

SPLAT

A model of young people's participation that moves beyond the rhetoric to empowerment

Wayne Daly, Colin McPherson and Lucinda Reck

Paying attention to under-represented voices is considered by some researchers to be one of the current critical issues in child welfare (Kufeldt & McKenzie 2003; Mason & Gibson 2004). Children and young people in care have often been the targets of public policy, the subjects of research projects and the focus of practice that is aimed at protecting them, but not necessarily involving them. Is there really a preparedness to invite children and young people to have a say? Do adults and professionals rather presume to know what is best? Children and young people have much to offer researchers and policy makers by giving their opinions and expressing their views about a range of matters that concern them. This paper will discuss a Department of Families' initiative in the Mackay Whitsunday Region that invites children and young people to be part of the community of practice. It will showcase the successful positioning of eight to ten young people within the research, practice and policy agenda, and outline a vision to champion children and young people's participation at a community practice level throughout Australia. It will explore the journey of placing the voice of children and young people at the centre of the child protection system.

Wayne Daly

Senior Resource Officer
Community Capacity & Service Quality
Department of Communities, Mackay, Queensland
Tutor and PhD Candidate, James Cook University
Email: wayne.daly@communities.qld.gov.au

Colin McPherson

Education Training & Reform Project Officer
Education Queensland
(Former SPLAT Project Officer)

Lucinda Reck

Community Services Officer
Community Capacity & Service Quality
Department of Communities, Queensland
Tutor, School of Social Work & Community Welfare
James Cook University

If I could change one thing about the Child Protection System it would be to change the whole entire system (Young person in care – 16).

Kuhn (1996) showed how almost every significant breakthrough in the field of scientific endeavour begins with a break with tradition, with old ways of thinking, and with old paradigms. Evaluation of services by service recipients is a break with tradition ... It is not a fleeting trend, but an essential tool that will be needed to lead decision making on out-of-home care into the next century (Wilson & Conroy 1999:67).

It is acknowledged that the principle of allowing and encouraging children and young people to have a voice in decision making processes that impact upon their lives is central to innovative child protection practice. The Mackay Whitsunday Region of the Department of Families¹ has encouraged participation through the creation of a 'Learning Action Team'. The Super Participation Learning Action Team (SPLAT) is made up of a team of people including young people in care and ex-care, foster carers, community based youth workers and staff from the Department of Communities.

SPLAT has focused on recognising and developing the strengths of children and young people in care. The young people, who face a myriad of challenges and obstacles, are taking advantage of being involved in a number of significant projects that in turn challenge and change the way we as practitioners, managers and policy makers do things. We are recognising the increased confidence and self-esteem of the young people involved and the impact they are having on the culture of the organisation.

This paper will discuss an initiative that invites children and young people to be part of the community of practice – that

¹ SPLAT was originally established within the Queensland Department of Families. This department has now been abolished, and the Department of Communities has been set up in its place, with the child protection function being moved into the new Department of Child Safety. SPLAT is now located within the Department of Child Safety, although there is still staff input from the Department of Communities.

group of players who contribute to and ultimately influence the decisions made about the young person's life. It will showcase the successful positioning of eight to ten young people within the research, practice and policy agenda, and outline a vision to champion children and young people's participation at a community practice level throughout Australia. It will explore the journey of placing the voice of children and young people at the centre of the child protection system.

SEEKING THE VIEWS OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN CARE: REVIEWING THE LITERATURE

The primary target group of the Queensland Department of Child Safety statutory intervention system is children and young people subject to neglect or abuse. According to Howard (2000:5):

Children and young people in the care system should have the means, not only to inform decisions made about them, but also to be significant contributors to discussion in the development and implementation of relevant policy, programs and practice.

Engaging children and young people is consistent with a number of key sections of the Queensland Child Protection Act 1999, including one of the nine principles that guide child protection practice:

If a child is able to form and express views about his or her care, these views must be given consideration (Child Protection Act 1999, Section 5[h]).

EMPOWERMENT AND PARTICIPATION

Research undertaken in 1996/97 by Thomas and O'Kane (2000) with several local authorities in England and Wales studied participation in decision making of children in care aged 8-12 years. The purpose of the research was to identify the extent and the patterns of participation by children in that age group and to explore parallels between the methods researchers and social work practitioners use when communicating with children in order to take their views into account.

The study found that the level of participation correlated with age, but also with other factors such as relationships between other children, families, carers, agencies and workers. Children were found to be highly reliant for support and representation on significant adults in the care system. They experienced very little independent support or advocacy from outside the care system. The researchers believed that methods of communication could be found to enable children to demonstrate their competence in expressing their views and being involved in decision making. Both children and adults in the study expressed the view that often children are not listened to in the same way that adults are expected to be listened to, and that it can be

the adult's concern for the safety of the child that reduces the child's autonomy (Thomas & O'Kane 2000). Conflict was evident between the children's wishes and the adult view of what is in the child's 'best interests'. Children reported a number of decisions that were important to them and in which they wanted to be included, ie, where they go, where they live, what they do, contact with family, school, play and who their friends are. They also spoke about how they had few opportunities to meet with other children in care and to find out about their rights (Thomas & O'Kane 2000).

THE VIEWS OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ON THEIR CARE EXPERIENCE

There are a number of Australian studies that make significant contribution to the body of literature that seeks children and young people's perceptions of their 'in-care' experience. Two of these were undertaken in New South Wales (NSW): the NSW Child Protection Council (1998) *'Having a Say': Report on the 'Giving Voice to Children' Project*, and the NSW Community Services Commission (2000), *Voices of children and young people in foster care*. More recently the *Needs of Children in Care Report* (Mason & Gibson 2004) further explored the issues confronting policy makers when attempting to develop processes which enable children and young people to participate in decision making.

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The NSW Child Protection Council (1998) examined children and young people's experience of inclusion and exclusion in decision making about their lives. The report asserts that there are three key elements necessary for young people's participation in decision making:

- firstly, positive attitudes to participation;
- secondly, relationships between the young person and significant adults that assist the young person explore and express their views; and,
- thirdly, structures and processes put in place that provide young people with opportunities for participation in decision making (NSW Child Protection Council 1998).

The young people in the study looked to the adults in their lives to help them improve their participation in decision

making by providing opportunities to listen, explain and explore. The picture that emerged through the study, however, was that generally the young people had very few adults (significant others) in their lives to whom they could turn for help and support (NSW Child Protection Council 1998).

... the Convention on the Rights of the Child not only exhorts individual relevant adults to listen to the voice of the child, but also obligates public agencies and governments to give opportunity and freedom for the child to express their views...

The second NSW report, undertaken by the Community Services Commission (2000), highlights the findings of an inquiry into the adequacy and shortcomings of the substitute care system in NSW at that time. The report identified areas where change was needed and made recommendations for reform. The methodology used included a children and young people’s questionnaire and focus groups. Responses were received from 158 children and young people. The primary focus of the inquiry was upon the substitute care system as a whole. The inquiry emphasised the growing complexity of the needs of children and young people and the subsequent increased demands and expectations upon carers. The key message flowing from the inquiry is that the child or young person should be placed at the centre of the care system. Too often, key decisions are made – such as where the child or young person will be placed, the quality of care they receive, whether or not they stay in touch with family or friends, etc – with little or no reference to the child or young person themselves (Community Services Commission 2000:III)

Teresa Lum and Nicole Herbert, both ex-care young people, provide a succinct summary of the needs of young people in care (Lum & Herbert 1999). They affirmed what other writers had previously asserted:

Never underestimate a young person’s capacity to understand (Lum & Herbert 1999: 62).

Gilligan (1999) explores the importance of listening to the child in foster care. After giving an exposé of studies which have listened to children, including two Australian studies, ie, NSW Child Protection Council (1998), and Cashmore and Paxman (1996), he goes on to cover in some depth a number of key themes that have emerged from these studies. These themes recur in much of the literature and have implications for workers in the child protection system in

terms of their capacity to contribute to successful outcomes for the child or young person in their care. Gilligan (1999), in reference to Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), asserts that the Convention not only exhorts individual relevant adults to listen to the voice of the child, but also obligates public agencies and governments to give opportunity and freedom for the child to express their views, and to consider these views seriously and meaningfully.

In Queensland, the rights of a child in care are enshrined in the Charter of Rights for a Child in Care, Section 74 of the Queensland Child Protection Act 1999. These rights are based upon the broader United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989). Of particular relevance is the right of the child to participate in decisions about where he/she lives and the emphasis upon the relationship of the child in care with their family. Children and young people in care must be the central focus of the care system and, as such, their needs, their views and their experiences should be sought after and given consideration. The literature (Department of Families 2001; Lindsay 1995; Mason & Steadman 1997; Whiting 2000) supports the perception that the right to participate in decisions, the right to be heard and the right to have their views considered in a meaningful, non-tokenistic way, rarely occur. The incorporation of specific rights in a statutory framework, such as the Child Protection Act 1999, challenges those who work with children and young people in care to adapt and refocus their practice to be inclusive of their views and experiences. As Gilligan concludes:

If adult carers and social services are to have any hope of meeting the needs of children in foster care then they must, among other things, listen very closely to the lived experience of children in foster care, through the medium of research and the participation of young people in policy and decision-making fora. For systems of foster care in every country the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child sets a demanding but essential standard in this regard (Gilligan 1999:56).

SPLAT: AN EMERGING MODEL OF PARTICIPATION: WHAT DID WE DO?

SPLAT means to me, getting my voice heard (Young person in care – 16).

In 1999 the Mackay Whitsunday Region of the Department of Families was engaging with a range of stakeholders in the community as part of a process of developing a ‘place profile’. The profile would seek to establish the strengths, weaknesses, gaps and opportunities of the Department of Families service delivery system within the community. One key group that the Department needed to engage with in this process was children and young people in care and ex-care. However, a framework did not exist to effectively engage

with the very people who were central to the child protection system. It seemed that it was not part of core business for the Department of Families to engage with children and young people and to invite them to participate in planning and giving feedback to the Department about its services.

At the same time CREATE, a national advocacy group for children and young people in care and ex-care, was about to establish a trial site in regional Queensland. It was decided in the Mackay Whitsunday Region to sponsor CREATE to come and help establish connections with the children and young people and to invite them to participate in a review of the service delivery system.

In the beginning, 'Facilitation of Participation' training established a core of facilitators with a passion for participation. These facilitators then supported CREATE to conduct Young Consultants Training which prepared eight young people to become actively involved in the region. This created the foundation for on-going engagement and connection to children and young people in care in the region. From this the Super Participation Learning Action Team, known as SPLAT, evolved.

SPLAT is recognised as being the driver of participation opportunities for children and young people in care. SPLAT members are regularly invited to participate in local and state-wide trials, consultation and training, including on-going Young Consultant training, foster carer training, and Child Safety Officer training. Young Consultants have been involved in Early Intervention and Prevention Trial Teams, the Suspensions in Schools Working Party, a Transition from Care Audit, and Stopping the Drift state-wide consultation. On a practical level, Young Consultants have been actively involved in increasing the knowledge of other young people in care through the development of a 'SplatChat' website and a 'Rights of a child in care' project, including the development and distribution of a Rights CD. Of great significance has been the establishment of a SPLAT Youth Worker Traineeship. It is the authors' understanding that the appointment of a young person to this position in 2003 represented Queensland's first young person in care to be employed by the Department.

A culture of openness is clearly evident by the way a young person in care has been introduced into the work-group. This interaction has reduced the communication barriers between staff and young people with the Quality Assurance Team having the opportunity of speaking to a team of young people, connected to SPLAT. We found their input very beneficial to our inquiry. During our investigations of case plans we found a case referring SPLAT as a support for a young person on a Youth Justice order. This connection is considered important to the quality care of young people and should continue to be encouraged. Consideration needs to be given to continuing to use SPLAT as an entry point for referrals to Professional

Support Services. We commend the Mackay Region for this initiative. (Quality Assurance Team Member)

SPLAT has become the vehicle to enable young people to build skills, gain experience and take advantage of important participation opportunities. It is the vehicle by which departmental culture is being challenged and remoulded. Departmental staff and community-based workers recognise the increased confidence and self-esteem within the young people involved with SPLAT.

We have noticed that the young people are increasingly becoming more self-confident, and are willing to take on challenges they would not have attempted before being involved in the SPLAT team, ie, public speaking, advocating for other young people, reflecting upon and sharing their experiences, and articulating their beliefs about how to enhance the care system. (Staff member)

Over time, young people who participate are being empowered to be more engaged with and connected to a system that had previously marginalised them. They are now more advantaged and, as such, can engage with a wider range of activities and people in the internal and external community.

Engagement with children and young people in care ... requires a radical realignment from welfare-based to rights-based practice.

THE KERNEL OF SPLAT – MAKING A DIFFERENCE: THE RESULTS OF THE PROJECT

SPLAT is essentially a social development tool. Its aim is to develop the capacity of the community of practice and a collective of children and young people to better understand and influence policy and practice. Ife (1997) suggests a critical model of practice with three core elements essential for social development:

1. increased political awareness;
2. more sophisticated analysis; and
3. more appropriate vocabulary.

Ife's three core elements can provide a critical model for the way practitioners work with children and young people. Within this model the voices of children and young people who are often marginalised can be legitimised.

I think I can make a difference by listening to other children in care and expressing those thoughts from the child to the Department and it is important that we can make a difference. (Young person in care – 17)

Children and young people in care should have their voices heard because it's their life. (Young person in care – 16)

The model identifies the personal issues that children and young people are dealing with on a daily basis as having political elements. Essentially the struggle of the individual is connected to a collective movement. Using the model, a child or young person who has been thought of as a 'client' is valued as a 'colleague'.

I really like having the young SPLAT members in the office as it gives vitality to the place. I think it's great that people who have been so affected by our system are now able to work here. It seems right that this be the case. Also they have behaved professionally as well. They are also fun! (God, can't we all use that!) (Staff member)

Cultivating trust and building social capital is regarded as core practice. Through a process of participatory and transformative action learning, the young people have become aware of systemic factors impinging on their personal lives. Their problems do not arise so much from individual inadequacies, but from systemic breakdown. Freire (1970) referred to this learning process as 'conscientisation', ie, acquiring an understanding of the reality that there are systemic drivers of personal disadvantage. With this knowledge young people are empowered to view their world differently and influence systemic change. Engagement with children and young people in care within this critical model requires a radical realignment from welfare-based to rights-based practice. It is this shift that is occurring in the Mackay Whitsunday Region.

The Mackay Child Safety Service Centre in which the project is established covers the region known as Mackay Whitsunday, an area of over 90,000 square kilometres, and employs 58 staff. The region is totally reliant upon foster care as its only 'out-of-home' care option. There are 103 children and young people in care in the region. Of these, 20 are aged between 16 and 18 years. Of these, 5 are Young Consultants. An additional 3 young people, ex-care, are also Young Consultants.

There is a lively culture of research and learning within the region and the success of SPLAT has been due in part to the incorporation of the practice of critical analysis and reflection at an operational level. The SPLAT participatory model has raised interest locally and from policy makers, researchers and practitioners across the nation. Feedback from a wide range of people indicates that successful engagement of this type is indeed rare. Connecting with young people and placing them at the centre of the model

has been the kernel of our success. No SPLAT decision is made without input from the Young Consultants. The processes used are both developmental and inclusive.

Leadership has been identified as an essential element in the model. It is the leadership from management which has allowed creativity, resourcing and risk taking. It is the leadership of the adult facilitators, who have a passion for and continue to champion the model of participation, that has given guidance and direction. Most importantly, however, it is the leadership of the young people themselves who, in the midst of ongoing personal challenges, continue to make themselves available, show courage and creativity, and build on their capacity and that of others to participate.

SPLAT and its logo have become a recognisable entity, with staff of the Department keen to become the owners of SPLAT supporter t-shirts. Is this a sign that the culture is shifting and that young people's engagement and participation are considered worthwhile? The enthusiasm with which simple tokens are received by staff is an indication that it is, as is the fact that Young Consultants are welcomed into the office environment and proudly occupy office space below the SPLAT logo.

At first I was cautious about having young people in our space, however it has been a positive experience. (Staff member)

I've seen a lot of these young people grow from being quite shy and not sure of themselves to being much more confident about their places in the world. It's great to have the young people with us in the office. I think they are a timely reminder that our work is 'with' kids not 'about' them. (Staff member)

In a recent consultation with eight young people on the importance of stability in their lives, they shared the number of placement changes they had experienced. Between them they had clocked up fifty-six placements. This was only counting their Queensland experiences – many were previously in care in other states as well. During the same consultation the young people became markedly animated when it came to questions about foster carers. They were eager to reflect on both positive and negative experiences in foster care, with a view to enhancing workers' understanding of the issues faced by young people in care.

A recent focus group of seven participants, who were involved in research on what makes a good foster carer, established that between them they had a total collective experience of seventy-seven years living in foster care. There is a lot for us to learn from these young people's experiences. They are, after all, experts 'in their own lived reality' (Gibbs 2001:29).

We are the experts in our lives. (Young person ex-care -21)

REALIGNMENT OF INDIVIDUALISTIC WELFARE PRACTICE TO RIGHTS-BASED PRACTICE: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHILD PROTECTION FIELD

A child or young person may be safe, but is there a risk when ensuring a child or young person's safety that we forget other important things? Are they connected and participating, or are they isolated? Are they informed, or are they ignorant of their rights? Do they have a sense of identity and feel empowered, or are they desperate and sad?

Involvement in their own case plan and in decisions about their care experience is a fundamental right for children and young people in care.

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child (UNCROC 1989:Article 12.1).

Ensuring a young person in care is given the opportunity to have their right to participate upheld is surely a minimum requirement for a child protection practitioner. Yet this practice is not common, but nor is it new or radical.

SPLAT is a simple organisational framework bringing together a range of key stakeholders, including children and young people in care, to plan and activate opportunities for positive participation.

Involving the individual child or young person in his or her own case plan still rests in the realm of social work intervention that is singularly focused upon individual problems and individualistic 'solutions'. This focus on what is essentially a micro understanding and response to the needs of children and young people in care could be seen as a conservative approach and disempowering practice both for the child protection practitioner and very much for the child or young person. Offering to involve a child or young person in his or her own case plan is at best standard and sound case management practice, but on its own cannot be considered best practice in participation.

If a child protection worker's practice revolves solely around patching up individuals damaged by the system, without ever seeking to understand, much less challenge or change, that system, they are at risk of becoming part of the problem rather than part of the solution. It is reasonable to state that most of our practice and policy in relation to the act of protecting children and young people is therefore not

sustainable. If child protection practice and policy places the majority of resources on intervention strategies in abuse and neglect cases and few resources upon building the capacity of communities, families and individual children and young people, we continue to promote and support a flawed and unsustainable system.

CONCLUSION

Children and young people in care are more than individuals who are to be protected and case managed. They have a lot to say about their experiences. A culture of research and action learning in the Mackay Whitsunday Region is enabling these voices to be heard. SPLAT is a simple organisational framework bringing together a range of key stakeholders, including children and young people in care, to plan and activate opportunities for positive participation. It builds relationships and connects people otherwise isolated and disenfranchised within the system. While it is important that opportunities continue to be explored so that the voices of children and young people in care are heard, it is imperative that their voices are listened to and that changes continue to be made as a result.

In the spirit of changing the current culture, Jones and Moses (1984), quoted in Rice and McFadden (1988), long ago proposed :

Given the mechanism, children could help serve as their own monitors of the foster care system; they could become the instruments of their own improved knowledge of the system and their rights within it; and they could become the instruments of change in the system.

Almost two decades later, Roberts (2000) commented:

It is clear that listening to children, hearing children, and acting on what children say are three very different activities ... There have always been people who have listened, sometimes there have been people who have heard, and perhaps less often, those who have acted wisely on what children have had to say.

Taking action is now urgent and SPLAT provides a model that deserves attention in the pursuit of change. In the words of the young people themselves:

It's important to listen to children and young people in care so they can voice how they're feeling and change what they don't like. (Young person in care – 17)

I think it's important for adults to listen to young people because that way the young people can express how they feel and the adults know more about the way they feel and they can try to change things to help the young people. (Young person in care – 15)

SPLAT has been a way of getting the voice of children and young people out there. (Young Worker Trainee -- 17)

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