

CHAPTER 4

by Jonathan Levy

DEMOCRACY BEGINS WITH CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

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*An educator who does not enforce but sets free,
Does not drag but uplifts,
Does not crush but shapes,
Does not dictate but instructs
Does not demand but requests,
Will experience truly inspired moments with the child.*
(Janusz Korczak)

*How we treat children determines whether
they will grow up to create a just society.*
(Jonathan Levy)

ABSTRACT

The paper presents the educational philosophy on which the Children as Actors for Transforming Society (CATS) initiative is based, in addition to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Key CATS principles include provision, protection and participation. Key elements of CATS are: co-construction between children and adults, children's rights, and transformative pedagogy. Participants in the annual conferences since 2013 have come from around 50 countries in several continents. The impacts of the CATS events have been extensively evaluated. The evaluations indicate that the activities have supported a community of practice with communication tools and competences; fostered cross-sector partnerships; and advocated to mainstream children's participation. CATS has been internationally recognized as an exemplar of good practice in children's participation globally.

Keywords: democracy; rights of the child; participation; pedagogical philosophy; living laboratory

INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2014, the Executive Director of UNICEF stated that as many as 15 million children are caught up in violent conflicts in Africa, the Middle East and Ukraine. This includes those who have been displaced in their own countries as well as those living as refugees outside their homelands. An estimated 230 million children live in countries affected by armed conflicts.

As an educationalist, my whole adult life has been centred on children. This has taught me that the key issues with which the world is grappling come back to universal values of humanity. These issues include injustice, corruption, undemocratic processes, lack of trust and integrity, conflict and power struggles, racism, cultural intolerance and discrimination. They are important, but they are the symptoms of something deeper, which touches on our relationship to our fellow humans.

Participation is the building block of democracy. It creates active citizens and thriving civil societies. It can hold governments to account and challenge corruption and undemocratic practices. Where do we teach people that their input is a valuable resource?

Our relationship with humanity starts in the womb. Then we are born. During our formative years, we build our understanding of society, first in the family, then at school and through recreational opportunities and our encounters with health centres and social welfare. We learn from our elders' behavior. We observe whether we are respected or humiliated, whether we are protected, under-protected or over-protected, whether our opinions are taken seriously. We see whether we are enabled to find our unique place in civil society, whether we are thought of as true competent partners when democratic consultations and decisions take place. These elements will determine our way of understanding our world and its complexities. They will decide whether we acquire a critical consciousness which allows us to make informed decisions so as to transform ourselves and our society for the better.

PARTICIPATION MATTERS!

Participation empowers children in their diverse situations to make decisions about the primary issues that affect their lives (growing, learning, loving) and the lives of others and the environment. It is essential for children and young people to develop their own capacities and skills to participate fully in their communities and society.

However, for most children, being heard and respected and having the opportunity to play a meaningful role in issues which affect them is not an option. There is much to be done to mainstream children's participation to ensure that all children are able to realize their right to be heard and have their viewpoints respected. Implementing this right involves a profound and radical change in the status of children in most societies and the nature of relationships between adults and children.

Many thinkers, from Jean-Jacques Rousseau onwards, have pointed out that an upbringing which does not respect the values of democracy (such as choice, decision-making and individual opinions) will not produce a just society. These fundamental elements are nothing more than the rights that we universally promised to the world's children 28 years ago through the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

We need to be part of the ongoing struggle to ensure that children can achieve true self awareness despite the tendency of educational systems to stick labels on them, that children should feel a sense of self worth and that what they say has value, so that they can go forward with self confidence. The CATS (Children as Actors for Transforming Society) series of conferences was created in 2013 and run annually in Caux, Switzerland in order to unite children and adults in a *mission* to foster each child's unique potential, for this to unfold and flourish within the context of the particular community and society in which that child lives.

Through our engagement in this mission, we are reviving certain pedagogical currents that have been relegated to the margins of mainstream pedagogy. The historical milestone – a hundred years ago – of what was then called the Great War sparked off widespread shock and horror at its atrocities, accompanied by a fervent wish that children be spared any recurrence and that they could

instead enjoy a positive future. A greater emphasis on what we now call 'well-being' – and how to achieve this through learning and pedagogy – meant that in the 1920s people listened with more attention than before to what thinkers like Janusz Korczak, Maria Montessori, John Dewey, Celestin Freinet, Ovide Decroly, Rudolph Steiner and many more had to say.

And what were they saying? In their different ways, these pedagogues put forward ideas that continue to resonate today – that every child is a person in his or her own right, that participatory democracy is founded on the recognition of this fact, that education must address the wholeness of a child rather than concentrate on developing only the child's mental faculties... and much more. While the word 'well-being' was not used, an idea was recognizably present that the desired outcome of education was the feeling of 'being well' as a whole person. These ideas can be traced back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau at the time of the European Enlightenment. Rousseau published *Emile* in 1762, in the same year that his book *The Social Contract* was published. *Emile* challenged the medieval concept that children were unfinished beings who needed to be corrected, and Rousseau argued instead that children were fully formed persons and that childhood should be recognized as a specific state of being. Both books prepared the way for the French Revolution with their political and pedagogical arguments for democracy and their demonstration that education and democracy were mutually interdependent. However, Voltaire's scathing critique of both books prevailed, and later Napoleon was to move education and pedagogy in France towards standardization and away from the recognition of difference that Rousseau urged – and this was one reason why reformers such as Froebel and Pestalozzi found it difficult to engage with the educational system in France.

Arguments for standardization continue to dominate debates on education today, as many of us know from personal and professional experience. We can draw on each other's ideas and perceptions for cross-fertilization, in the same way that notable pedagogues did a century ago. We can in fact share ideas on the same geographical as well as pedagogical terrain. Major seminars and conferences were held in Europe in the period between the two World Wars, and some pedagogues in whose footsteps we follow met for several weeks at a time. One of these people was A.S. Neill from Britain who established the unconventional school Summerhill (that continues to resist regulation and to describe itself as the oldest children's democracy in the world). Both Rousseau and Pestalozzi were born in what is now Switzerland. When you pass through Geneva to or from Caux, you can consult the archives at the UNESCO office that houses the correspondence between many pedagogues – exchanges between the social reform movement in pedagogy (which influenced the thinking behind children's rights), the more clinical pedagogical movement (influenced by developments in the social sciences and in medicine) and the spiritual movement. In the 1920s and 1930s, not only did such pedagogues receive a much wider hearing than had been the case earlier, but they engaged more with each other rather than working in parallel, as before.

THE VISION OF CHILDREN AS ACTORS FOR TRANSFORMING SOCIETY (CATS)

Since the first CATS Global Forum in 2013, the vision has been to create a world where children and adults are working together in mutual respect towards a more just, inclusive and sustainable society where all can realize their fundamental human rights and fulfil their unique potential.

CATS aims to provide a space for children and young people to engage and exchange perspectives with adults: to enrich, challenge, and expand their respective understanding and knowledge; and to create the potential for meaningful partnerships and participation. It is a rich, dynamic, experiential, inclusive and fun program co-designed, co-led and co-evaluated by children and adults.

Every year at CATS, we endeavor to show what children's participation looks like, and how children and adults can work together as equal and competent partners. Even if this is for the limited period of one week, we hope that both children and adults will take something away with them as they journey back down the mountain to their daily contexts (diverse as these are, since CATS draws participants from several continents and around 50 countries are represented). As CATS is advancing, its community of participants is growing. Each year brings in new participants in addition to some returners. The number of participants has varied from 222 to 362. The age of the participants vary because they may be parents with their children, young people from various organisations with their supervisors, or people working with children or youth. You can apply to participate in a CATS conference via the website www.catsprogramme.org.

CATS fully embodies a belief in children's rights, and is living homage to Janusz Korczak, the twentieth century pedagogue who was the parent of the children's rights movement and who integrated pedagogical relationships with children's rights. A pediatrician as well as a children's author and an educator, Korczak set up two orphanages for street children in Warsaw at the beginning of the twentieth century. These orphanages were his CATS, a microcosm of what the world might look like if children were granted active citizenship. Korczak anticipated the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child including the three Ps embodied therein, namely Provision, Protection and Participation, and he built the third P on the first two. (How can you participate in learning if you are not provided for, if for example your stomach aches with hunger or you live and learn in an unprotected environment where fear is the dominant emotion?) Although classified as orphanages, Korczak's institutions did not provide children off the street with charity. Instead he gave them dignity – through justice, respect, participation, dialogue and reflection – *justice* through the children's courts, *respect* by taking children seriously and listening to them, *participation* through consultation and shared decision making, *dialogue* in the sense of Socratic exchange as opposed to adult monologues and *reflection* through the encouragement of decent and democratic behavior (for example, the use of a letter box for angry exchanges between children, with a twenty four hour period of reflection as part of the mediation process).

KEY PRINCIPLES AND RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CATS STRATEGY

To quote from the CATS strategy document:

Globally we are at a critical juncture, with growing environmental, economic, and political challenges. Working in partnership with children and young people is essential if we are to find solutions to these challenges and create more just, sustainable, inclusive, and equitable societies. Participation is the building block of democracy. Globally, it is the means to create active citizens & thriving civil societies – the foundations for dynamic communities and economies; hold governments to account, and where necessary challenge corruption and undemocratic practices.

It has become important to unpack these statements from the original strategic document to understand how CATS contributes to these goals through its unique approach, not only for the global event, but also to inform the development of a program; regional forums, and trainings.

Figure 1 presents a diagram to highlight the key points and relations.

The top triangle represents the cause and mission of CATS. This comes about through the active application of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and is a holistic and iterative process between the three main categories of the rights of the child:

- **Provision:** Children have the right to an adequate standard of living, health care, education, and services, and to play. These include a balanced diet, a warm bed to sleep in, and access to schooling.
- **Protection:** Children have the right to protection from abuse, neglect, exploitation, and discrimination. This includes the right to safe places for children to play; constructive child rearing behavior, and acknowledgment of the evolving capacities of children.
- **Participation:** Children have the right to participate in communities and have programs and services for themselves. This includes children's involvement in libraries and community programs, youth voice activities, and involving children as decision-makers.

Prior to the convention, the emphasis on children's rights was on provision and protection through social reform. This led to international treaties. These reforms were adult led and although well intentioned, they tended to see the child as someone with needs and who required protection.

The 1989 convention not only expanded on the issues of provision and protection but included the rights of participation. The step change was that the child was now seen as a subject, with his/her own vision and contribution and not as an object. This vision, largely inspired by the early pioneering work of Janusz Korczak and others, represents a cultural revolution in how we relate to the child in all sectors of society.

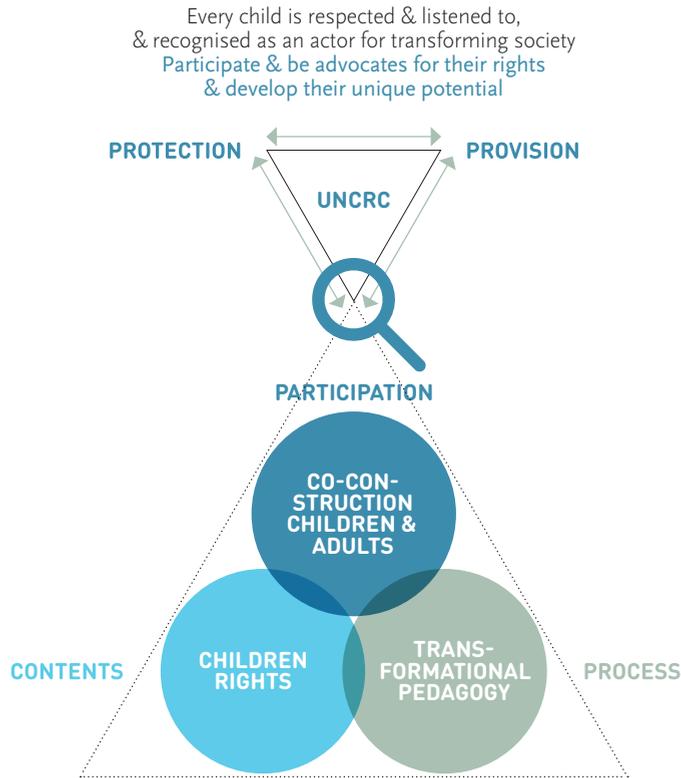


Figure 1: Key principles and relationships in the CATS strategy

CATS promotes and enables children to engage in an iterative process between the 3 Ps. In other words, the vision is that the empowering of children through participation leads to improved and transformed protection and creates better and vital provision. And thereby children become actors in the transformation of society. Also, participation is enabled by creating a safe and protected environment where everyone is respected, taken seriously and feels valued. Similarly, having good provision (physical and human) also has a positive consequence in that it liberates children to participate.

These three key categories of children's rights are all too often treated separately in our society with specialized teams and professions dealing with them, which can detract from the systemic dynamic for the efficient application of the UNCRC.

The bottom triangle shows the key elements and their interactions which are the unique and necessary ingredients of any CATS events/actions.

The key elements are: having clear information and messages on the issues of children's rights led by key actors who not only have knowledge but also experience (across different age groups) and combining this with approaches of transformational pedagogy led by experts in experiential learning methods. It is the overlap between the process and contents together with the key

element of co-constructing and co-delivery between adults and children that creates this desired experience for applying it to the cause of the upper triangle. This means that on the one hand the contents providers need to adapt to the process and the process providers need to adapt to the contents of CATS.

IMPACTS OF CATS

Extensive evaluations to assess the quality of the CATS experience have been carried out so that it can live up to the intention of being a living laboratory of collaboration between children and adults. The evaluation report (Children as Actors for Transforming Society: CATS Impact 2013–2016) assesses whether the CATS conferences have met the four goals of CATS:

- **Goal A:** Supporting a community of practice with communication, tools and competence
- **Goal B:** Foster cross-sector partnerships
- **Goal C:** Advocate the mainstreaming of children's participation
- **Goal D:** CATS is internationally recognized as an exemplar of good practice with regard to children's participation

The evaluation shows that CATS is not only a forum where people spend a week sharing their experiences, ideas and objectives but it is also a living platform where participants can develop their competences and learn new skills and tools. Several national initiatives have been inspired by CATS, such as CATS type activities in France, Israel, and Canada; changing training methods in the Bulgarian Internet Centre; and using activities from CATS as work methods in Uganda. A group of children and young people has gone to Brussels to meet with members of the European Parliament and European Commission officials. In 2016, the European Parliament Intergroup on Children's Rights committed to encourage MEPs to engage directly with children more often and more effectively.

One of the achievements of CATS has been to bring together participants not only of different ages and from different countries but also families and delegations; representatives of international organizations and local ones; schools and NGOs, etc. In a world that functions too much in silos, this experience of meeting and working with such diversity over a week has been enriching.

Although the legal framework for children's rights and children's participation exists, the reality of seeing it applied in everyday life is not very common. CATS aims to spread the practice wider into society so that it becomes a natural process in all sectors, levels, and spaces. As participants leave CATS, they become ambassadors of mainstreaming the practice. Participants realise how children can be active in their own lives and participate in all kinds of tasks, and that their voice matters.

The annual CATS event looks beyond Europe's borders, and in similar ways Paulo Freire in Brazil took Korczak's critical and transformative pedagogy further in the second half of the twentieth century. Freire's ideas bolster CATS

in encouraging children not only to claim their rights but to use those rights to transform society. Freire's books go beyond the pedagogy of the oppressed to the pedagogy of faith and of hope. The autonomy and agency that CATS lists among its aspirations for children resonate with Freire's emphasis on self-determination and empowerment as the goals of learning, rather than on the acquisition of skills.

George Orwell said: "each generation imagines itself to be more intelligent than the one that went before it, and wiser than the one that comes after it."

Really... Well maybe we need to change this.

BIOGRAPHY

Jonathan Levy is the scientific and international development director of Children as Actors for Transforming Society (CATS). He is a bi-cultural teacher trainer and trainer of child professionals. He is British born and educated in pedagogy and the philosophy of education, and has lived and worked in France for 36 years. He provides training in the education, social, Intergovernmental and NGO sectors. He is employed as the pedagogical and education specialist for the French NGO Initiatives of Change, and is the initiator of the CATS conferences. He is a consultant for both UNESCO & UNICEF in pedagogy and children's rights. He is the Vice President of the International Janusz Korczak Association. Contact: jonathanlevy@wanadoo.fr