



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.