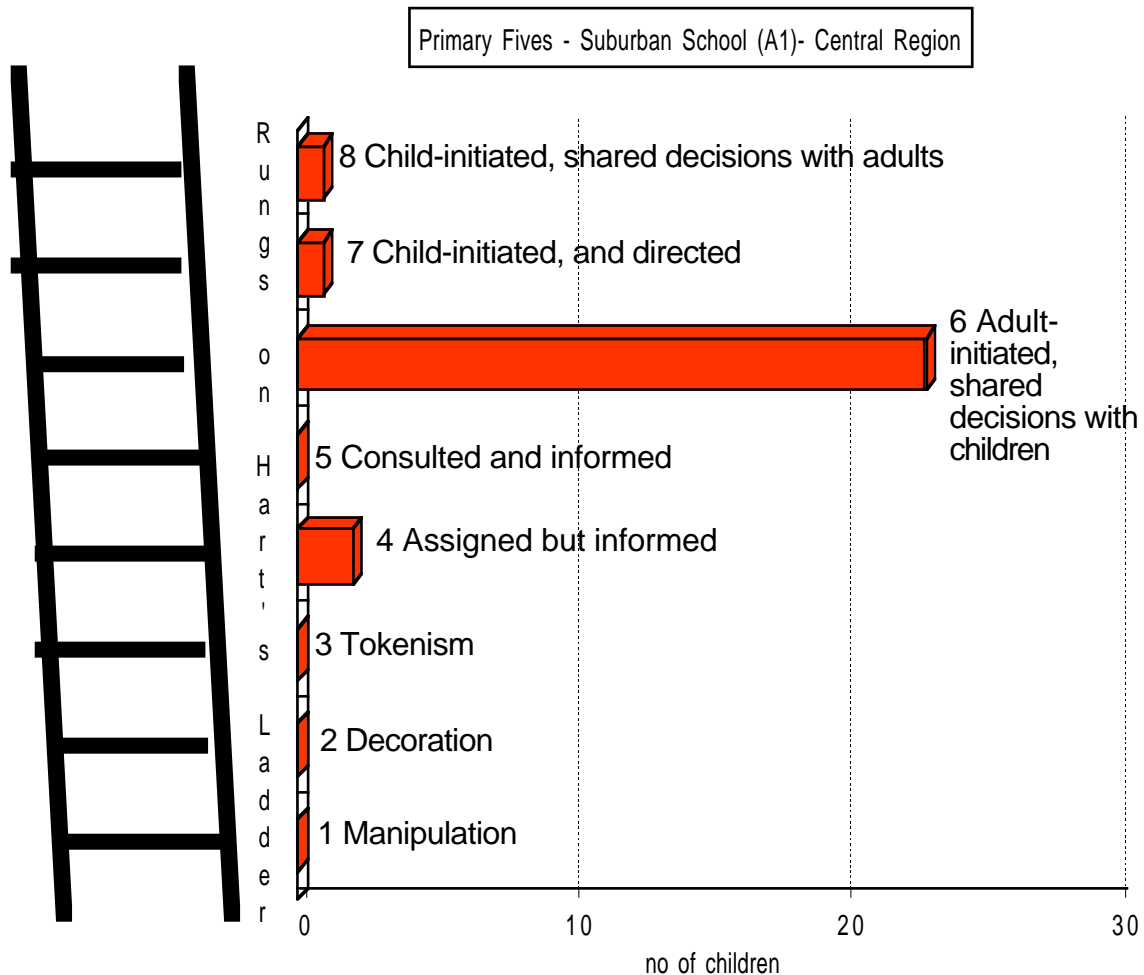


Fig. D.1. These children (n=30) selected the level of participation they felt represented the project as a whole from beginning to completion. This is a sample of the data collection technique that was used to collect empirical evidence about children's experience of participation. See also figs.D.2, D.5, & D.6.

We can notice that generally the children felt that the adults had initiated the project but that for the most part, the children felt that they had been involved at a fairly high level of participation in that they had been consulted all the way. Even though a few children felt that the ideas had been their own in initiating the project, mostly the view was that some adult had been the one to moot the idea first. Quite a few children felt that they had missed out on opportunities for being involved in some of the work-based aspects of projects and in

making decisions about the finer details; this seemed to be as a result of adults' desire to work within time and budgetary constraints, and their desire to avoid lengthy discussions with children because adults may have been working from taken-for-granted assumptions about children's capacity for agency in projects. In the example above, there was a consensus that the project was adult-directed but that the decisions had been largely shared with the children. My own experiences of having attempted to encourage participation gave me the impression that we excluded the children from decisions more than the children thought. Of course, within any one group of children there are likely to be very different opinions about the 'level of participation' that was present in the relations between adults and children as the following chart demonstrates:

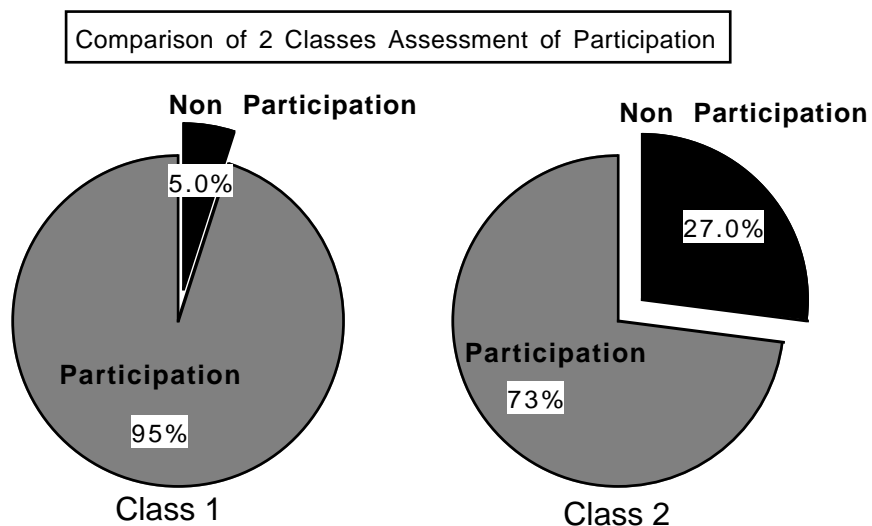


Fig. D.2. This pie Chart shows the differences between two classes when asked to assess their own levels of participation in a 'Seating area design project' that was facilitated by the author. In line with Hart (1997), children selecting levels 1 to 4 are regarded as having evaluated their level as 'Non Participation' while children selecting levels 5 to 8 are regarded as having some authentic level of participation. This schema for evaluation is drawn from my adaptation of Hart's interpretation of Arnstein's Ladder of Participation.

Fig. D.2 (above) shows how two classes of children, who worked on the same project, experienced participation quite differently. From having discussed the project in hindsight with these children I concluded that there was some dissatisfaction with the project from a participatory point of view in 'Class two'. The group in question had been suspicious about the project (having been invited to do this kind of thing before but nothing came of it). Their reticence throughout the project to 'be involved' is reflected here in their own assessment of their participation. Another explanation is that the class group selected lower levels of participation because the design chosen in the end was considered to be closer in form and intent to some of the design work the children had done in the other class.

Learning Versus Fun

To further evaluate my own work with the children I asked the same two classes to reflect on the aspects of the project they found the 'most fun' and 'from which they learned the most'.

THE DESIGNING AND CONSTRUCTION OF A 'PLACE FOR EATING' PROJECT

Each child was asked to vote for one aspect of the project that they 'learned the most from'. The aspects were derived from class discussions.

	Class 1	Class 2	Totals
1 Drawing and Designing (Indoors)	16	23	39
2 Physical Work	9	2	11
3 Planning and Refining the Plans (Outdoors)	2	0	2
4 Looking at the Photographs from other Projects	2	2	4
5 Talking with the Adults	1	2	3
6 Talking Among Yourselves (Groupwork)	0	1	1
7 Being Involved in Publicity (Newspapers)	0	0	0
TOTALS	30	30	60

Fig. D.3. Table showing the raw data of what the different classes 'learned the most from'. When asked to explain their selections (above) they came up with these comments:

Drawing and Designing

They felt these were good learning experiences because they were making the playground 'a better place'. The adults were seen as effective partners in the project in that they "weren't saying *You can't!*. They told you gently' [how your ideas were inappropriate or impractical. 'The adults didn't just snatch at you.'

They commented that the process helped them learn 'how to do design work'. One commented that 'You learn how to label your work properly'. [Design work involves more 'than just letting your imagination run wild' and that impediments like financial constraints effect design solutions. One child's comment also alluded to how the work required that they as pupils take up a different 'position' in how they approached knowledge: 'You don't just stay in the same position, you have a new role.' The project 'made you feel like a professional cos it might happen'. Another boy compared the work to his 'play design work' at home where he uses Lego.

Other comments reflected the fun element of the work: they 'liked designing' and 'colouring' and it was 'fun'.

Physical Work

The children explained how this component of the project was a useful learning experience in terms of the practical hands-on knowledge that they acquired: mixing cement, cementing in the slabs, learning how the wooden seats were attached to the brick piers. They also remarked about the social element of working with the adults. For another girl the talking with the adults was important too. She was one of the forefront players in negotiating the redesigning of the area while outdoors.

The Use of Photographs of Other Sites in the Design Work

Looking at the photographs was a key component for a couple of children. They remarked that they could make effective choices from looking at other ideas that had been implemented. They noted that the colour pictures did not depress them even though they realised their own playground did not contain many interesting features. The photographs were effective as inspirational rather than conducive to 'copying' in design work and were empowering rather than disempowering in how they perceived the potential for change in

their own environment.

Next, I collate the responses from children from a number of schools who were asked to detail which aspects of the projectwork they found most enjoyable ('most fun') and from which they learned the most. I collate this information in fig. D.4 (below). Through participatory discussions with the children, we divided the projects up into broad categories: design work (drawing and designing mainly indoors), any work with adults (teachers, parents, others), group work (not involving adults) and any outdoor or physical work aspects of the project. When asked to rate which aspects they enjoyed the most they rated almost equally the 'Outdoor' and 'Drawing and Designing' components. So, while we can see how the children seemed to enjoy the drawing and designing aspects of the work, that when it came to children's accounting for their own learning they acknowledged that their contact with the adults in the project development was where the most learning took place, second only to the outdoor physical aspects of the work. When taken together: the fact that outdoor physical work was usually done in the company of adults, we can surmise that these events amounted to forms of proximal zones of development (Vygotsky). Seen culturally, they amounted to sites for cultural interchange between the adults and the child's world: the site of learning is the playground (the child's world with all the attendant meanings and local knowledges) - the inputs are also from the adult's world (extra layers of local knowledge, and meaning are brought by the adults about how to mix cement, the need for habitat restoration, the needs of newts in ponds). Yet another interpretation could draw on the metaphor of colonisation of the child's world and territory by adults ideas - the appropriation of the child's ludic space for discourses of rationality.

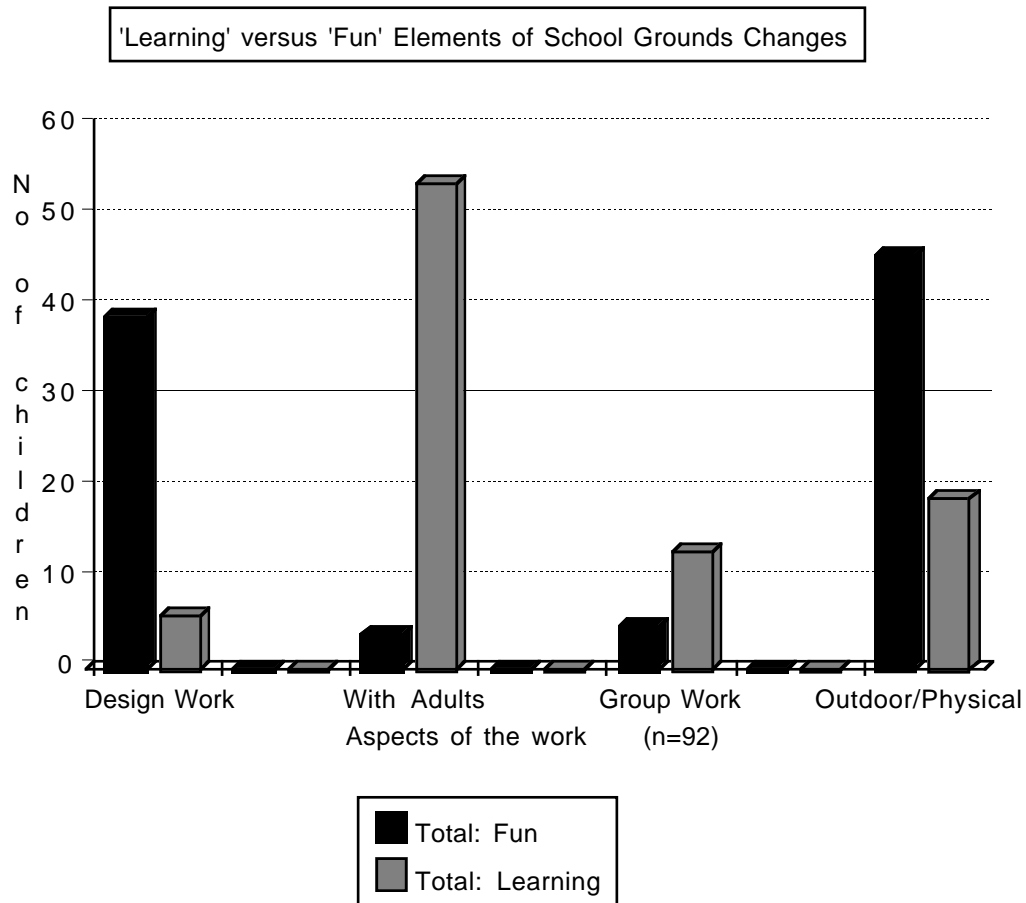


Fig. D.4. Here the totals are cumulated for some 92 children from five schools who assessed their participation in approximately 12 different school grounds projects.

Model making, drawing and using colour to illustrate designs turned out to be popular with many. 'Getting messy and muddy' was a really fun aspect of the work for most if the project involved such activities. Working with adults included the contact time the children had with outsiders as well as with their teacher depending on what kind of project it was. Visiting adults like rangers, schools grounds officers, and landscape architects all seemed to act as funnels for a 'world of reality' that contributed to the children's own accounts of their learning. They learned about soil types, habitats for newts, what types of play equipment were regarded as 'safe', about local geology etc. Depending on the visiting adult involved, the 'curriculum' surrounding what the children learned was distinctly different. When committees were in operation, children reported learning about decision making and about letter writing. The children also reported learning about recycling, keeping things free of litter, and other environmentally sensitive issues when the teacher involved set out to

make these learning events for the children. We must be careful here to realise that there were probably many more aspects of the projects that were learning events for the children where 'learning' was 'caught rather than taught'. Asking children about what they learn in a school context seemed to preclude discussions about the children's learning about local activism (if their parents were involved) or opportunities for active citizenship for children in changing their locales which is itself indicative of an absence of 'talk' about such 'learning' by the adults involved in schools grounds changes.

Small Rural Schools

Perhaps it is worth noting that the schools I ended up visiting tended to be small rural primaries where the stories of children's participation were most effusively told and were evident to me on visits I made. (I discuss the phenomenon of the child as participant in local change in small rural settings in Chapter 15, main volume in more detail). Next I present a subset of the statistical evidence on participation selected for the five small rural primary schools I visited and studied in more depth. The findings show a marked inclusion of more selections of 'Eight' and 'Seven' from my adaptation of the ladder.

In this school the children's own initiatives included the construction of dens and huts and the installation and maintenance of pathways in the grounds. While they assessed their participation as child-directed and 'exclusive' of adults, one child also discussed how the adult-child distinction did not hold for her as a child in the school.

Fig. D.5. (below) was an example of a 'Seven' project that was not mentioned within the context of schools grounds changes in other schools I visited. In this same school there were also quite a number of examples of projects that were evaluated at level 'Eight' by the majority of the children. The number of children in upper end of this two teacher school was about ten. The size and rurality of the school have to be significant factors in throwing up results such as these that indicate a collegiality between children and adults. Another main factor has to be that the head teacher is a keen environmentalist, actively encouraging the children to start off initiatives themselves and to become aware of the need to recycle their waste, dispose of their litter, and minimise their use of paper.

A Small Rural Primary School 4 - Small Rural Central - Dens and Path Building; Digging

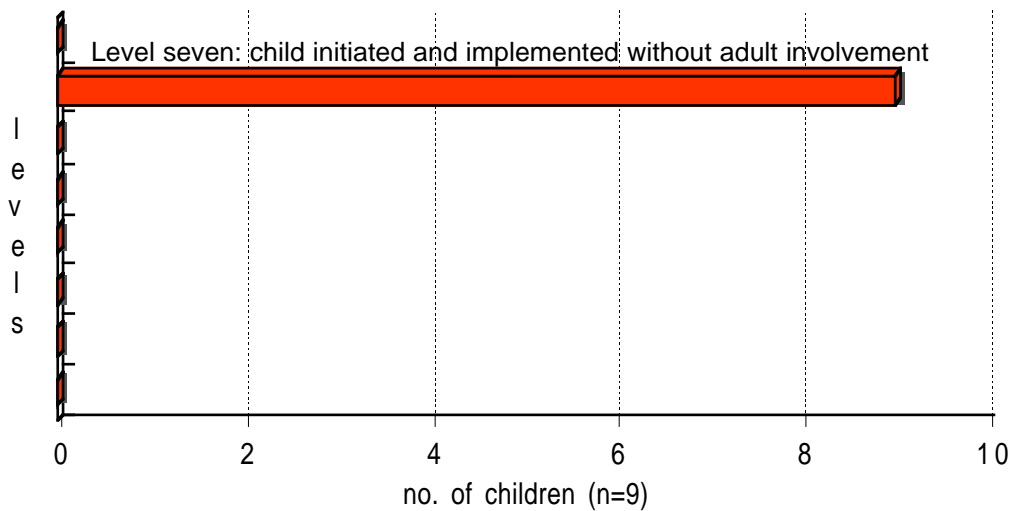


Fig. D.5. In this small rural primary school I encouraged the children to evaluate their schools grounds projects. In this school the children regarded their 'own work' carried out independently of adults to be part of the schools grounds development. Their activities (path building etc) went on with the teacher's knowledge but the work was not directed by the teacher in any substantial way. What is interesting here is that the children could categorise their own work in the school grounds as a valid piece of grounds development and assessed it as such.

Next, I present cumulative responses from the rural primaries I visited where the total number of children on roll tended to be no more than eighty. Significant here is the greater spread of results in a more normalised curve when compared to single project assessments. But even in rural schools adult-directed projects (level six) seem to be the norm.

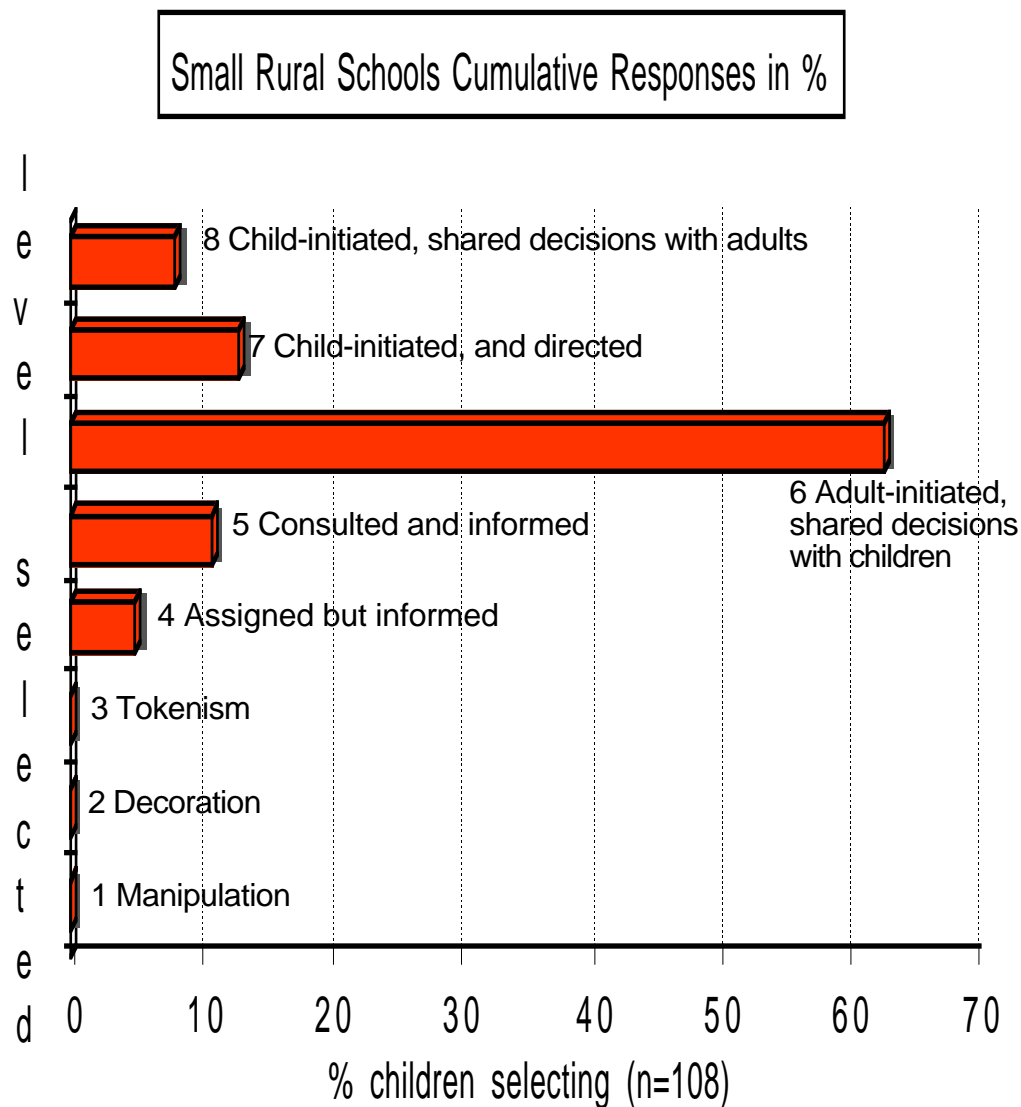


Fig. D.6. This chart shows the levels selected for projects completed in six different small rural primary schools by some 100 children. Most noticeable is the spread of scores which includes selections made in levels seven and eight. This can be seen as indicative of a more collegial atmosphere in these schools between adults and children when compared to results from other schools of different sizes and location (see Fig. D. 1, p6). Yet even in these schools, where participation was regarded by specialists in school grounds changes as being examples of ‘best practice’, level six still seems to be the dominant level of participation as experienced by the children.

Some Findings from Assessing Participation

1. Children find it fun to work physically on schools grounds projects in a ‘hands-on’ way. They also enjoyed the planning and design aspects of projects that were not ‘simulations’ of the design process.
2. Children attested to their participation in schools grounds projects as learning

experiences and especially remarked on the processes that involved their collaboration in activities with adults: teachers, outsiders.

3. Schools that can organise the learning experience in schools grounds projects so that children's 'own knowledge' (own culture) gets validated as relevant in its own right or contextualised in new ways by adults will find that those involved will experience participation at a greater variety of 'levels' (Hart 1992).

4. Level six (on Hart's reconceptualisation of Arnstein's ladder of participation) seems to best describe the kinds of participation experienced by children in Scottish primary schools for cases (categorised as 'best practice' by those who were familiar with the popular cultural movement to change school grounds). This level: 'Adult initiated, shared decisions with children' seems to be indicative of an adult-led participatory culture of change of outdoor school environments.

5. Within any one group of children, different levels of participation will be experienced even within one project initiative.