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A NOTE ON DIALOGUES WITH CHILDREN

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Two Swedish journalists, Lisa Berg and Annika Holm, recently produced a book När Jag Blir Stor* (When I Grow Up) where 21 children age 10-13 report on their views of the future. They were interviewed by the authors in a very dialogical fashion, then the interviews were transcribed by the authors.

What comes out of such experiments, what can children possibly know about the future when even the experts fails - - -.

Today one would probably have to go at least 10 years back to find a majority seriously believing more in experts than in children when it comes to knowledge about the future. But the reason for this is mainly negative: experts have failed so miserably, since children are different from experts - and even in a sense the opposite of experts - where experts fail they should succeed, almost by definition. Of course, it is not like that. But the book very clearly shows three major differences between children and experts, indicating how important it is to have children participate in the dialogical process of any society.

First, children are much closer to the fundamental values, to justice, equality, security, ecological balance than are adults. Children are expressing themselves in values rather than in facts. In a sense they turn the adult-logic upside down: among children there is probably higher level of consensus about values than about facts, whereas adults seem to believe that facts can serve as a basis for consensus, but not values - thereby dissociating themselves from fundamental evaluations and from discussion about fundamental evaluations. The result is the coolness of the expert, not the spontaneity expressed by children.

Second, children proceed directly to the most important problems, guided by the interviewing process, but also guiding that process. They see extremely clearly a future and in negative terms: their images of year 2000 are honest, clear. War, poverty, exploitation, pollution and depletion - unemployment - all of these

* Gidlunds, 1979, Reproduced here is the postscript to the book.

stand out clearly, they are not overshadowed by words that could soften their impact.

Third, it looks as if children are thinking and also express themselves in a more holistic way than are adults. They do not think in sectors and segments, they see society as a totality, and they also reject what they see. They do not yet talk in terms of such adult categories as capitalism and communism, nor is it important for them to defend a theoretical position they have grown into. But they have an underlying scheme, only they do not have the intellectual technique to bring it out in the open. They do see things as hanging together, and much of their pessimism seems to stem exactly from this: it all looks like one great conspiracy, to them, by adults.

However, the question is what happens to them later, when they become adults. For we are not used to meeting people who talk in terms of values, in a very rejecting and negative manner, thinking and expressing themselves holistically. Everybody will know some people like that, everybody will be like that sometimes, but often they are seen as fanatic/dogmatic, and these are not complementary terms. So, what has happened in the meantime?

First of all, they have been through a schooling system which is a school of facts more than a school of values. Facts are learnt and to some extent discussed, values are perhaps to some extent taught, but rarely discussed. In an incredible reductionist process the whole field of ethics and morality in many parts of the world seems to be reduced to the morals of sexuality, marriage and family, particularly the former. A detailed discussion of societal and personal goals is extremely rare, and when it takes place is usually primitive, unguided by training and tools of various kinds. Hence, when adults talk less in terms of values, it is not because values are childlike, but because adults do not have competence, and are expected to be competent in what they do. Hence, they will prefer to drop the theme.

Second, adults have lived longer, they have invested more of their time in society. The older they are the higher

is the proportion of their lives lived in the past, the shorter the proportion to be lived in the future. In a sense future will, as they proceed through the life-cycle, matter less; to the children it is of overwhelming significance. To the children, hence, the negative aspects of the future loom large - to the adults they are slightly less important. They have started giving up already, and they also have a vested interest in the society as it is, having contributed their share to it. To this may be added that children perhaps are more sensitive, more like artists with antenna probing the future, reflecting and reporting on what they sense.

Third, these children are going to find their place in social life, they are going to have a job, a niche from which they will try to comprehend society around them. But the more they grow into that niche the more will they lose their holistic visions, and the more will they develop segmented images of society. They will see one segment of big society rather than the totality of the small society that children can come to grips with relatively easily, at a relatively early age. The result are people fragmented away from each other, with a sectorial outlook on the world - precisely the type of people elites need in order to rule.

In short, there are many arguments for having children participate in this process, among other reasons in order to awaken in adults the child that still may be left, that has not as yet been successfully killed.