

“Empowerment” of Children and Adolescents: What is it, how does it occur, and what is the adult supporter’s role? Finding answers in the experience of young people organising with CESESMA in Nicaragua

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Introduction

“Empowerment” has been claimed as one of the important benefits of children’s participation (Kellett, 2010; White and Choudhury, 2010). This is an attractive and plausible idea, but there is no consensus among those working in this field on what the term means, and currently no way to validate such claims.

CESESMA, a children’s rights organisation in Nicaragua, developed a conceptualisation of empowerment as a process which links three essential factors: capacity, conditions/opportunities, and attitude/self-belief (CESESMA/UNN, 2010; Shier et al., 2014). This paper describes a qualitative research study undertaken in August 2017 with adolescents who had experienced such processes of empowerment, the aim of which was to contribute to a fuller understanding of the nature of empowerment and how it occurs; and how adult supporters and facilitators of child and adolescent participation can most effectively contribute to such processes.

This paper has six sections. Following this introduction, key references in the literature are noted, though space precludes a full literature review. The third section is a summary of CESESMA’s concept of empowerment, followed by sections on the methodology, then the findings of the research. The concluding section notes the implications for those who seek to facilitate processes with children and adolescents that may help them to become empowered.

“Empowerment” in the literature

The concept of “empowerment” is found in diverse literatures. It came to prominence in feminist/women’s studies literature (Riger, 1984; Kabeer, 1999; Collins, 2002), and has since found a significant place in the fields of international development (Narayan, 2005;; Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007; Samman and Santos, 2009; Hennink et al., 2012), health promotion (Wallerstein, 2006; Tengland, 2012; Christens, 2013; Spencer, 2013), community development and industrial psychology (Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995; Arneson and Ekberg, 2006; Miguel et al., 2015).

Though its use is widespread, there is no consensus on how to define empowerment, much less how to measure or demonstrate it. In the development literature it has been described as a “buzz-word”:

Words that once spoke of politics and power have come to be reconfigured in the service of today’s one-size-fits-all development recipes, spun into an apoliticised form that everyone can agree with... Nice-sounding words are, after all, there for the taking, and the nicer they sound, the more useful they are for those seeking to establish their moral authority. (Cornwall and Brock, 2005, p. 1043-1044)

The Word “*empowerment*” is also found abundantly in literature on children’s studies and children’s rights studies, where, as noted above, it has been claimed as one of the important benefits of children’s participation. However, as Kim (2015) points out:

Claims that children conducting research themselves empowers them may have been made without sufficiently thorough conceptualisations of what such empowerment involves and how it happens. Such claims and assumptions also need to be more firmly based on empirical evidence. (p. 237)

CESESMA’s version of Empowerment

CESESMA is a Nicaraguan NGO that supports rural children and adolescents, particularly those who work on the region’s coffee plantations, in promoting and defending their human rights (Shier, 2010, 2016). CESESMA’s model of empowerment emerged as the product of a

2009 research project in partnership with the University of the North of Nicaragua,
“Children and young people as active citizens influencing public policy in Nicaragua”
(CESESMA/UNN, 2010; Shier et al., 2014).

CESESMA believes that empowerment should be seen as a process which links three essential factors: capability, conditions/opportunities, and attitude; as shown in the diagram in Figure 1. CESESMA sums up the diagram as follows:

In order to be ‘empowered’ a boy or girl must be in conditions where they can have an influence, must have the knowledge and abilities required in order to have an influence and, above all, must feel themselves capable of having an influence. (CESESMA/UNN, 2010: p. 44; translated from Spanish in Shier, 2015: p. 213).

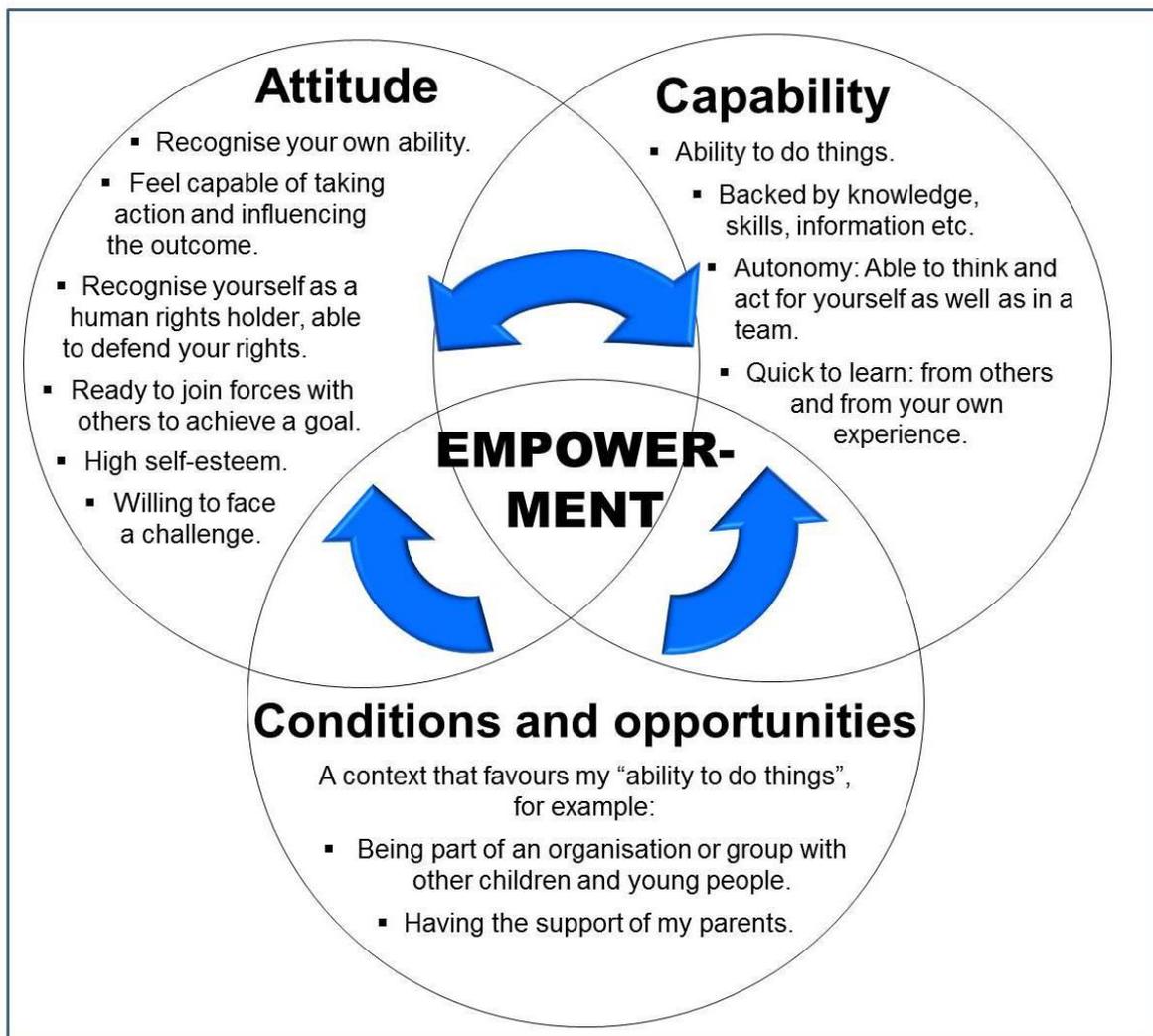


Figure 1: The CESESMA model of Empowerment
(CESESMA/UNN, 2010: p. 44; translated from Spanish in Shier, 2015: p. 213)

Research methods

Research ethics

As this research was not university-sponsored, but carried out under the auspices of the Nicaraguan host organisation, CESESMA, the research proposal was ethically assessed and authorised under CESESMA's locally developed child protection guidelines (CESESMA 2012),

which are founded on the international guidelines in Keeping Children Safe (2011). No ethical concerns were identified.

Sampling

In order to gain a deeper understanding of “empowerment” as something experienced by children and adolescents, a decision was made to focus this research on adolescents, as we wanted to learn from them about processes over time that had led to them becoming empowered, stretching back to their childhood, but better reflected upon from their perspective as adolescents. The participants, therefore, were 42 young people (17 girls and 25 boys) aged from 13 to 20. They were selected purposively as young people already known to CESESMA as being actively engaged in the range of community activities that CESESMA was supporting in their communities.

Data collection

The selected young people were invited to participate in a sequence of three engagements. To start the process CESESMA facilitated three focus groups where they were invited to share and discuss their experiences of influencing others in their community; they also gave written accounts of these experiences. As part of these focus groups they undertook a poster-drawing activity, where they worked in small groups to depict in words and pictures how they would characterise adolescents who have power to influence decisions (such as themselves) and those who do not (see examples in Figure 2).

people's written testimonies and the posters they had drawn. This technique (which the CESESMA team had not used before) was seen as offering a user-friendly way of exploring the data, but not as a substitute for a fully-coded thematic analysis.

A sub-group of the original participant group (18 participants) then met to hear about and further discuss the initial findings, thus providing an additional level of participant validation. The word-clouds were found to be particularly useful for giving feedback at this stage and engaging the participants in further discussion on how to interpret the initial data.

In addition, CESESMA held a "Panel of Experts" event, where eight young people who were recognised as effective activists in their communities gave personal testimony before an invited audience of adults and young people, followed by questions and discussion. The report of this event was used to triangulate and further validate the findings from the focus groups.

Findings

The thematic analysis confirmed that the young people's testimonies and visual conceptualisations of "empowerment", based on their own experience, offered both a good fit with the original model, and also a number of new insights into what was important in each of the three circles, and the relationship between them.

First circle: Capability and Knowledge: Although *knowledge* was mentioned, and clearly valued, participants gave greater prominence to the skills and capacities that they needed in order to influence others in their communities. As well as those that were expected, such as participation, communication, expressing opinions, and learning from experience, there were repeated references to *negotiation* as a skill necessary for empowerment, and particularly its use *within the family*, for example to win over unsupportive parents. Many participants spoke about the process of becoming *promotores* or *promotoras*, and exercising the corresponding skills of "promotoría". This is hard to translate, but refers to young people who organise out-of-school learning groups with younger children in their communities, and through this take on a leadership role that often leads to their active

engagement in different aspects of community development (Shier, 2010; 2014). Instances of *promotoría* referred to in the young people's testimonies included: prevention of violence; promotion of children's reading; work with young men on alternative masculinities; work with young women on women's rights and equality; raising sensitive issues through community theatre (such as domestic violence, alcoholism); agro-ecology; supporting community members to report rights violations; community appraisal and needs analysis; lobbying and political demands; communications and using the media; and sharing these experiences with other groups and communities.

Second circle: Conditions and opportunities: As expected, the central role of the supporting organisation, CESESMA, was highlighted. For these young people, it was CESESMA that supported them in the process of becoming *promotores/as*, gave them access to learning experiences through workshops and courses, gave them a first experience of being organised and active in their communities and, importantly, provided the transport, meeting places, subsistence and other practical resources to make all this possible. Equally important, however, was the condition of having the support and approval of one's family, particularly one's father and mother. Some spoke movingly of the challenges they had faced when they started to get involved in community education without their parents' support; but also recounted how they eventually won this support, and saw this as a major milestone on their own road to empowerment.

Third circle: Attitudes and sense of self: Elements of empowerment belonging to this circle included: self-esteem; self-confidence; sense of security in oneself; recognising oneself as a rights-holder; attitude of "Yes I can"; inner strength to confront and overcome obstacles; willingness, commitment; "Love for what I do" and the desire to share it with others; and setting an example to others.

Conclusions

These findings support and validate the existing CESESMA model of empowerment, and also generate a deeper understanding of how young people themselves experience processes

leading to empowerment. This in turn helps us to reappraise the role of the adult supporter/facilitator.

If empowerment requires processes where all three circles are engaged with simultaneously, how can this be achieved? For adults who work in the area of child and adolescent participation, facilitating the acquisition of knowledge and skills is the relatively straightforward part (Lundy and McEvoy, 2012). Establishing conditions and creating opportunities are also aspects of empowerment that adult supporters and facilitators can help with, both directly and indirectly (Shier, 2008; Wyness, 2009; Percy-Smith, 2015). Considering the examples above, CESESMA acted directly to provide workshops and courses, and to provide the logistical support and resources required to facilitate the young people's continuing engagement. The other important condition, however, was the support of parents, and here CESESMA helped indirectly. CESESMA staff commonly visited the homes of young *promotores/as* to talk to doubtful or concerned parents and help win them round to supporting what their sons – and particularly their daughters – were doing in the community.

Considering the third circle, however, where young people talk about self-esteem, self-belief, self-confidence, motivation, critical thinking, initiative, perseverance and solidarity; these are personal qualities that must take shape within the person (Sharp, 2014). This process can be supported but cannot be directed. Thus, adults can do much of what is required in order for empowerment to occur in children and adolescents, but not all of it. Essentially, we cannot empower them.

Whilst this can be seen as a validation of CESESMA's ideas about empowerment, this research perhaps offers more questions than answers. One area to be followed up in future work is our understanding of the role of the adult supporter or facilitator. It is suggested here that an important component of empowerment comes from within the person; meaning that adult supporters, despite their best intentions, cannot hope to directly deliver "empowerment" to children and adolescents. What kinds of actions, behaviours or

approaches on the part of adults, then, are most effective in opening the way to empowerment?

Another set of questions relate to the possibility of a universal concept of empowerment, that would permit comparison across cultures and continents. This would be of practical use to international agencies like UNICEF, who have struggled to establish universal indicators for adolescent participation (UNICEF, 2016; Azzopardi et al., 2017). How far is the Latin American conceptualisation of “empowerment” described here universalisable? Will the same concept work across diverse cultures, for example in Ireland? Could it be a possible starting point for the development and testing of a universal, globally valid concept of child and adolescent empowerment?

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