Children’s Participation in Educational Projects and Sustainable Design – Comparing the UK and Nicaraguan Contexts: An Interview with Harry Shier, 17th January 2009

Andrea Wheeler
Schools of Education and Built Environment, University of Nottingham

Born in Belfast, Ireland, in 1954, Harry Shier lived and worked in England for 25 years, initially on adventure playgrounds, then in training adults working with children out of school. In 1981 he founded Playtrain, an independent training agency specialising in children’s rights, play and creativity. In the 1990s he worked and wrote extensively on children’s rights and participation, most notably developing the “Article 31 Children’s Consultancy Scheme”, which enables young children to act as specialist consultants to the senior management of diverse cultural institutions, helping them make facilities and programmes more child-friendly. This experience was crystallised in his 2001 paper Pathways to Participation, which has become one of the most important conceptual models of children’s participation in decision-making, widely used in many parts of the world.

In 2001 he moved to Nicaragua, Central America, where he works in community education, supporting local colleagues developing new education programmes with children and young workers on the region’s coffee plantations. In November 2002 he was attacked and badly beaten by local delinquents in his new hometown of Matagalpa. Left for dead in a pool of blood by the roadside, he was found, barely alive, the next morning and rushed to hospital. He made an almost complete recovery and, against professional advice, returned to Matagalpa to continue his work. Nicaragua is now his permanent home.

From September 2007 to March 2008 he held a Practitioner Fellowship at the University of the West of England, researching concepts of children and young people’s participation in Nicaragua and the UK. An extensive list of Shier’s papers including links to online resources are included in the appendix to this interview transcript.

***
Andrea Wheeler: I’ve been working with children from an architect’s point of view. Getting them to design their school and telling me what they think about sustainability. My project is about whether you can encourage children to learn about environmental issues through design. I think it is a really good way and it can encourage them to care more about the environment. So can I ask you some very direct and simple questions for a start? Do you think architects should consult children? There’s a lot of policy out there that says you should, and must, but I’m getting to the stage of thinking is it even worthwhile, because how well can architects ever listen? Architects are doing what they should do in consulting children now, but what is the benefit? Is anything transformative actually coming out of it? When, in fact, participation could potentially be quite a transforming process.

Harry Shier: You’ve hit the nail on the head as far as I’m concerned. The bit about specifics of architecture and design is one issue, but the general issue you’ve raised, “Why bother if nobody takes it seriously?” is crucial. I live and work in Nicaragua, but in the last year I’ve become reconnected with the field here in the UK, and talked to a lot of people working in the field in both countries, and this is a real issue. People are writing and publishing articles questioning whether it’s rhetoric or reality, and there’s at least one that’s called that (Graham et al., 2006; Driskell et al., 2001; Freeman et al., 2003). It is about exactly this idea that there is all this rhetoric about children’s participation, but what is the reality? It’s hard to find good evidence of how this process works in terms of policy influence. I come from a children’s rights focus, so it’s the children’s right to have a say and the children’s right to have their opinions given due weight in decisions that affect their lives (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12). For me, the design of any buildings that children use involves decisions that directly affect their lives, so if the design process doesn’t include their participation it violates this right.

Being in a school will have a huge affect on children’s lives. So by right, under the Convention on the Rights of the Child – of which the UK Government is a State Party – that implies it’s a right that all children in Britain have (I understand that the UK Government is now prepared to waive its reservation saying that children who are asylum seekers and refugees weren’t covered, so now all children in the UK have that right). So that’s the starting point. In Nicaragua we’re very conscious that rights are valuable and have to be defended, and if you want them to be defended you have to make an effort to demand that they are. So that’s the starting point, and where you see adults engaged in tokenistic exercises like having a focus group with children around the design of new schools because it’s a requirement that they have to tick for their grant, or to get a contract, or whatever, and they have no intention of doing anything about it, that’s a violation of children’s rights. So if you put it in that way, you then have to ask who has a duty