

#3 ENSURING CHILDREN'S AGENCY IN SCHOOL

By Luca László, 2022

This card provides tools for practical questions like

- How can I ensure children's agency in school?
- How can I support parents to respect their child's agency?
- How can I ensure all children are able to participate in decision-making regardless of their socio-economical background?

What is child agency?

Agency means that individuals, in particular children, may choose their way of acting, thus contributing to the construction of their social and cultural context. As per the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 12 and 13, children have the right to express their opinion, and they also have the right to be heard. They have the right to freedom of expression, and it also includes the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.

Why is it important to allow children to participate in decision making at school and at home?

The role of school in children's life is so much more than just providing academic knowledge. School is a place where children can develop and practice social skills, where they can explore their interests, learn about the ways society works, learn how to learn with the guidance of professional educators. Skills and concepts like critical thinking, decision making, the consequences of a decision, democracy, cannot be taught in theory, they need to be learnt through practice and error. If children are allowed and supported to exercise these rights

from an early age, they will be much more confident in them as they grow older.

If children are included in the decision making for their own environment, they will feel ownership and will adhere to the rules much more. This is a skill even 2-year-olds are able to do.

How do children know what is best for them?

It is difficult to let go of complete control. Professional educators and parents often make decisions for the children with the intention of keeping them safe, protecting them from harm and the negative consequences of bad decisions. While these intentions are noble, they don't allow children to learn and to make their own mistakes when the stakes are low by school leaders creating the ultimate safe environment for trial and error, and thus leave young people unprepared when they turn adults and there isn't anyone making decisions for them anymore. The role of adults is to involve and facilitate, to give them tools, help them consider options or point of views they have not thought about, make sure that everyone is heard. Children are one of the many stakeholders in school, and their input should be considered equally important as the other stakeholders' opinions.

How can school heads ensure children's agency in school?

School heads first need to acknowledge the benefits of collaborative decision making. Collaborative decision making can help the group focus their intent so it is not so much about winning the argument, but about finding the best solution. When this happens it builds trust and buy-in, which is a crucial element of strong and healthy group dynamics. School heads then need

to make sure the regulations in place allow this to happen, and everyone is aware of their rights and duties. Professional educators (teachers and/or the school head) need to identify age-appropriate processes for children to express their opinions and practice their decision-making rights. Hart's Ladder of participation is a great tool to monitor decision making practices, and to check if they are truly participatory.

How can school heads ensure all children are able to participate in decision-making regardless of their socio-economical background?

It is important to know the background of the children in your school. Their family, their social status and their heritage have a lot of impact on how they view hierarchy, what values they respect, and how comfortable they are with making decisions and facing the consequences. In order to make sure that every child is equally able to express their opinion and to participate, you, as a school head need to be aware of these differences, and adjust the tools to accommodate them. It is essential to have a respectful and trustful relationship with parents too, so that children are not trapped between clashing values and practices.

Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation

Children have the ideas, set up the project, and invite adults to join them in making decisions.

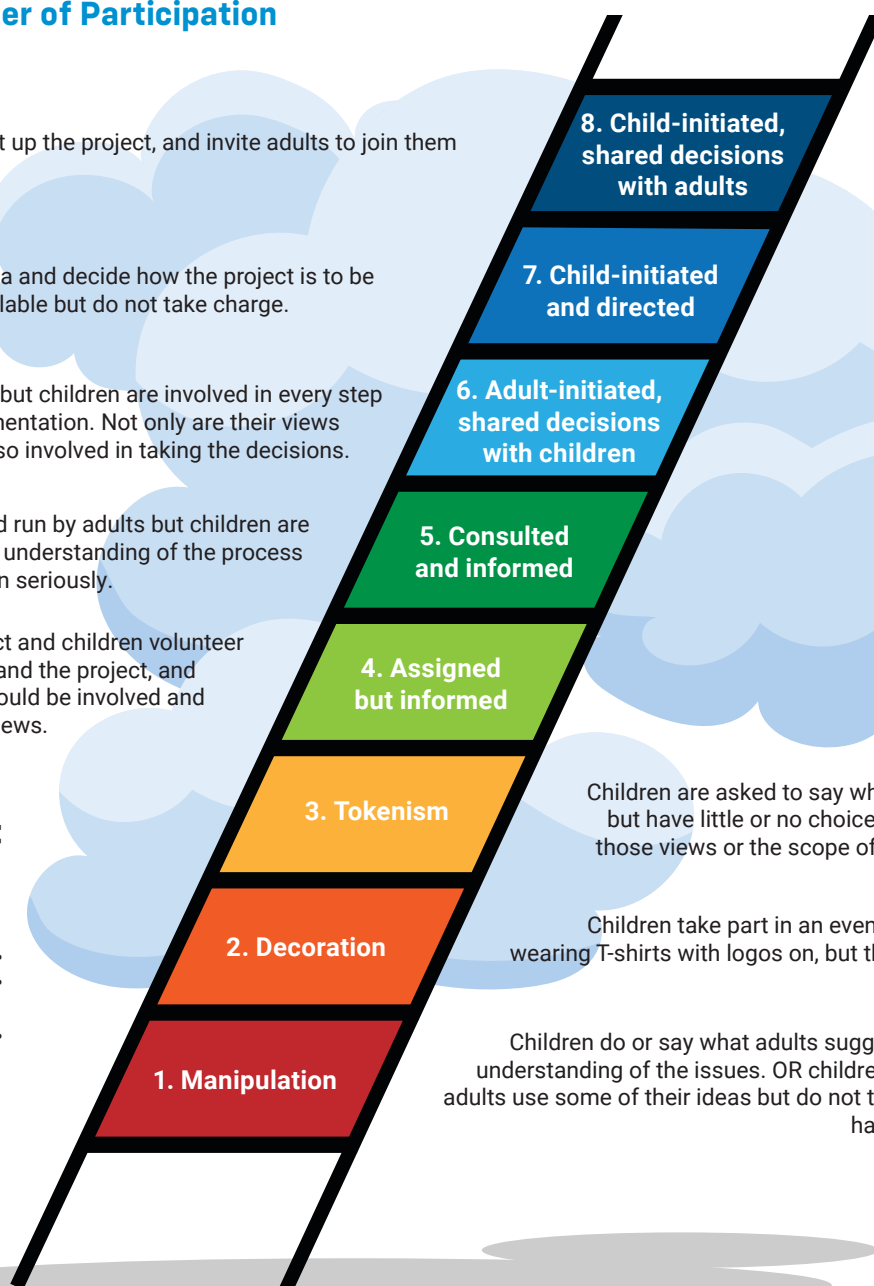
Children have the initial idea and decide how the project is to be carried out. Adults are available but do not take charge.

Adults have the initial idea but children are involved in every step of the planning and implementation. Not only are their views considered, but they are also involved in taking the decisions.

The project is designed and run by adults but children are consulted. They have a full understanding of the process and their opinions are taken seriously.

Adults decide on the project and children volunteer for it. The children understand the project, and know who decided they should be involved and why. Adults respect their views.

Non-participation



For further information check out ESHA's Children's Agency Toolkit | esha.org/childrens-agency-toolkit