

With us, not to us

Towards policy and program development in partnership with children

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Internationally, there is a growing trend for children and young people to participate in decisions affecting their lives (Bellamy 2002; Hart 1997). The active participation of children and young people is clearly articulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). However, despite the international movement towards children's participation, there are precious few opportunities for Australian children and young people to contribute to policy and research debate in a sustainable manner. A review of the literature demonstrates that there are few ongoing research or policy advisory groups made up of children and young people, and those that are operational are generally auspiced by Children's Commissioners (e.g. New South Wales) and policy offices addressing the issues of children and young people.

In Western Australia, when children and young people are consulted, the dialogues tend to be short-term and issue-specific in nature. This paper will briefly discuss a number of techniques employed to engage Western Australian children and young people in dialogues about important issues affecting their lives. Using these examples, the barriers that challenge efficacious children's and young people's participation are discussed; finally, some suggested ways forward are delineated.

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Our children¹ are Australia's most valuable resource. Today's children are far more sophisticated, knowledgeable and global than any of their predecessors. They provide the perfect springboard for short, medium and long-term sustainable change to our society. They are able to articulate concerns, develop solutions and implement change across a wide range of domains (MacDougall, Darbyshire & Schiller 2004; Vicary, Tennant, Adupa et al. 2006). When they are consulted, children's contributions to policy and program development have relevance (and validity) to other children, policy developers and service providers (Clare, Vicary, Skinner & Mayes 2006; Tennant, Santa Maria, Vicary, Wadley & Doncon 2005; Vicary, Tennant, Adupa, Milbourn, Mayes, Miffing & George 2006; Vicary, Tennant, Santa Maria & Wadley 2005). However, despite the value of their insights, children continue to be marginalised by not being consulted on issues that affect them.

Those children who are considered at risk (e.g. children in out-of-home care, living with violence and drug use, Aboriginal and recently arrived ethnic minority children) or difficult to consult with (e.g. disabled, geographically distant) are further distanced from the opportunity to make their voices heard in a policy and programmatic context. Alarming, the children most vulnerable in our society are those who are not provided with an opportunity to develop their resilience (Oliver, Collin, Burns & Nicholas 2006) and wellbeing through participation in the issues that directly affect their lives.

Being 'seen and not heard' is an axiom that is reflective of many adult attitudes to children's participation. Prevailing adult beliefs are but one hurdle children must overcome to ensure their voices are heard. In order to challenge the status quo, enabling processes and programs must be implemented to facilitate opportunities for children to communicate with adult decision makers so that their views might be incorporated.

¹ For the purpose of this paper, children will be defined as those young people between birth and 18 years of age.

WHY INCLUDE CHILDREN IN POLICY DEVELOPMENT?

Participation has a positive outcome on children's emotional, social and cognitive development. Listening to other opinions, expressing their own and having their views taken seriously allow children to acquire the confidence and skill sets required to make valuable contributions across a variety of settings. Importantly, participation challenges and develops thinking and develops problem solving and judgement skills that children take with them as they grow.

Lansdown (2001) delineated the value of children's participation. He argued that the benefits of participation to children include: (1) development of new skills, (2) enhanced self esteem, (3) empowerment (4) contribution towards improved decisions, (5) insight into issues affecting their lives and their worldview, (6) contribution to making the world a better place, (7) it can be fun, and (8) it offers a chance to meet with other children from diverse backgrounds and experiences.

Other authors (Cockburn 2005; Hart 1997; Wilkinson 2000) have delineated the value of information provided to adults who are developing policy and programs by children through participation. However, when adults consider child participation as a vehicle to gather information, some of the issues set out below must be considered.

- A child's participation in decisions affecting his or her life is a *right* – clearly delineated in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Therefore meaningful, genuine, age and developmentally appropriate methodologies for enhancing children's participation must be employed (UN General Assembly 1989).
- Children's participation leads to a better *understanding* of their worldview and priorities and this improved knowledge base improves policy, programs and procedures (MacDougall, Darbyshire & Schiller 2004).
- Participation *empowers* children to provide input into issues that concern them. Developing child-focussed methods moves towards an egalitarian sharing of power, e.g. between adults and children. Such approaches provide children with the sense of being both listened to and taken seriously. Consequently such approaches enhance the child's self esteem, feelings of empowerment and validity of data, e.g. children say what they mean rather than saying what they think adults want to hear.
- Encouraging children to participate allows those in policy making and research the opportunity to *measure* the efficacy of policy and programs that are aimed at children, their families and communities (Wilkinson 2000).

- Further, skills and knowledge gained through participation can enable children to become involved in other projects. *Sustainable* participatory mechanisms can result in long-term, child-initiated, measurable change to the community.
- When considering children's participation, the *cultural background* of the children must also be considered so that the collected data is both valid and relevant. Culturally valid data provided by children can be an extremely powerful agent of change (for example, see Vicary, Stilling, O'Meara, Garvie, Guard & Cronin 2004).
- Adults working with children in a participatory context will invariably enhance their understanding of children's development and worldview. Further they will *improve* their own skill levels through the development of egalitarian relationships with children in research/policy and programmatic settings.

CONTEXT

As already canvassed in this paper, the active participation of children is clearly articulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly 1989) and has led to many countries around the world engaging with and listening to children to ensure their perspective is accounted for in decision-making processes in a variety of domains, and policy and program development. While the worldview of children is recognised as being inherently valuable, there remain few sustainable mechanisms to ensure ongoing engagement of children. However, there are some notable exceptions, including the Children's Parliament in Bangladesh.

Australia, like many other countries, has made considerable advances in children's participation, particularly in the realms of social policy. Many states are now employing methods that capture children's views on issues that are important to them. In Western Australia, children have been consulted widely on a range of issues that are of interest to policy makers and researchers. Such consultations are usually short-term in nature and rarely provide an ongoing opportunity to make further contributions to a dialogue. The Western Australian Office for Children and Youth (OCY) was established to promote and develop the ideas of young Western Australians, with the aim of consulting with children and youth in order to incorporate their views into policy and programs. The Office for Children and Youth established and developed a range of engagement mechanisms in collaboration with children to ensure their views and ideas were represented. Some of these children's participation methodologies are described below.

CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH: CHILDREN'S ADVISORY GROUPS

Children's Advisory Groups (CAG) provide a vehicle for children to channel their ideas and views on issues directly to government, not-for-profit and for-profit organisations. Generally such groups consist of 10-15 child members who are usually selected by teachers or peers at their schools, according to the host organisation's selection criteria. Once selected, the advisory group members work in partnership with the host organisation, and are involved in projects and decision-making affecting children. They contribute their first hand experience of children's issues.

Being 'seen and not heard' is an axiom that is reflective of many adult attitudes to children's participation.

In April 2004, OCY developed a Children's Advisory Group to work in partnership with staff to give a children's perspective on decisions that affect them. One of the CAG's key roles was to articulate to OCY the issues children would like to have a dialogue about. Further, the CAG advised how best to help children have a say on these issues in the short, medium and long-term. The CAG provided input across a range of domains, including government policy (existing and proposed), social issues (e.g. environment, education), engagement strategies, local community concerns, media commentary and issues affecting Western Australian families and children.

The CAG continued to operate until late 2007, providing invaluable input into the OCY's policy development, media and publication strategies, research and engagement methods, professional development of staff and insight into the worldview held by children in WA. Further, the children also contributed to the process through their energy, enthusiasm, commitment, fresh and creative perspective and first hand knowledge of what it is like to be a child in Western Australia.

Despite the value of the CAG, the OCY did encounter issues that ultimately affected the sustainability of the group. These included:

1. staff time required to run such a group effectively, e.g. negotiations with the children, their parents, school principals, teachers, etc.;
2. the cost of running such a group in a long-term and meaningful way, e.g. preparation time and financial cost;

3. additional staff professional development – particularly in the engagement of children;
4. the challenges of geography, e.g. ensuring a representative group from across the state;
5. ensuring the group was representative of the general population, e.g. culture, gender, developmental status, intelligence;
6. ensuring the work undertaken by the group was meaningful and not tokenistic;
7. time taken to convince other adult stakeholders about the immense value of the CAG's input;
8. ensuring the CAG's input into policy issues did manifest as tangible outcomes;
9. the active opposition of some adults to the concept of children's participation in policy and program development;
10. attrition from the group and its negative impact, and
11. the ongoing training required of both children and staff in order to maximise opportunities and potential and the effect this had on the cost benefit ratio in terms of positive and tangible outcomes.

CONSULTATIVE APPROACHES: CHARTER OF RIGHTS, CONVERSATIONS WITH CHILDREN AND CULTURAL GRANTS REVIEW

Charter of Rights

The Western Australian *Children and Community Services Act 2004* ensured that a Charter of Rights for all children and young people in care became mandated as part of the new legislation. The Department for Community Development, through the Children and Young People in Care Advisory Committee (CYPCAC), asked both the CREATE Foundation and the OCY to undertake the Charter consultation and development work. The results of this consultation were outstanding with 139 children and young people aged between 4 and 19, representing diverse cultural and developmental cohorts, consulted across WA (Vicary, Tennant, Adupa et al. 2006). A diverse group of over 60 community stakeholders and departmental representatives also contributed their ideas and thoughts to the process. The consultation methodology implemented ensured that follow up validation consultations were held with the children and young people, further strengthening the findings and ensuring that their vision for the Charter was captured both in content, intent and presentation.

While this consultation was successful in gathering the data that ultimately led to the development of the Western Australian Charter of Rights for Children in Care, it also experienced challenges that impeded the ability of children to participate in the consultative process. These included:

1. the difficulty in accessing children from at risk groups, e.g. children in the care of the state;
2. the over-protectiveness of some adults;
3. the difficulty in ensuring geographic, developmental and cultural representation;
4. the short time frame of the project;
5. the need to consolidate adult training to facilitate the consultative process, and
6. the principle of ensuring that the voices of the children were heard over adult wishes and ideas.

Conversations with Children

The OCY considered that consultation was an important means of empowering young people and enabling them to develop a greater connection to the community and society. In early 2004, in partnership with the Department of Education and Training, the Office for Children and Youth developed a *Conversations with Children Workshop Pack*, which was designed to be administered to primary school children by their teachers.

The aim of the project was to gather genuine information from primary school children on a range of issues affecting their lives, and to ensure that policies and programs developed by Government would take account of children's views. To facilitate this statewide consultation, workshop packs were distributed early in the 2004 school year to primary school teachers in 120 Government schools throughout Western Australia. The packs were principally aimed at teachers and students in Years 5, 6 and 7. Teachers were sent a booklet which contained a synopsis of the workshops, instructions and guidelines.

The *Conversations with Children* (Office for Children and Youth 2004) program was based on a series of six workshops, where topics were introduced and the children were able to discuss and comment on them. The topics included: (1) Participating and getting involved, (2) Being healthy and well, (3) Rights, responsibilities and safety, (4) Being active, having fun and relaxing, (5) Learning, working and thinking ahead, and (6) Getting out and about. The booklet also contained feedback forms for students and teachers which were designed to be completed at the end of the workshops.

By the end of term two in 2004, a total of 31 schools (both metropolitan and country representation) had returned completed workshop packs and 1,050 children returned comments on the workshops (341 of these children also completed the student feedback forms, and 25 teachers completed the teacher feedback forms).

This successful consultation could have been further enhanced if the impact of a number of barriers to children's participation had been minimised. Some of these

participatory barriers are similar to those already mentioned earlier in this paper. However, this consultation brought with it unique challenges which included:

1. extensive negotiation with the Education Department and schools;
2. ensuring school and teacher uptake of the program;
3. the lead time required to develop the consultation tools and materials;
4. cost, and
5. the significant amount of staff time required to bring the project to fruition.

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Cultural Grants Review: Engaging with Aboriginal children

Two Western Australian state government agencies – namely, Healthway and the OCY² – provided grants and recurrent funding to the not-for-profit sector for a range of services, events and programs for children and young people. Organisations in receipt of recurrent funds are located in metropolitan and regional areas of the state. Due to the priority given to the Aboriginal community by both organisations, a large scale qualitative research project was undertaken to review the current grant processes in place at the respective Offices (Vicary et al. 2004).³

As part of this project, 281 Aboriginal children and young people were interviewed from the East Kimberley to the Lower Great Southern of Western Australia. The consultation component of the project was broken into two phases. Phase One was the initial consultation around current grant processes and preferred and culturally sensitive alternatives. Phase Two re-interviewed (cultural validation) 20% of the original cohort to validate the data provided.

The Cultural Grants Review was another successful consultation that enabled a large number of Aboriginal children and young people to participate in discussions around the funding (and processes) provided to their

² The Office for Children and Youth became part of the Department for Communities in 2007.

³ As part of this review, an extensive literature search found no completely culturally secure Western Australian grant policies, forms or procedures.

communities. Participants in the review were able to clearly articulate funding models they felt would be more equitable and ensure greater uptake by Aboriginal young people. The methodology employed by the consultants in this project followed well-established research guidelines (Vicary 2000a, 2003, Vicary & Andrews 2000, 2001; Vicary & Bishop 2005; Westerman 2002; Westerman & Vicary 2004) which aim to engage the community in a research/consultative process and then sustain the rapport through ongoing relationship development, reciprocal feedback, information exchange and updates (e.g. grant funding rounds, program information, events, etc.) and future consultation opportunities.

Feedback from this cohort led to the redesign of both process and policy to enable improved uptake of grants using innovative and culture/community friendly methodologies, e.g. videotelelink. Despite the success of the consultation methodology, there were still difficulties in (1) attracting participants, (2) ensuring gender balance, (3) maintaining contact with the participants after the consultation, e.g. for cultural validation purposes, (4) convincing adults (including Elders) to allow the young people to participate, (5) cost, e.g. both dollars and staff time, (6) overcoming suspicion some Aboriginal people have about research, and (7) ensuring the project outcomes reached the participants and their community.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Children and young people's participation in the decisions that affect their lives is essential. Successful engagement of children and young people through participation and consultation clearly illustrates that they do provide insights into issues that challenge researchers, program developers and policy makers. The information provided by children and young people has demonstrated improvements to the development of child-centred policy and programs. Further, children's emotional, social and cognitive growth through participation prepares them for future opportunities when their opinions will be canvassed about other issues important to them. Children and young people's developing maturity provides a unique opportunity for active participation across a range of domains at differing developmental stages.

This paper has described four Western Australian examples that have illustrated the power and value of children's participation. Data from these consultations have directly influenced a range of policy (e.g. Charter of Rights for Children and Young People in Care) and programmatic (e.g., Cultural Grants Review) domains. Despite the clear advantages of involving children in policy and program development, there are still obstacles to be overcome to ensure children's participation is considered part of 'normal' consultative practices rather than considered a novel adjunct.

Based on the experience of undertaking a variety of consultations with children and young people, the authors make recommendations to enhance the potential for children's participation in research, policy and program development. For adults considering children and young people's participation, it is important that:

1. the consultation process has the child's best interests at heart and be genuinely committed to ensuring children's opinions are heard;
2. consultants have the necessary skills and prior experience in working with children and young people;
3. consultants be familiar with the principles of children and young people's participation;
4. consultative sampling frameworks ensure egalitarian representation;
5. data provided by children is gathered in a non-tokenistic way and information obtained is employed in a pragmatic, transparent and relevant manner, and
6. consultation methodologies ensure that
 - a) the relationship between the children and adults be open, transparent and equal;
 - b) methods for recruiting participants are developmentally and culturally appropriate;
 - c) children and young people are consulted on the methods they consider most appropriate;
 - d) information on consultation outcomes are *always* provided to the young people;
 - e) time and cost of the consultation are considered carefully prior to commencement to ensure successful project completion;
 - f) formative preparation and development be undertaken with stakeholders to overcome any misgivings or preconceptions, and
 - g) strategies are developed to overcome potential challenges to the process so that the children and young people's participation in the project is not jeopardised.

The authors advocate that children and young people engaged in participatory processes:

1. have opportunities to have fun, grow and further develop their knowledge base and skills through their participation;
2. are treated as equals with valuable knowledge and information to share;
3. are able to see tangible outcomes of their efforts;

4. are encouraged to explore ideas (Sheridan & Samuelsson 2001) and options, individually and with one another, and given permission to make mistakes;
5. have their thoughts and ideas recorded accurately, and not altered or manipulated (Reddy & Radna 2002) into 'adult speak';
6. are encouraged to participate in other activities and forums where they can offer both insights and opinion, and, finally,
7. are encouraged to maintain contact with the adults 'facilitating' the participatory process to ensure reciprocal feedback (e.g. of outcomes), new information transfer, critique of process and methodology, and opportunities for future involvement.

The information provided by children and young people has demonstrated improvements to the development of child-centred policy and programs.

It is vital that researchers and policy makers take the time to engage with children and young people appropriately. The measures delineated above ensure that the participatory process is fruitful for both the consultants and the children and young people involved. Crucially, if the engagement process is undertaken in an egalitarian, transparent and appropriate manner, it will ensure that the participants remain engaged with the project and improve the potential for their future involvement in other projects. The legacy of quality, child-centred participation is profound and long-term with a range of positive outcomes for participants, and current and potential consultants. The value of asking children and young people 'what they want' should be embraced and never underestimated. ■

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