

Collaborative dialogue between children, school and community

An essential part of the Shape Up strategy is the creation of opportunities for *contact and communication* between the children and youth involved in the project and the *universe of human resources* available locally and beyond. These forms of *collaborative dialogue* can and should occur in all phases of the project and can contribute useful information, technical and organisational skills and the political acumen and strategies essential to render the children's participation and actions most effective. The Shape Up promoting group should play an essential part in facilitating the identification and fruitful collaboration of local experts and "resource people" pre-emptively and as the need arises, as the children's visions and plans for action begin to take form.

The presence in the Shape Up promoting group of actors from various municipal departments contributes, in real time, to the effective distribution of information, knowledge and resources that serve to assist the progress of the children's projects. In addition, a continuing dialogue between municipal departments and schools / children can serve as a reality check: often serving to identify opportunities and resources, in the city's annual or longer term budgets and programmes, for carrying out the children's action projects.

About children's participation with the Shape Up promoting group

- Remember that Shape Up emphasises the dialogue between children and adults;
- The Shape Up promoting group symbolises this dialogue;
- Children should and can effectively contribute to this dialogue;
- Children and youth should **be represented** in and **interact with** the Shape Up promoting group;
- The selection process is carried out in collaboration with the children through the participating schools or other existing bodies such as youth councils.

We do not expect that children, on their own, will (or should) possess all of the knowledge and capacities essential for producing operationally effective action projects, even if the activities that will have been carried out up to this point will have certainly improved their proficiency and action capacities. It is the local facilitator's task (together with the promoting group) to provide the children with all possible sources and forms of *technical and inspirational assistance* throughout the various phases of the project. As deemed necessary, teachers or facilitators in previous participation projects have called upon experts from different fields and for various purposes.



Some examples of how to promote teamwork between school and its settings:

- Students or teachers from schools of architecture in the vicinity have contributed specific know-how in many urban design proposals formulated by the children;
- Municipal engineers and traffic specialists have familiarised the children with official planning documents and regulations connected to the children's schemes for "traffic calming" in the school vicinity;
- Botanists or ecologists from environmental associations or the regional parks services or relevant city offices have aided in the selection of plants and soil analysis in school vegetable garden projects;
- Local health professionals have supplied knowledge and enthusiasm in the development of innovative schemes for the healthy lifestyles imagined by children;
- Local chefs and food industries have contributed to proposals that young people have developed for more healthy and convivial lunchrooms.

It should be made clear, however, that not all experts need to be professionals. In many cases, local residents have been found to possess useful knowledge and skills for the children's purposes. For example:

- Elderly artisans have, at times, contributed useful information concerning construction details such as woodworking, pavement layout and stone wall construction (and have sometimes demonstrated superior knowledge of those environmentally-friendly site components and traditional agricultural practices that conventional construction firms and younger artisans have forgotten about);
- Local "farmers" (at times, the children's grandparents) have often collaborated in defining details of garden plots, tree planting or shrubbery layout;
- Parents and grandparents have contributed recipes and culinary know-how to child-designed healthy cookbooks or healthy / convivial eating events.

The collaboration of families has sometimes spontaneously served to introduce a European dimension to local projects. For example, in Italy, we at ABCittà have noted just how often children and their families have contributed interesting stories and photographs of innovative environmentally-friendly parks, piazzas and residential streets which they have collected during holidays in other European cities and towns. In the Shape Up project, these opportunities are strategically planned. Through the portal, *networking* is made possible with other groups of children (and communities) who live in "healthier cities" or who have contributed to neighbourhood improvement plans, and innovative health projects are promoted. These exchanges can offer a considerable motivational and operational impulse for the children and for their local community.

Case study

Experts can learn from children too

In 1982, I was carrying out an interesting local participation project with elementary and middle school children in a poor, isolated neighbourhood in Brooklyn, New York. The aim of the project was to open a forum and create opportunities for introducing children and teenagers' ideas on the future of their neighbourhood into the official city planning process. At that time, we had not yet grasped the fundamental necessity for the creation of an interdepartmental and community-based group of adults (experts and amateurs) to accompany any children's participation process (as is now the case with the Shape Up project).

After several months of child-led community investigation and dialogue and through many imaginative, creative sessions with the children using a vast array of multimedia tools, the children were ready to share their research and their ideas and proposals for the future with the city authorities. The liaison planning officer for the neighbourhood was called in for a preliminary meeting. The children presented an in-progress slide tape entitled "The Future of Red Hook: as we want it", and their numerous drawings, plans, surveys and photographic studies completely covered the walls of the senior citizens centre that hosted the meeting.

As we well know, children do not live in departments and, as such, their ideas tend to be global, treating all issues from multiple perspectives. Thus, their ideas for the future of the neighbourhood went well beyond the exclusive issues of physical planning. This fact initially placed the young planner in a difficult position.

Tamara, who is 12 years old, opened the discussion.

"We have a lot of ideas about our neighbourhood. First off, street crime and drug use is a big problem. The first day, we went out to study the neighbourhood, and a gang, some "druggies", ripped off our camera and tape recorder. We have a lot of proposals about that."

"Wait a minute", interrupted the planner, "that's not my department's area. I would suggest we call in the police department."

Jamal continued: *"Like then, talking to our parents and older brothers and sisters, we got the idea that a lot of what's happening, the bad stuff around here, has to do with work, man. I mean NO WORK. You know, unemployment."*

Getting a little more nervous, Ms Morese, the planner, intervened again.

"Hold on; that's outside my office, too. I can put you in contact with the human resources department. What do you say?"

"Hey", interrupted little Michael, "what about the cookie factory that we designed and the farmland, with sheep and cows, we want to lay out along the waterfront?" (He just LOVED those two elements in their project!).

“A little closer to my field, but I think it would be better to have some colleagues here from the parks and economic development departments.” She was really getting nervous at this point.

Sharleen, a mature 12-year-old and the group's natural mediator and pacifier, then stood up and took the floor. She changed gears.

“Ms Morese, ma’am, where do you live? In what neighbourhood? Do you have any children yourself? Do your children LIKE THEIR NEIGHBOURHOOD?”

The young woman sat down at that point and the children moved their seats up closer to her, in a semi-circle. The planner, from then on, *became a person*, a mother, a community resident and activist, as well as a planner, and she told the children, *from her heart*, how her neighbourhood, which was just up the hill from Red Hook, where the children lived, had turned itself around from a problem area, resolving many of the departmental problems that the children had previously mentioned. They talked together about community organising, how numerous departments and local actors were brought together and how she, as a person and a planner, had contributed to some of the improvements.

In the months that followed, the young planner helped the children and the school to meet with other colleagues and departments, often together. She, like Michael, became personally (and professionally) very attached to the urban farm idea.

Twenty years later, I read that the neighbourhood had improved, not in all the ways envisioned by the children, but that a lot of problems still exist. A local school now manages an urban farm, which produces tasty, natural vegetables for schools and newly opened restaurants in the neighbourhood. Amazingly, there is a city-renowned cookie bakery in Red Hook. I doubt that it was in the official city plan, but I do wonder whether “little Michael” might be the baker.

If not, he is most certainly a regular customer.

One useful way of involving 'experts' is to spend at least one lesson before their visit, asking pupils what they want to ask the visitor, deciding:

- who will ask the questions?
- who will record the answers
- who will thank the visitor?

Also let the children reflect on whether the contact will stop after one visit or if there should be a follow-up.

- who is responsible for this?