

## Ladder of participation – a tool for evaluating young people's involvement to library services, actions and plans

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### Abstract:

*The ladder of participation is an evaluation tool for children or young people participation. It has been used mainly within environmental and infrastructural development, community planning and youth work. The model was invented and developed by Roger Hart and already earlier Sherry R. Arnstein. Arnstein's model focuses on citizen empowerment in general, Hart's model is a tool for recognizing young people's participation.*

*Libraries can use the ladders to view existing or planned activities and measure them against the tool. Simple visual appearance of the tool makes it easy, appealing and attracting to use both in evaluation and proactive planning. The simple image of ladder inspires to start a conversation within the library. The ladder act as a support base for ideas and a tool for developing processes together with children and youth in area, community and library.*

**Keywords:** young people, participation, involvement, evaluation, planning, library services

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### 1 WHAT is participation, involvement?

“[Participation is) the process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives” (Roger Hart)

### 2 WHY involve young people?

It is written in national youth legislation, national library strategies, international guidelines and recommendations

*UN convention of the rights of the child §12:* children have the right to be heard and taken seriously

*IFLA guidelines for young adults:* “The library fosters youth development by providing opportunities for young adults to participate in planning and implementing library programs and services for themselves”

*Finnish Youth Law §8:* Young people must be given opportunities to participate in local and regional youth work and youth policy issues. In addition, young people must be consulted in matters affecting them.

*Finnish public library quality recommendations (Ministry of Culture):*

- \* User-orientation is at the heart of development in libraries.
- \* Services are developed from the customer's perspective, jointly with customers.
- \* Services for young people have been developed in cooperation with youth work services and young people.

On a grass root level: youth are the best experts on issues related to their life, culture, values and expectations.

Participating youth in local community provides mutual knowledge, information and higher level of satisfaction and makes the daily interaction easier and more rewarding. Importance of cooperation with adults working in youth related organizations is also vital.

### **3 WHEN** youth participation is needed?

- \* very effective when being proactive, preventing problems
- \* developing something new, renovating spaces, building new libraries
- \* during changes but also maintaining the good present state
- \* using youth as tools for communication and PR, bush radio is the best marketing channel

It is something that has to be done again and again, as youth are a renewable nature resource. Just when you get things working well with one age group, they grow up and you start again.

### **4 HOW** to get them participating?

Sorry, not giving the examples of ways to involve youth, you already know at least some of them. Questions, surveys, panels, theme days, online feed back, polls, workshops... one-time, continuous...

The most important thing is the measures to be strategically and operationally thought over. One important part of the process is evaluation, and here's one tool for it.

### **5 WHAT THEN?**

Ladders of participation is one tool of evaluating your library's level of involving and participating young people.

[IMAGE OF THE LADDER]

The ladder of participation is used mainly within environmental and infrastructural development, community planning and youth work. The model was invented and developed

by Roger Hart and already earlier Sherry R. Arnstein. Arnstein's model focuses on citizen empowerment in general, Hart's model is a tool for recognizing young people's participation.

Libraries can use the ladders to view existing or planned activities and measure them against the tool. Simple visual appearance of the tool makes it easy, appealing and attracting to use both in evaluation and proactive planning. The simple image of ladders inspires to start a conversation within the library. The ladders act as a support base for ideas and a tool for developing processes together with children and youth in area, community and library.

First three ladders are degrees of non-participation.

*Manipulation* – young people have no real possibilities to affect on issues concerning to them. Feedback is collected from ready made plans and activities. Or ideas/feedback is collected but the youngsters don't know why, and they are not informed how it's going to be used.

Library programs, campaigns and promotions are being planned by adult librarians. Youth are part of activities only as users.

*Decoration* – "Children are undoubtedly the most photographed and the least listened to members of society" Making a new brochure of your library, wouldn't it be tempting to use photos of laughing children in the cover? Even though the kids may have nothing to do with the issue in the brochure.

*Tokenism* – youth are used for cute appearance and comments, for example taking part of a panel and not being enough prepared. False "voice of the youth".

Further ladders are deepening degrees of participation. The meaning is not to try to achieve the highest steps constantly, but it is good to be aware of different degrees.

*Assigned but informed* – For example young people are informed about actions concerning them (eg. renovation of the youth department) beforehand and adults ask for feedback and ideas. Although the renovation plans are already ready, so the opinions of young people don't make much difference.

*Consulted and informed* – During the early planning stage, young people are consulted using different means of communication, surveys, polls etc. Their answers are taken into consideration fulfilling the plans. Compare with previous ladders.

*Adult-initiated partnership* – Adults initiate projects, campaigns or promotions, but it's young people who carry out the implementation. For example school class creates drama/puppetry/booktalk and perform it at library after mutual planning. School class is not only fulfilling adults wishes but also their own ideas and schemes.

Last two ladders, being *youth initiated and directed* and *youth initiated partnership with shared decisions with adults* happen more rarely than previous phases. Not because young people don't have initiative, but maybe more because in everyday library work adults don't have time and resources to listen to their ideas. The ladders can occur for example when young people, individual or group see a gap in activities or happenings. They contact adult

librarians about their idea. Adults accept the ideas and help young people realizing them. Adults facilitate only, young people carry out the planning and realizing the project.

Youth initiated and directed ladder could be a reading group or knitting club gathering in library without librarian knowing about it.

The difference between the final steps is at that the deepest degree young people ask adults to partner them, as in lower levels adults have asked the youth. Youth act total equals with adults when it comes to realizing and carrying out the idea. At final rung for example the already working book club would ask librarian for participating in their project as booktalker.

The ladder model is meant for opening the conversation in library about participating the young people. Not to judge or demean existing actions or plans. It is not necessary and not even possible to reach the highest rungs at every segment, but considering the youth library work a entirety it is worth thinking, re-thinking and maybe changing some actions.

## **6 BY WHO, sources**

Arnstein, Sherry R. "A Ladder of Citizen Participation"  
<http://lithgow-schmidt.dk/sherry-arnstein/ladder-of-citizen-participation.html>, originally published in JAIP, Vol. 35, No. 4, July 1969

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Hart, Roger A.: "Children's Participation: From tokenism to citizenship". UNICEF International Child Development Centre (now Innocenti Research Centre): Florence, 1999

"Quality recommendations for public libraries". Publications of the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture 2011:35

UN Convention of the Rights of the Child  
<http://www.coe.int/t/dg3/children/participation/CRC-C-GC-12.pdf>

For further reading

An interesting survey on children's participation in Finland, including not only the results but also practical advice how to work on children focus groups, interviews etc. methods

[http://www.coe.int/t/dg3/children/participation/PolicyReview\\_en.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg3/children/participation/PolicyReview_en.pdf)