

‘You need our eyes to see us’: Exploring children’s solidarity mindset and performance in a museum context

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Summary Solidarity is a multifaceted concept often influenced by personal narratives and cultural contexts. In some cases, it can be distorted by superficial displays, as seen in ‘solidarity-washing’ prevalent in various sectors. Breaking free from this cycle necessitates a fresh perspective. Museums and children offer a unique avenue. A pilot initiative, conducted by the Museum of Communication of Bern in collaboration with Cultural Inquiry, reveals that the minds of children, and in particular those from migrant backgrounds, can offer genuine insights into authentic solidarity. Through the innovative ‘Children’s Board’ methodology, children’s unfiltered thoughts and actions illuminate a path towards a sincerity-based, children-centric approach to solidarity, emphasizing radical vulnerability and genuine care.

Keywords solidarity, children-centred approach, museum, cultural participation, co-creation, social sustainability

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There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes “What the hell is water?”

– David Foster Wallace

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.

– John Donne

To be solidary in turbulent times

What does it mean to be in solidarity today? What kind of role models do we find in media and social media? If we look at some recent cases, not everything that is apparently 'sold' as supportive is.

In 2022, Sam Bankman-Fried, founder of cryptocurrency exchange FTX in 2019, entered the 30 under 30 Forbes list.¹ He defined himself as an 'effective altruist', a kind of crypto-qualified Robin Hood with a social conscience.² He shared the good news that everyone could get rich by following his net wealth path of \$26.5 billion. Today Bankman-Fried is facing a litany of charges ranging from bribing a foreign government to money laundering and making unlawful political contributions. The list of promising youth who intended to change the world for the better doesn't end with Bankman-Fried and reflects how some people in competitive environments conceive of solidarity or even use the concept altruism to further their own personal social or financial success.

Moving away from this context and such stories we see presented in media, what happens if we change the context, for example to a museum? And change the actors, for example to children,³ and migrant and refugee children in particular? Will they behave differently from how Bankman-Fried did? How will they practise solidarity in the museum? This is the starting hypothesis that has given rise to the pilot project being carried out in collaboration with the Museum of Communication Bern by building a Children's Board to address this issue. In this paper I will share some of the ideas behind the methodology and some initial reflections.

Different modes/moods of solidarity

To paraphrase Marshall Berman's well known title, we live in times when All That is Solid Melts into Air,⁴ including, of course, solidarity. Technological developments and the generative artificial intelligence disruption are changing ways we relate, interact and engage with one another in society. Is solidarity becoming a somewhat outdated and outmoded concept? Not in the experiences I shared with children during the Children's Boards projects. But, more about that later.

First, to help further contextualise the project, it helps to explore the semantics of the word *solidarity*, crossing three different approaches. One approach is canonical, the second is ChatGPT, and the third is a child-centred definition.

The Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines *solidarity* as 'unity (as of a group or class) that produces or is based on community of interests, objectives, and standards'.⁵ Etymologically, it derives from the French, *solidarité*, and from Latin, *solidum*, or whole sum.

Our next source of meaning comes from generative artificial intelligence. ChatGPT defined solidarity as:

A term used to describe a sense of unity or common purpose amongst a group of people who share a common interest, goal, or identity. It is characterised by mutual support, cooperation, and a willingness to work together to achieve a common objective. Solidarity can be expressed through various forms of collective action, such as political mobilisation, community organising, or social movements. It is often seen as a crucial component of social justice and is frequently associated with concepts such as empathy, compassion, and mutual aid. Solidarity can be based on shared experiences of oppression or marginalization, but it can also be built through acts of empathy and understanding across lines of difference. Ultimately, solidarity is about recognizing and valuing the interdependence of all people and working together to create a more just and equitable society.⁶

When we asked ChatGPT what solidarity is to a six-year-old girl, the answer was:

To a six-year-old girl, solidarity can be understood as a feeling of togetherness and support for others. It can mean being kind and helpful to friends and family, sharing toys or snacks, and showing empathy and understanding when someone is upset.⁷

Solidarity for a six-year-old can also mean standing up for what is right and fair, even if it is not popular or easy. For example, if a friend is being excluded from a game, a six-year-old might choose to include them and make them feel welcome.

Overall, solidarity can be seen as a way to promote kindness, inclusivity, and cooperation amongst children. It teaches them to care for and support others, and to work together to create a positive and harmonious community.

When we asked the same question to a real six-year-old girl, who here we will call Noemi, the answer is: 'I don't know. Can you explain it to me, Mom?'. When her mother explained the concept, the input grew in her mind until it

was time to put it into practice. At a train station, a man approached the two of them asking for some money. The mother did not respond to the request and at that moment the spark in Noemi's mind arose: Why didn't her mother help the man? Didn't her mother explain to her that solidarity means helping those in need? If the man needed help, why not help him? Why not show solidarity with him?

Considerations such as 'What will this man do with the money we give him?' or 'Maybe he is cheating us and using it for something else' did not matter to Noemi. The only thing that mattered to Noemi was to be radically honest and consistent in what one thinks and says. It is this deep coherence between thoughts and actions when it comes to helping someone that defined solidarity for her. It is something internal, something that comes from within oneself and that does not need the validation or approval of anything or anyone 'out there'. In fact, when what is said to happen does not happen is when the problems begin. When one says they are 'are in solidarity' or 'show solidarity', but are not really acting in solidarity. The difference lies in what a child does not accept but an adult does. Noemi demanded a response to this contradiction from its internal meaning. Some psychologists call this phenomenon 'cognitive dissonance'. Children simply call it lying.

For Noemi solidarity was completely identifiable with acting consistently. When we asked the same question to older children, the concept became more complex and incorporated other elements such as emotions, power, or collective agreement. For another nine-year-old girl from a Montessori School in Vienna with a migration background, solidarity was something closer to emotions: 'It's a feeling that we are all together, no matter what. We are going to stand up for everyone who needs extra support.' Another eleven-year-old from the same school thought that 'this word means strength, like when more people work together, they have extra power.' And one fourteen-year-old conceived solidarity as something that 'saves the weakest people from suffering. It pulls them into the centre instead of leaving them on the outside. Solidarity is agreement. It is a force of positive energy. It tells people that we believe in them.'

If we compare these three kinds of definitions, we can observe similarities but also some remarkable differences that can drive us to a new territory of research. The pivotal question is whether children have their own way of understanding solidarity – a way based on internal coherence, radical honesty, and similarity between what is thought, said, and done. An approach with a kind of inner logic, which involved feelings or power dynamics in different ways. And if that is how it is, can we as adults learn from the child's way how to improve our own understanding of what it is to act in solidarity? Children are able to accept and even celebrate

their vulnerability, and this is a key factor to connect with others. Not only do they acknowledge their vulnerability but also show it in a completely open and honest way without fear of being judged or frowned upon by others. This is not something spontaneous. As some research⁸ has proven, it is internalised in some way, connecting 'the right thing' with their true nature.

This was the starting point for the 18-month Children's Board project at the Museum of Communication Bern that raises issues related to museum power structures and how to invite other voices to participate and be heard.

The Children's Board project at the Museum of Communication Bern

The title of this paper is taken from the project *You need our eyes to see us*, led by artists Emelihter Kihleng, Hinemoana Baker, and Radek Rudnicki dedicated to recovering stories of Oceania through objects.⁹ This phrase and sentiment echoes that of the Children's Board project.

The Museum of Communication Bern is specially committed to diversity, inclusion, and social sustainability issues as a part of their core strategy. The Museum of Communication in Bern's mission statement enshrines a museum policy that puts people at the centre of their work.¹⁰ The Diversity Strategy adopted by the museum in March 2022 is committed to broad and diverse participation and embracing social responsibility. Through their activities, the museum communicates their ethical stance and has an impact on society.¹¹ They are committed to continuous development from within, expressed in a conscious approach to diversity, participation, and innovation, uncovering blind spots, and gaining new perspectives through onsite research.

The project focusses on children with a migration background in particular. The project builds on previous projects in Bern such as *Multaka-MfK (2021-2022)* and *Moving Lives Move Institutions (Bewegte Leben bewegen Institutionen, 2022)*. In 2017, the association *Multaka Bern* began an educational project for refugees in co-operation with the *Bernisches Historisches Museum*. The project '*Multaka – Refugees present the museum*' is an integration offer in Bern, training people with refugee experience to become guides.¹² These guides lead tours of museums in Bern that encourage the shared exploration of themes such as migration and flight, culture, history, and shared cultural heritage. The objectives of the project are the cultural participation of refugees, their empowerment, as well as their integration and social participation by creating cross-cultural encounters and exchanges with the population of Bern.

In 2022, realising that it cannot guarantee sustainable formats for/with refugees with quickly conceived offers, the Museum of Communication Bern tested a co-creative project called *Moving Lives Move Institutions*. The museum worked with three museum guides who had migrated to Switzerland from Afghanistan, Tunisia, and Yemen between 2015 and 2016. Although the participants in this project were adults, some of the conclusions drawn from the process can be applied to further projects at the museum. Within the European cultural sector, there is increasing focus on democratic participation¹³ but the idea that everyone can equally contribute ideas and have opinions recognised often remains a utopia. By creating the right environment, applying certain methodologies and organising capacity building programmes at the museum, as well as adopting a collective strategic approach, everyone could have their say within the project. In *Moving Lives Move Institutions*, many communicative and cross-cultural challenges were also brought to light through trial and error. For example, the concept of community was understood differently and the extraordinary life situations of the participants also affected the process, the experiences and the impact on different participants.

In correlation with these previous projects, the Museum of Communication Bern wants to approach the children's visions of solidarity to show by empirical onsite research that they are not only a museum 'for as many as possible', but 'with as many as possible' to contribute to a more caring society. From this, they are seeking to answer some key questions such as:

- How can we delve into this approach in specific contexts such as cultural organisations?
- How do these organisations create and apply a very specific concept of solidarity?
- What does it mean to be in solidarity when working with them?
- How does this process affect their internal power structure?
- Can this structure be modified by other external conceptions such as that of a child?
- Will there be resistance?
- Where are the limits?
- Can processes of negotiation and pact be opened up?

For this purpose, we shall use a disruptive and well-tested Children's Board work methodology.¹⁴ The Children's Board methodology places children's way of seeing at the centre of the power structure of the museum, giving them the possibility



Figure 1 Children interviewing Director during a Children's Board project at the City of Arts and Sciences, Valencia, 2020



Figure 2 The Children's Board at Granada Science Park during a remodelling brainstorming session

to share ideas to improve the museum's reality in all of its dimensions. This 'power shift' strategy is organised in four different moments across nine months during which the children audit fundamental aspects of the cultural organisation.

For their Children's Board project, named The Children's Commission for the Museum, the museum has decided to focus on three aspects:

- the building and accessibility
- the people who are working at the museum
- the creation of contents and programmes.

As per the method and facilitated by a coordinator from the museum, the children visit the site, observe, analyse, debate, and prioritise changes. They share this with the museum personnel who will be committed to considering, answering, and, if appropriate, implementing their ideas.¹⁵ This roadmap permits the 'suspending' of many of the practices carried out by the adults working in the museum, including challenging their concept of solidarity including in relation to other concepts such as diversity or inclusion.

Do children have their own solidarity mindset? The Children's Commission for the Museum Project

The Children's Commission for the Museum Project is a one-and-a-half-year (June 2023–November 2024) pilot project run by the Bern Museum of Communication, represented by Veronica Reyes, mediator and Diversity and Inclusion Museum representative, in collaboration with Cultural Inquiry and other experts. In addition, experts on the relationship between migration and refugees, such as Elsa Horstkötter, and experts in philosophy and child psychology, such as Sarah Fuhrer and Regula Bühler, are involved.

The project delves into children's concept of solidarity and the way in which their knowledge can teach us as adults how to be more vulnerable and authentic in our social connections. This can include important implications for how we build trusting relationships with others and how they can lead to more supportive personal and professional environments. It may even lead to a future capacity-building programme where skills can be acquired directly from the way the child practices solidarity with others.

One of the key issues addressed by this project is to obtain information on what the 9–12-year-old understands by solidarity and being in solidarity, and if

what they understand by solidarity is similar to what we adults understand. Can we talk about a children-centred concept of solidarity? What's the difference between this concept and other related ones such as equality, justice, or integration? The ages of the children were considered, taking into account the type of tasks that the children were to perform in the Children's Board: team-building, analysis, abstraction, prioritisation according to limited resources, communication of ideas, debate, and argumentation, etc. Accordingly, the ages between 9 and 12 years are best suited to these functions, in terms of children's psychological and cognitive development. We promote a radically honest conversation with them as adults, while at the same time questioning some of our certainties (i.e. biases) around the concept of solidarity.

The project allows us to observe relevant aspects when it comes to understanding how children conceive solidarity. The knowledge of these aspects can help us to create a different model of solidarity from which to act not only in cultural institutions such as museums, libraries, and archives, but also in organisations such as companies, administration, and associations.

Some of these important aspects are:

- how they form the group
- how they relate to each other
- how they communicate with each other
- the importance of emotions in their relationships
- the role of active listening in their interactions
- how they manage to share common objectives
- how they are concerned about the well-being of the whole group
- how they exercise mutual respect
- how they build relationships of trust.

We invited twelve children, including those with a migration background, to be on the Board. Each child's own story and voice are the materials to create the threads that weave the group together. Most importantly, we listen deeply to them. Deep listening is not only a methodological tool to answer, but it is a critical way to understand what children are trying to express. In many cases children have developed a protective strategy against the adult. They pretend to obey in order to be left alone. If we are able to overcome this defensive barrier, we will truly get to know some of their views on solidarity.

In these preliminary stages of the project we are currently in, we have carried out strategic tasks of research, planning, involvement of relevant partners, and

initial contacts. In the first step we spend three months focusing on some pivotal questions:

- How will they introduce themselves to the group?
- What is the role of play in this first contact?
- How will they interact/react with each other, not knowing each other before?
- What are their expectations?
- What makes them feel they are part of the group and accepted as such by the other members?
- Will they create something like a code of ethics that they must follow, even if implicitly?

In a safe, comfortable, and empathetic environment, they follow a complete roadmap from working together to improving the museum in any aspect they consider important. The process is tracked with a tool called Children's Board Diary, which will record the children's ideas and proposals in every meeting. Each idea is labelled in the diary with a code and then included in blocks of issues, such as organisation; attitudes and behaviour; diversity and inclusion; ways to think, ways to listen, ways to talk; playfulness etc. It's a pivotal resource for embracing the children's dynamics and connect them with the dynamics of the museum.

In our interaction with them, we are mainly seeking their perception of themselves and others as a baseline to delve into their idea of solidarity. As children's rights advocate and researcher Patricio Cuevas-Parra has explained in his article about discriminated children in Brazil,¹⁶ a fundamental question to ask about any concept related to children is 'What is their perception of themselves?'. The way the children see themselves determines their concept of solidarity. For example, if they are blind to discrimination dynamics, will they try to support other ones in their same situation? This is operating from inside them and informing their agency, social interaction, and daily performance.

Jon Alexander, co-founder of the New Citizenship Project, has pointed out that the classic 'adult' concept of solidarity continues to have important consequences for the way we understand the work that philanthropic organisations do.¹⁷ Solidarity in this perspective focuses on data, results, transactions, and return on investment. It establishes a way of being in solidarity by one person 'buying' something that brings welfare to another. But as in the case of the children in Brazil, this approach neglects essential aspects of solidarity in a given context such as history, generational traumas, and abuses in power relations.



Figure 3 Museum of Communication, Bern, Switzerland

The Children's Board project tries to bring to light all these contradictions and underlying dynamics that affect children's understanding and practice of solidarity in an 'outside' context such as a museum, which has its own power structure, dynamics, and adult perception of solidarity. One of the drivers of the project is to avoid a risk that Cuevas-Parra warns of in his research. The simplification and homogenisation of children and young people as a one-dimensional social group undermines the uniqueness of their particular identities and the specific ways in which they construct and reconstruct the meaning and significance of their experiences.¹⁸

In this regard, this project is constantly moving in a very interesting (and slippery) 'in-between' space of research; the space in between children and adults; and the space in between migrants/refugees and locals. The Children's Board experience should be understood as an attempt to dismantle a double hegemony. First, it attempts to avoid, as the great Italian pedagogue Francesco Tonucci¹⁹ has been warning for a long time, the hegemony of adult thinking that reduces, standardises, and simplifies children to the point of making them stupid and incapable, dependent, superficial, immature, and naive. Second, the migrant/refugee perspective questions the local cultural hegemony. Quoting Karen Savage and Dominic Symonds:

Migrants cross over borders, come together as strangers, find ways of communicating despite their differences and forge powerful assemblies to make to make themselves heard [...] in short, they constitute a new common without ever losing their singularities [...] we must learn how to speak (and to act, live and create) like migrants.²⁰

Here is precisely where fascinating discoveries can be made.

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Notes

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