Can you hear me?

The active engagement of Aboriginal children in the development of social policy by non-Aboriginals

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In recent years significant focus has been placed on the first few years of a child's life and how their experiences during this time can shape their future development (McCain & Mustard, 1999). Social policy and programs that enhance the capacity of children and their families so that positive outcomes for children are ensured are being developed and implemented throughout Australia. This paper takes up the topic, initially introduced in Children Australia (Vicary et al. 2005), but turns the focus to Aboriginal children. Despite the advances in early years policy and programs development, marginalised children, particularly those from Aboriginal backgrounds, continue to be overlooked in terms of consultation (Vicary 2002).

The ramifications of this lack of consultation are profound in terms of cultural appropriateness and sensitivity. The Western Australian Office for Children and Youth has refined a model for the engagement of Aboriginal children in social policy consultation. The model is inclusive of diversity and targets the children who normally would not have their voices heard in the development of social policy. The following paper will describe the Aboriginal Child Engagement Model developed by the Office for Children and Youth in consultation with children, young people and adults from Aboriginal backgrounds. The model consists of six steps, and takes the non-Aboriginal worker from the initial engagement phase through to evaluation and relationship consolidation. The proposed model is further delineated by a case study.

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Children's participation in the development of social policy has shown the importance of the inclusion of the 'child's voice'. There is a growing national and international movement towards the encouragement of participation of children and young people in the decisions that affect their lives (Hart 1997; Office for Children and Youth 2004; New South Wales Children's Commission 2005; UNICEF 2002). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) clearly delineates the active participation of young people in decisions that affect them. However, despite the growing movement towards children's participation within Australia there are very few sustainable, culturally specific, consultative mechanisms to canvas the views of Aboriginal children and young people. That is not to say that they are not consulted, but usually these consultations are ad hoc in nature and largely issue specific.

Generally, young people consulted by government tend to be either adolescents or those in their early twenties. There are numerous examples of Youth Advisory Councils (YAC) that provide advice to government (eg, Youth Advisory Councils of WA; National Youth Parliament; Queensland Youth Council; New South Wales Youth Citizen's Jury). While these youth advisory mechanisms do take into account issues of diversity, they often do not incorporate the visions and ideas of younger children. Sustainable forums for young children, particularly Aboriginal children (0 to 12 years), to express their concerns and solutions with government are paramount if governments are to effectively address the pressing issues confronting our children.

The Office for Children and Youth (OCY), a policy office of the Department for Community Development in Western Australia, has initiated an engagement strategy that is inclusive of diversity and targets the children who normally would not have their voices heard in the development of social policy. This consultative model has been developed particularly to access the ideas and aspirations of Aboriginal children and young people. It is envisaged that this strategy will be applied on a state-wide basis to ensure that the demographic diversity of Western Australia is represented through sustainable long-term relationships that are vehicles for policy development.

This strategy has been designed in consultation with children and young people, particularly those from Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander backgrounds[1], and continues to be implemented and reviewed by members of these groups. The engagement strategy takes into account the idiosyncratic process requirements of different cultures (such as translation, cultural norms and religious requirements) to ensure that the information obtained is both valid and relevant. Further, the strategy has been designed to make certain that engagement with children is developmentally appropriate and suitable for those in remote and rural settings.

This paper outlines the Aboriginal Child Engagement Model proposed by the Office for Children and Youth. It is a six phase engagement model that takes the practitioner from the preparatory stages, through to evaluation and follow up. The model has been operationalised following extensive research carried out over a number of years by a team at Curtin University (Vicary 2000a, 2000b, Vicary & Andrews 2000, 2001; Vicary & Bishop 2005) and the Office for Children and Youth. The authors caution that the model is not static but continues to evolve and develop with each consultation. The model is not intended as a panacea, rather it is a guide to the engagement of Aboriginal children. The proposed engagement model is also premised on the employment of Aboriginal cultural consultants (eg, local Aboriginal staff or community members) to assist and facilitate the process. The model detailed below will be further delineated by means of an OCY case study.

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Phase One

Motivation and Self Reflection

Why consult? This is a question that all those intending to work with children and young people should ask – especially those whose focus is on engaging Aboriginal young people. Other questions to be answered include the nature of the benefit that will be derived by the children and the community through the consultative process. Is this benefit realisable in the short, medium or long term? Are there consultations that have previously been conducted that could provide data rather than initiating a new research process? This is especially important as some Aboriginal communities are experiencing sizable research burdens due to the extent and nature of research being conducted by state and federal governments, research institutions and not-for-profit organisations. New work should only be undertaken with the community's consent and if it is going to provide new information to benefit the local Aboriginal stakeholders.

When the OCY first became involved in working with Aboriginal children, there was a realisation of how little was known about their culture, spirituality, skin groups, family and the importance of extended family in a child's life. Consequently, OCY has attempted to safeguard against erroneous assumptions by developing sustainable, culturally sensitive relationships. It is clearly impossible for members of one culture to fully understand or enter into the world-view of another (Vicary 2000a, 2000b; Vicary & Andrews 2000). This lack of understanding can be made worse by non-Aboriginal workers if adequate guides and supervision are not provided when they work cross-culturally. Culture, in this instance, refers to and incorporates various dimensions such as traditional beliefs, practices and customs; song, dance, language and food; family structure, relationships and obligations; and stories, beliefs and spiritual dimension which in Aboriginal culture hold a place for both Dreaming and Christianity (Task Force on Aboriginal Social Justice 1994).

Non-Aboriginal practitioners should reflect on their motives for wanting to work with Aboriginal people. There must be no hidden agendas and the goal should be to provide a quality and culturally appropriate service aimed at empowering Aboriginal young people and their families. Furthermore, there can be no half measures in effective engagement – to simply pull out or let the engagement stagnate – as this will reinforce the cynicism many Aboriginal people have developed about the promise of government and other agencies to consult. This is especially important when working with young people as poor engagement and relationship building could jaundice future consultations.

Phase Two

Preparation and Research

There is no right or wrong way to begin the engagement process, but if there is one general rule, it is to seek advice from a wide range of sources. Of crucial importance is the early advice from local Aboriginal community members, Aboriginal staff members and Cultural Consultants.

This valuable information can give the non-Aboriginal consultant a more detailed background of local politics, history, culture and practices, and provide a good starting point from which to develop relationships with the Aboriginal community. This information may also allow the non-Aboriginal worker to avoid the more obvious cultural faux pas and work out a more appropriate way of finding out

[1] The authors acknowledge the considerable cultural diversity throughout Western Australia and the term Aboriginal is not intended to imply cultural homogeneity.

specific information about Aboriginal young people. An example of this might be when a non-Aboriginal person who has worked with Koori people in NSW then comes to Western Australia and refers to Aboriginal people as Kooris, instead of the more appropriate local group name (eg, Noongar). Similarly, it can be argued that, although reading is important for sourcing such information, it should only be used as an aid to understanding. The most relevant and valuable information will always come from the local Aboriginal people and the young people themselves.

Research suggests that, prior to engagement with Aboriginal adults and children, there may be a need to modify or re-write the engagement plan. In particular, the use of language can potentially be a problem if big words and jargon are used. Many Aboriginal people refer to this as 'high' language, and they have trouble following conversations when this language is used. This is even more important when consulting with children, and the language used should be consistent developmentally with a preference for Aboriginal English. The use of 'high' language may be perceived by Aboriginal people as patronising, ignorant or lacking respect. These potential problems with language can be exacerbated when English is not the first language of the Aboriginal group being consulted. It is also important to remember to allow time for Aboriginal people for whom English is a second language, to translate what you are saying into their own language and then back again into English

The non-Aboriginal worker needs to be aware of community events such as deaths and law business. Contact should always be made with the community or family to negotiate an appropriate meeting time. The community chairperson or coordinator should also be asked if the proposed visit is appropriate. He/she should be informed of the nature of the visit and who will be visiting. If there is a degree of uncertainty, then clarification should be sought before the visit is planned further.

Phase Three

Networking and building relationships

From an OCY perspective, networking is about building relationships and trust with Aboriginal colleagues, Aboriginal agencies and people. Time must be spent exploring and building a participatory culture in an organisation or group before an approach is made, and well before children and young people are engaged (to ensure the voices of children and young people can be canvassed).

As stated previously, building strong relationships with the entire Aboriginal community is a central theme of the engagement model. Without a solid relationship with the community, the non-Aboriginal worker may experience difficulty in working with Aboriginal children. Developing personal relationships with Aboriginal children and adults is the key to having meaningful discussion and provides an opportunity to build trust and, hopefully, lasting friendships. These relationships and networks give the worker more opportunities to ask for help and guidance.

Judging Aboriginal cultural beliefs and practices from a western worldview can be a barrier that prevents Aboriginal people from engaging with non-Aboriginal people. The worker must be both aware and comfortable with cross-cultural differences and ensure that these differences are valued, rather than negated or judged. Aboriginal people, and particularly children, can quickly detect when non-Aboriginal people are unable to disengage their western framework or are being insincere. This can result in superficial engagement or avoidance altogether.

There must be no hidden agendas and the goal should be to provide a quality and culturally appropriate service aimed at empowering Aboriginal young people and their families.

Phase Four

Getting started

Non-Aboriginal workers are advised to review their skills and assess how these may need modification in an Aboriginal context. The worker should be comfortable in his/her work so that Aboriginal children and adults will derive the best benefits. Cultural awareness training may well improve the non-Aboriginal worker's understanding of Aboriginal culture, although training may be generic and not appropriate for all Aboriginal communities. Training at a local level by local Aboriginal people is recommended as being more efficacious, whilst also allowing the worker to develop networks within the community.

The Office for Children and Youth has found that developing relationships with the women of the community, particularly the Elders, is the first step to engaging the children. Once the intent of the consultation has been explained and the women are comfortable with the consultant, they may give permission for the children to be consulted. In most cases it has been the Office's experience that the women themselves were instrumental in ensuring the children were available for the discussions. Generally older children will still require parental/community permission prior to the consultant speaking to them, even though they may be happy to speak to the worker before formal approval. In some cases, young people may be considered 'adult' by the community having been through

the 'law process', in which case they may be viewed by the community as an emancipated adolescent and consequently able to give their own consent. The complexity of these consultations further underscores the importance of taking advice from appropriate local Aboriginal people.

Once consent is provided, finding the right technique is what makes the various methods of engagement accessible, inclusive and fun for children and young people and, subsequently, rewarding for the community. It is here that the most important adaptations are made to cater for different ages, ethnicities, educational levels and special needs. Children should guide the choice of tools, techniques and location to use during the engagement process. The worker should also be aware that this is not just a one way process and they should be open to the fact that they too will undoubtedly learn from the community, family and children.

The most relevant and valuable information will always come from the local Aboriginal people and the young people themselves.

From discussions with the women, fathers, young people and other community stakeholders, the worker should identify who will be involved in the initial contact and then provide all parties with details of the 'whens' and 'wheres' of the meeting. A range of strategies to assist adults and children to engage should be used. For example, engage in an activity such as fishing, painting, etc and develop a relationship that is not perceived as professionally based, but more focussed on the development of a personal relationship. In many cases, adults will also join in activities with the children to further enhance the relationship process and to familiarise the children with the consultant.

Phase Five

Yarning

It is important to identify where children feel safe to meet, and where they will be most at ease sharing information (this information can be gathered from a range of stakeholders, including parents and the young people). This may mean negotiating with the school or pre-school as to a suitable time (eg, at recess) and place (eg, in the playground). The worker should identify whether the children would like a support person present, such as a family member or teacher, and talk, or yarn, with them about who else could attend the meeting and how they would like this organised.

The non-Aboriginal worker should discuss barriers that may impede an effective discussion with Aboriginal children, acknowledging that children will demonstrate different ways of understanding and responding to given situations, and there will undoubtedly be a need to adopt flexibility in the approach. During the yarning phase, listening carefully to the child without interruption is paramount. Simple questions should be asked, avoiding jargon and big words as mentioned earlier, and giving the child or children ample time to respond. Non-Aboriginal workers should become accustomed to long periods of silence and not attempt to rush the process while the child is thinking. Often confident children, especially those who have initiated contact, will want to ask their own questions.

The engagement process is adapted to the needs of the children. It is important that engagement with children – whether they be Aboriginal or otherwise – is not perceived as tokenistic and that follow-up visits are determined to re-engage or to show that there is a real interest in having them involved in an ongoing way.

Phase Six

Evaluation and Validation

Evaluation is an ongoing process, and there may well not be immediate positive outcomes. Children may come from dysfunctional environments and goal setting needs to be realistic, given the context of the environment to which they will be returning. Evaluation is also about maintaining contact after the work has finished. It is important to remember that if you are passing through town or near the community, you can be sure that the community will know about it. To keep trust and maintain the relationship, it is very important that you stop and say 'hello' even if you have no work to do in that area.

The following case study details a visit by OCY staff to the remote Kimberley region of Western Australia. The consequent consultation provides an example of how the 6-step model can be implemented.

CASE STUDY

A REMOTE KIMBERLEY COMMUNITY[2]

As part of a state-wide consultation aimed at ensuring the ideas and vision of remote Aboriginal children are incorporated into policy development, the OCY visited remote Aboriginal communities in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. This case study is derived from the engagement process utilised at one of these communities. However, as noted earlier, the model is a guide that takes into account the idiosyncrasies of each individual community.

[2] The name of the Aboriginal Community engaged by OCY is not used to ensure confidentiality.

PHASES ONE AND TWO

Prior to visiting the community, OCY staff received the appropriate permission to enter the lands, and reviewed the potential benefits for the community from the consultation. The community was provided with information about the intent of the visit, the voluntary nature of the participation and who would be visiting. Staff consulted extensively with Aboriginal cultural consultants (both local and Perth-based) and Aboriginal colleagues to ensure engagement strategies were relevant and culturally appropriate. This formative consultation also provided vital contacts within the community. The consultant also investigated ways of ensuring the relationship built between OCY and the community was sustainable (should the community want ongoing contact).

PHASES THREE AND FOUR

Upon arriving at the community, the OCY consultant set up a campsite and was introduced to the community via the cultural consultant and welcomed by women Elders. Over the next couple of days, the women Elders from the settlement joined the consultant and slowly introduced the party to their beautiful country.

PHASE FIVE

The women provided cultural instruction, but were also keen to hear of the work of the Office, the intent and ramification of the consultation and the findings thus far. The reciprocal information provided by both parties through sitting and yarning with one another proved invaluable. It was from this information exchange that the women expressed a desire for the consultant to meet with the community's young people so they would have the opportunity to express their opinions and visions. A visit to the community school was organised as this provided an opportunity to have the young people in one place but also in an environment in which they felt comfortable about meeting people from outside the community.

Advice from the principal, school staff and Elders provided opportunities to identify issues of importance for the children. Strategies based on this input allowed the consultants to develop a relationship and trust with the children. The younger children were very happy to discuss their lives and experience of living in a remote region. The older girls, in particular, were keen to talk and show their work and talk about their goals for the future. The students expressed a desire to finish school and 'get a good job'. They talked about their uncertainty of leaving their home, family and community and moving to the city. The young people were clearly concerned about the opportunities they might have in the future.

The time spent with the children and with the women Elders involved physical activity, singing, dancing painting and yarning about issues of importance to them and their hopes and aspirations for future generations. Over a period of a week, the trust between each of the groups grew and developed.

PHASE SIX

Today the relationship with the Community and OCY continues to develop and strengthen, and the joys and anguish felt by the young people, their parents and Elders about the issues facing them have become a reality for OCY and its work. Contact between OCY and the community occurs regularly through a range of mediums, including face to face visits. Insights derived from this work have led to the development of an Aboriginal Children's Advisory Group to provide ongoing advice and assistance to government, Aboriginal specific publications, policy and programs, and have further enhanced OCY's capacity to canvas the opinions and ideas of Aboriginal children and young people.

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CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Communicating with all children is a two way interaction. As adults working alongside children, we may think *we* have much to offer, but we should never underestimate how much the children have to offer. The Western Australian Office for Children and Youth works on a principle that the children must gain as much, if not more, from the consultation experience than the adults undertaking the dialogue. The Office for Children and Youth has discovered that there is much to learn from Aboriginal young people through effective, sustainable, culturally sensitive communication.

As stated earlier in this paper, the engagement model is not static, but rather it is a dynamic process that is constantly being developed through the input of Aboriginal young people, their families and communities. For the model to be truly efficacious, non-Aboriginal consultants wishing to work with Aboriginal people must be committed to embarking on a journey which focuses on the development of an ongoing relationship rather than a professional acquaintance. ■

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