

Give everyone a say

The involvement of young people in selecting program staff

Meredith Kiraly

This article describes an Australian project which was conducted over several years in which small groups of young people were engaged to participate in the selection of staff to work in youth programs. It builds upon a series of small projects of a similar nature which have been conducted in the UK over the years 1993 to 1996. The collaboration of staff and young people in staff selection was a rewarding one, and led to the conclusion that with appropriate preparation and resourcing, this process is a very worthwhile addition to conventional staff selection, and one which adds useful information to the selection decision.

Meredith Kiraly completed a Master of Behavioural Science at La Trobe University, Australia, on the topic of Recruitment and Selection in Residential Child Care. She travelled to the US and the UK in 1994 on a Creswick Foundation Travelling Fellowship to further her investigation of this subject. Email: kiraly@melbpc.org.au

BACKGROUND

Yeah, I believe that everybody should have a say in who should look after them... about who they want to look after them and what they think their needs are, like to be able to be heard, and choosing your own staff is being heard, you know? [Young person in AAYPIC]

I think the right people got the jobs because they could tell us what they could do in different situations and we can trust them [UK young person involved in *Save the Children Fund* project] (McGlindrey, 1993, p3).

This project was inspired by the burgeoning movement in this country towards recognising and affirming the rights of children and young people in care (Owen, undated) and, more specifically, by contact with the Australian Association of Young People in Care (AAYPIC)¹ which commenced its operations in 1993. Through AAYPIC, the author came into contact with the work of Michael Lindsay (Lindsay & Rayner, 1993) in the UK on the involvement of young adults who had been in care in selecting persons to be appointed to an Independent Persons Project in Cleveland, England. Later, another instance came to light in which 15-16 year old residents in a children's home were involved in selecting a research worker who was to live in with them for some time (Berridge & Wenman, 1995). The writer met with both Dr Michael Lindsay and Dr David Berridge in 1994 in the UK to discuss

¹ Now renamed CREATE.

these experiences.² The meeting with Dr Mike Lindsay included two young people who had participated in the staff selection. The meeting with Dr David Berridge included the research worker who had undergone an interview with the young people as part of her selection process. It seemed from these meetings that involving young people in staff selection was likely to improve the selection decision.

They [the young people] provided the employing agency with a critical opportunity to observe how well the candidates actually interacted and communicated with the young people (Lindsay & Rayner, 1993, p25).

It was decided to explore further the process of involving young people in staff selection by a series of small 'trials' as opportunities presented themselves in various workplaces. This article details five such occasions in which groups of young people – and, in one instance, parents – were involved in staff selection in the state of Victoria.

This work was undertaken in the context of a wider research project which explored best practice in the recruitment and selection of residential care staff.³ The larger project is

² The assistance of Dr Mike Lindsay and Dr David Berridge on several occasions with ideas and feedback is acknowledged with thanks.

³ The author acknowledges the support of Kildonan Child and Family Services, Anglicare and MacKillop Family Services in this work, as well as a series of Charitable Trusts who assisted with funding. These include the Felton Bequest, the Stegley

described in more detail in Children.UK (Kiraly, 1999a) and a research dissertation (Kiraly, 1998), and the results have been used to create a practice manual entitled *Choose with Care: A recruitment guide for organisations working with children* (Kiraly, 1999b).⁴

LITERATURE REVIEW – THE UK EXPERIENCE

Work in the UK on the involvement of young people in issues which affect their lives was influenced by the UK National Association of Young People in Care (NAYPIC) which was established in the late 1980s, and other British children in care rights groups which have worked towards the involvement of young people in a range of child welfare practices. Further, the report of the Warner Inquiry (UK Dept of Health, 1992, p48) recommended the informal involvement of children and young people in the selection of residential care staff via a visit to the children's home by all short-listed applicants.

The approach of involving service users in staff selection has a longer history in the disability field (Ogden, 1991; Mitchell, 1992). Ogden (ibid) describes a program which offers comprehensive training in staff selection to disabled people before recruitment takes place.

In addition to the published work of Lindsay and Rayner (1993) and Berridge and Wenman (1995), considerable in-house work involving groups of children and young people in staff selection has been done by the UK Save the Children Fund (SCF) (1996). SCF documents outline policy and procedure, including training for young people and decision-making powers.

Concerns about this process on the grounds of Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) have been raised in the UK (Thomas, 1994), a country in which there has been particular concern with EEO in recruitment in recent years (Platt, 1994). EEO was therefore seen as one of a number of issues which would need to be addressed in order to

ensure that the process was fair and respectful to all involved.

THE PROJECT

THE FIVE SELECTION ROUNDS

Five selection rounds took place, through which some of the necessary preconditions to successful collaboration between staff and young people in the process of staff selection were established. Each trial informed those which followed, with noticeably improved results over time.

PREPARATION

As indicated above, the involvement of clients who are untrained in management or professional skills is an unconventional and innovative process which required careful management in order to ensure that the legal and ethical rights of job applicants were met, and also that the experience would be a positive one for the young people themselves.

Each trial detailed below took place in agencies in which the author was in some way associated, either as a staff member at different times, or as a visiting research worker. Discussion of the idea had taken place at one or more meetings prior to the work taking place. In most cases, the author and staff worked together to recruit the young people, to prepare them for the interviews, and to explain the process to the job applicants. Young people were paid \$20-\$25 for their involvement and given lunch and other refreshments. Assistance was offered with transport to and from the office in some instances.

The process of involving young people in staff selection in each case was an addition to the conventional process of recruitment and selection which commenced with a newspaper advertisement, was followed by an interview conducted by staff, and concluded with reference checks and a criminal records check.

In each instance, the writer or a staff member sat in the interview room with the client interview panel but did not participate. The interviews were followed by a discussion between the young people and the staff involved in the selection process.

INTERVIEWER TRAINING

In the training sessions, the basics of good interviewing practice were outlined. This included topics such as interview structuring, putting applicants at ease, appropriate body language, sources of bias, questioning techniques, documenting the interviewers' perceptions of applicants, etc. EEO legislation and how it applies to staff selection was discussed. Brief formats for documenting assessments of applicants were distributed in all but the last trial. The interview questioning schedule was developed collaboratively. Assistance with reading and other personal needs was provided as needed.

Training varied to some extent from one trial to the next according to time allowed, and as one trial influenced those which followed.

THE PARENT GROUP

While this project was intended to focus upon the involvement of young people in staff selection, during the process an opportunity arose which seemed to offer potential to explore the principles of client involvement in a different context. The situation was the appointment of a support worker to work with families who were at risk of having their infants placed in care. Thus, a trial was included which on this occasion involved parents in the selection process.

TRIAL 1

THE RECRUITMENT OF RELIEVING RESIDENTIAL CHILD CARE WORKERS

Preparation

The young people were recruited from the Australian Association of Young People in Care (AAYPIC), and from young people known to the agency. The intention had been to recruit older (eg, eighteen years plus) participants for this first pilot. Apart from this, the young people were chosen on their availability and interest.

Four young people agreed to come, and on the day three of these were able to attend. They were two seventeen-year-olds (one young woman and one young man) and a twenty-year-old young woman. The seventeen-year-old young woman was attending a special school

Foundation, the Viertel Foundation, the Potter Foundation and the Myer Foundation.

⁴ Available from ECPAT Australia, email ecpat@ecpat.org

for learning-disabled students; the seventeen-year-old young man was currently excluded from school, and the twenty-year-old was in part-time employment. The younger woman was still in care; the other two had left care.

When the young man arrived, he mentioned that he had had only two hours sleep the night before! On request, he was served a number of mugs of strong, sweet, black coffee through the day.

In the preparation session, the young people were asked their views on what qualities they would look for in staff. They placed importance on being listened to, on staff self-control, and the control of children and young people in a non-authoritarian way. Where possible, they preferred that physical restraint be avoided, although they appreciated that there may be times when this might be needed.

An interview pro forma was developed. The young people devised some of their own questions, and chose some from an interview pro forma which had been developed by young people in the UK (Berridge & Wenman, 1995).⁵ In addition, the young man devised a staged scenario of an incident in a residential unit and suggested that applicants be invited to give their views on ways to handle the situation at different points. The scenario was derived from his own experience in youth hostels, and related to a gradually escalating confrontation between two boys, which then embroiled staff.

The interviews

Three interviews were conducted directly following the staff interviews. For the first one, the writer brought the applicant to the interview room. The young people were initially anxious, but relaxed more during the second interview; at this stage, one of them then took on the role of bringing applicants in, introducing them, and seeing them out.

⁵ The writer is indebted to David Berridge and Helen Wenman (University of Luton UK) for the use of the questioning schedule used in their interviews, as material to stimulate discussion to develop this first interview schedule.

Discussion

The staff involved in interviewing, the residential services manager and the young people met over lunch to discuss the interviews.

Regarding the first applicant, there was agreement, in that both groups felt that she lacked the necessary experience. The young people felt that she was unsure of herself, and unlikely to have the skills to take control of situations. They also felt that she talked down to them.

Regarding the second applicant, there was some divergence of views. The staff recognised her lack of experience in the area, but felt that she was mature, open, and had a good attitude. They recommended her for employment. The young people liked her, but felt that she was not mentally strong enough, and unlikely to be able to handle difficult situations. They thought that more challenging residents would 'walk over her'.

Regarding the third applicant, there was again agreement. The young people saw him as strong, able to cope, energetic, experienced, caring and understanding, and as having good planning skills and child management strategies. The staff agreed, and commented on his experience and confidence.

The question about the second applicant was resolved when everyone agreed with the manager's suggestion to do reference checks, and then, subject to references, offer her some short trial shifts, first with less challenging children, to see how she went.

Reflection

The young people were very appreciative of having been asked to be involved. One said that she had been very nervous, but felt good that she had handled it well. They were happy that there was general agreement about the outcome. They all felt that they had learnt a lot from the process, particularly about how to conduct themselves when they themselves were going for job interviews.

It was also the first experience of interviewing for a residential worker who was involved on the staff panel, and she commented that she was also

nervous. She made the following comment:

It's a bit demoralising, I thought, to find that they did it better than us.

Staff were impressed both with the young people's interview schedule, including the scenario, and with the clarity of their feedback. Everyone felt that the different perspectives complemented each other well.

TRIAL 2

THE RECRUITMENT OF A YOUTH WORKER

Preparation

The vacancy for a youth worker was in a youth activities program for 12-15 year olds. The opportunity to involve young people had come up quickly, and was taken with little pre-planning. Front-line staff responded with enthusiasm and the manager, although having some reservations, gave consent.

Because of their young age, the staff selected three young people who they felt had the maturity to handle the task, two fourteen-year-old young men and a fifteen-year-old young woman. The earlier trial had led to a degree of confidence in this process which underlay the decision to try working with this younger group.

The young people devised some of their own questions, and chose some from the interview proforma which had been developed in the first trial. In devising their own questions, they discussed some problems in the dynamics of their activity groups, and their expectations of the leaders as to how they should handle these. They then turned these situations into questions and scenarios. In their discussion of the skills which they would look for, there was an emphasis on fairness, caring and self-control.

The interviews

Three interviews were conducted, again directly following the staff interviews. Again, the young people were initially quite anxious. Following a smooth first interview, they were more relaxed in the subsequent interviews; they gave the other applicants more eye contact and read questions directly from their papers less.

A problem of the timing of the interviews was that there was a gap of over half an hour between each interview. This became a real challenge as the day went on. The young people became restless and distracted. In the second interview, they took an instant dislike to the applicant, and their restless mood made it difficult to control expression of their emotions. They became giggly and revealed their discomfort in their body language. Some discussion after the interview of their obligation to show respect to applicants preceded a better final interview.

Discussion

Frank and open discussion between the young people and staff led to some differing views being expressed. The young people were unambivalent about their preference for the first applicant. They seemed to respond in particular to his apparent confidence, experience and comfort with them. Staff, on the other hand, saw the third applicant as possibly having more to offer. The young people felt that this applicant was patronising and unduly influenced by his experience in schools.

In deciding how to proceed, a consideration was that of all the applicants, the first one was the most experienced in youth work.

It was agreed to contact referees before making a final decision. The reference check suggested that the first applicant had considerable skills and rapport with young people, and this person was subsequently appointed.

Reflection

Again, the young people were very appreciative of having been asked to be involved. They also felt that they had learnt about going for their own job interviews from the process. And they really appreciated being paid!

The staff were again impressed with the young people's interview schedule.

It was agreed that the scheduling of the interviews with long breaks in between contributed to the young people's difficulty in handling the interview which they found most difficult. The problems with the interviewing program appeared to reflect the limited



preparation by the writer with the program manager, and the manager's reservations about the process, leading to limited attention to the detail of making it work.

In retrospect, the staff felt that the involvement of relatively young people was a positive process, but that more preparation regarding their responsibility to the candidates might have been helpful, together with a more concise schedule of interviews. The writer and program manager wondered whether these young people may have been bordering on too young to carry this level of responsibility.

TRIAL 3

THE RECRUITMENT OF A FAMILY SUPPORT WORKER

Preparation

As mentioned earlier, parents were chosen in this trial both because the children in these families were very young, and also because the focus of the program was on teaching parenting skills. Three parents (all mothers) participated. One parent had low literacy.

The usual selection process was followed, but in addition the staff's selection interview included a role-play simulation of work with a family. In this trial, there was limited staff involvement beyond the recruitment of the parents.

The parents were asked about the qualities which they felt were most important in a family support worker. The parents' comments included:

- Being able to help, not pass you on
- Listen to you
- Not to judge you, to really want to help
- Not to be judgmental
- To be on time or to ring if unable to be on time
- To show respect to families
- To be patient and tolerant with kids while talking to parents.

On the basis of this, the writer suggested ranking applicants on the dimensions of understanding, attitude and experience. The parents agreed, and wanted to add the two dimensions of respect and communication.

As in the other trials, in developing questions, the parents tended to describe scenarios, and to discuss attitudes and behaviour which they felt were appropriate to the situation. They also added some general questions about attitudes.

The interviews

Two interviews were conducted directly after the staff interviews. One parent brought the applicants to the interview room, and did introductions. One of the parents had a little difficulty reading her questions, but having practised her questions carefully, contributed well.

Discussion

In discussion with staff, the parents indicated that they liked both applicants and felt that each could do the job well. They saw the second applicant as very nervous, and felt that this may have affected her performance in the interview. They felt that the first applicant demonstrated more maturity, understanding and experience, and had a strong preference for her.

However, in further discussion, it became clear that staff were not willing to appoint the first applicant on the basis of a reference they had collected prior to their interview of her (see below). In addition, they felt that the second applicant had performed better in the role-play.

Given that the parents had felt that both applicants were suitable, the parents were accepting of the decision to appoint the second applicant.

Reflection

It was not clear whether the parents' panel accepted the final decision readily because they were happy with both applicants and felt that they had been listened to, or whether their acceptance was because they were used to being over-ruled in situations with welfare staff.

Nevertheless, the parents enjoyed their opportunity to be involved in the process. They felt that it gave them confidence, the feeling of being valued, and of having something to offer.

This trial raised the question as to how decisions are made when the two panels differ in their preferences, and clarified the need for the decision-making

process to be established at the outset. This trial also raised issues about staff's attitude to the pilot. While the manager had agreed to give the idea a go, some scepticism had been expressed. The trial had been undertaken, again, with minimum planning. In hindsight, it was felt that this may have influenced the way in which the interviews were set up. As mentioned above, the applicant whom the parents preferred had in fact already been rejected as unsuitable by staff prior to their interview. In this way, the parents were not offered a genuine say in whether this applicant could be considered.

A better process in this case might have been for agency staff to conduct their interviews first, and then short-list from the applicants those whom they would be willing to consider for appointment for the parents to interview. An additional option might be that clients be told that they will not have the final say, but that they will have the right of veto of an applicant whom they feel is clearly unsuitable (UK Save the Children Fund, 1996). This pilot highlighted the importance of preparing staff thoroughly for the work, and negotiating workable arrangements at the outset.

TRIAL 4

THE RECRUITMENT OF A YOUTH OUTREACH WORKER

Preparation

Following on from the last trial, this time it was understood from the outset by all participating that the program manager would make the final decision regarding the appointment, following consultation with both panels.

Many applications had been received for this position. Of these, seven were interviewed by the staff. In addition, a written 'work test' was given to the applicants before their interview. Two applicants were seen as promising. These two were offered a second interview with the young people on a separate occasion.

On this occasion, it proved to be difficult to find a group of young people who could commit themselves to an afternoon of interviewing. Of three who planned to be involved, two had other priorities on the day. A seventeen-year-

old young woman from AAYPIC who had extensive experience of the care system agreed to be involved at short notice, together with a fifteen-year-old young woman who was a current client.

As before, some discussion took place as to what attributes the young people felt were important in staff, and then they were invited to think of questions. As in the other trials, a number of scenarios were suggested by the young people, as well as some general attitudinal questions. More suitable questions were generated than there would be time to ask, so these were prioritised.

The interviews

The young people brought the applicants into the interview room, made introductions, and conducted the interview. As in the other pilots, they relaxed gradually as the interviews progressed, and became more confident.

Discussion

The young people noted that both applicants were also quite nervous as they themselves were. Some discussion took place as to how they might have been able to make them feel more comfortable. This could have been difficult given that the interviewers were themselves nervous, but they thought that more 'small-talk' at the outset might have helped everyone.

The young people felt that one applicant related better to them than the other. They felt that their preferred applicant was more natural in her responses, and the other one gave more like 'text-book' answers. They also felt that the latter may have a stronger use of authority, with which they were uncomfortable. They discussed whether her presentation might have been adversely affected by anxiety. One of the young people then became more ambivalent about her preference – and in fact rang in the next day to change her mind.

The program manager considered the feedback of both panels, the reference checks and the written work test, and made the decision in favour of the applicant whom the young people had initially preferred. She felt that the decision had not been clear-cut, and that it was likely that either applicant may have been suitable.

Reflection

This experience demonstrated that young people may struggle with their decision and disagree among themselves, or with staff, just as staff themselves will. It was felt that the final decision still needs to be made on the basis of all the information available and consideration of all views expressed.

The young women were again very pleased to be involved. One, when asked by another staff member what she liked best about the experience, said: 'The power!!'

TRIAL 5

THE RECRUITMENT OF AN EDUCATION ASSISTANT FOR A LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION PROGRAM FOR YOUNG WOMEN AT RISK⁶

Preparation

The young people in this program were all out of mainstream schooling for a variety of reasons. Consequently, an assistant was sought who would have a good understanding of their particular needs, and a creative approach to education in its broadest sense.

The life skills program co-ordinator was particularly keen to involve young people in the selection process. Work demands were high at the time, and the process was decided upon and implemented with little lead time.

Three young women were recruited by the program co-ordinator. One was nineteen years of age, and had a developmental delay; she also had a problem with chronic heroin use, however she held down a regular part-time cleaning job. The second panel member was age fourteen. The third was age thirteen and had 'high risk' behaviours. All had experienced significant abuse and were in care.

It was again explained to the young women that while their input would be listened to carefully, the final decision

as to who to select would be made by the program manager. However, their choice would not be overruled without a very good reason, and they would have the right of veto if they were really unhappy with the choice.

Unhurried training was held during the morning, and a break for coffee was taken part of the way through. Training included what a selection interview is; the seriousness of the responsibility of selection interviewing; what an employer looks for in a job application; what a curriculum vitae is; the reason young people might be involved, that is, issues of rights and the importance of hearing their perspective; the decision-making process; anxiety in applicants and in panel members and how to handle this. A mock interview was conducted to allow the young people to practise the process of interviewing. They had a brainstorm about questions and then went to lunch at McDonald's.

During the training session, views were expressed that the young women were looking for someone who would be patient and flexible, not have a temper or yell. They wanted someone who would notice what the young women do and give positive feedback, not just tell them off when they were naughty.

The interviews

From the first round of interviews by staff, three applicants had been selected for interviewing by the young people. The nineteen-year-old chose the role of chair; this was agreed to by the other panel members. The fourteen-year-old brought the applicants in and showed them out.

The panel commenced the interview by welcoming each applicant and describing their life skills program. As in the other trials, by the last interview, the young women were noticeably more relaxed and confident. Following each interview, the young women wrote down their comments on the suitability of each applicant for the position.

It was noticed that a short gap between two interviews was useful for the young women to have a break, but when a longer gap arose it was harder for them to refocus on the task of interviewing.

Discussion

The young women commented that they liked both of the applicants. Comments about the first applicant were that she was nice, and experienced, but likely to be a bit too firm and to work too much 'by the rules'. The second applicant was seen as having relevant experience, a good attitude, as outgoing and truthful, bright and chirpy. The third applicant was seen as nice, but not mature enough. Two were concerned that she had a baby to look after. This led to a discussion about roles and responsibilities during working hours, bias, issues of planned child care, and EEO. Overall, they were clear in their preference for the second applicant.

Reflection

This trial had a particular group ambience of co-operation and job satisfaction. The fourteen-year-old, in other situations quiet and reticent, became a supportive informal leader of the group, reminding the chair of her role and assisting her when she forgot. Despite forgetting tasks occasionally, the chair led well and revealed different qualities from those seen at other times. They all took the work seriously and seemed to respect the fact that they had been given considerable responsibility.

The nineteen-year-old, who normally had some difficulty articulating her views, surprised staff by her capacity to express her opinion clearly regarding each applicant.

Comments from the young women included:

- It was a good experience.
- It was very nerve-racking.
- It was good for us to have a say, so it's not just you picking.
- We gained special knowledge from it.

The co-ordinator gave a range of feedback. She felt that it was important that training was thorough and unhurried, and that there was a lunch-time, before the interviews, which was 'playtime'. She felt that it would have been better if the young women had been given a checklist or set of rating scales to assist with documenting the skills which the applicants demonstrated; this process had been

⁶ The author acknowledges the assistance of Karen Hagen in this fifth pilot. Karen's exceptional skills in working with young people were pivotal to the very positive outcome of this trial.

overlooked on this occasion. She thought that this might have assisted in avoiding the more emotive responses, for example, concerns that one of the applicants had a baby to look after. She also commented that the timing of interviews was important, in that the intervals between interviews needed to be quite short to allow the young people to maintain focus on the task. Another comment was that it seemed to be quite difficult for the applicants that she was in the room. She felt that this sense of being observed seemed to make the applicants more nervous. She wondered if it was necessary for her to be there. The writer, on the other hand, while recognising the problem, felt that with such young people, and considering their known life issues, the agency had a duty of care to have a staff member present.

This trial demonstrated that it is possible to work effectively with young people who are as young as thirteen and fourteen who may have challenging behaviours, if the circumstances facilitate their involvement. It contrasted with the second trial in which limited time for preparation and training was available, and interviews were staggered throughout the day with long gaps in between. In addition, the life skills program co-ordinator who participated throughout the trial was a very experienced youth worker, had a good rapport with each young woman, was able to give adequate time to the training, and was extremely committed to the process. This made the writer's task much easier and set the young women more at ease.

CONCLUSIONS

The project bears out the British experience that the involvement of young people in staff selection is a positive process which adds unique additional information to the staff selection decision. It is clear, however, that the interest and commitment to put time and careful planning into this process are fundamental to its success.

The utilisation of the small group format appears to give young people confidence through peer support, and thus assists them to maximise their performance as interviewers.

Well-planned training for participants is clearly important to best outcomes. Essential content needs to include rights and responsibilities of all parties; confidentiality; basic interviewing skills; EEO requirements; common interviewer biases; and use of structured interviewing materials such as interview pro forma and evaluation sheets. A role play interview might be a useful additional learning tool.

The decision-making process needs to be determined in advance. The young people involved need to be informed at the outset that their input will be taken seriously, but that the final selection decision will be made by senior program staff. The young people should be advised of the final decision and given reasons. An option may be to give the young people the right of veto if they feel that the applicant preferred by staff is clearly unsuitable.

A feature of each trial was the interview schedule which the clients developed with a minimum of assistance. Most of the questions emerged directly from the experiences of the young people themselves, and were framed as scenario type questions. Staff involved in each trial commented on the quality of these interview schedules.

It is important to have a thorough group discussion at the end of the interviews between the young people and staff with a view to collective decision-making where possible. This also yields useful information about how to improve the process.

The involvement of young people or other clients of services in staff selection is not a 'magic answer' to selecting staff, and young people may struggle with their decision and disagree among themselves, or with staff, just as staff themselves do. The process of decision-making needs to be handled positively and in an unhurried way, as in any selection panel. The final decision still needs to be made on the basis of all the information available on each applicant, and to be owned by the employing agency.

The younger the participants and the greater their current life issues, the more assistance and structuring may be necessary. Adolescents as young as thirteen may be capable of contributing

well in this work with appropriate peer leadership and staff support.

The specific needs of the participants need to be met. Examples of commonly experienced needs are assistance with writing and reading, appropriate scheduling of interview times to avoid restlessness and fatigue; and recruiting sufficient participants to allow for some who may have other priorities on the day.

Young people report great appreciation of their chance to be heard and to have a say, as well as to develop new skills.

It would seem likely that clients from a range of programs, both adults and young people, may be beneficially involved in staff selection. The writer calls for further work in this area, and the dialogue about this practice to continue. □

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