

The guide map, the beacon and keys to the front and back doors: a case of consumerism

Jan Owen

Consumer – buyer, client, end user, patron, purchaser, shopper, user. (Macintosh LCIII Dictionary)

Recently I was idly leafing through one of our State's educational review magazines. My attention was immediately captivated by a headline which read 'Students to be empowered as consumers'. 'At last', I thought, as I dived in to consume the article, 'even the education system is going to empower students in their role as consumers of school life'. I'm sure you can imagine my disappointment when I discovered that in fact the education department was introducing a program of teaching students to be good retail consumers. You know the kind – Levis versus Corfu, MacDonald versus Hungry Jacks, Revlon versus Shiseido, Dolly versus Juice, hip versus funk – the type of purchasing traumas we all experience from time to time.

Not, of course, that I'm condemning this kind of empowerment, but in many ways it couldn't be further from the issues surrounding school and the future of education if they'd tried. It's entirely possible that teachers wouldn't necessarily want a whole school full of students demanding their rights to be informed and participate in decisions regarding the place they spend most of their lives for up to 13 years at a time? What a nightmare!

I've had occasion to think about this issue a great deal recently. Since the establishment of the Australian Association of Young People in Care (AAYPIC) in 1993, the first consumer network of children and young people in out-of-home care, I've been asked more than once (and not by children

and young people), what is this going to mean for the system of child welfare in Australia.

What AAYPIC is not

AAYPIC is not a political youth movement – it does not have a manifesto or an agreed party line. It is neither a government or non-government agency. It is not a contracted service provider.

AAYPIC is not an organisation created by like-minded people with idealistic visions and goals for a better and more magnificent world or founded on the principles of love, humanity and honour as so many before it.

AAYPIC does not see its role as a confrontational one which would see young people and children take to the streets anti-Vietnam war style (although some from that millenium would dearly love to see such activism from today's young people as a sign of true youthfulness, anarchy and commitment to the cause, whatever it may be!) You can blame all the fast food in the world you like, but the reality is that children and young people who have been abused and rejected by their own families and therefore, by default, their community and their country, have little reason to believe that anything they say or do would make an ounce of difference to those who actually have the power to create real change.

The telling fact is recent research by a number of political parties and researchers, which points out that 95% of children and young people who are actually making their way out there as a part of the community feel exactly the same way.

What AAYPIC is

AAYPIC exists only because children and young people in the care system have, intentionally or unintentionally, but nevertheless unilaterally, been denied their right to a safe, nurturing family in which to grow towards independence. Children and young people come together in AAYPIC groups not for any idealistic goals and visions for themselves or our community, or from a common view of the world and how it should be, but purely because of a common experience of the immense powerlessness and isolation which can only be experienced when our rights to choice, participation and personal decision-making are denied. Children and young people have adapted and become consumers of services as easily as they were made victims beforehand, with seemingly little change in the power structures. AAYPIC serves to network young people to support each other in advocating their views.

What do people think?

While political correctness and ideological soundness dictate generally unswerving public support and rhetoric for the emergence of a national consumer body of users and end users, the vibes round the traps are somewhat different. The responses are, in many ways, not at all surprising, although sometimes disappointing. Following are the most common statements and questions regarding a voice for children and young people in care. I need to be very clear in sourcing these comments. They do not come from any one particular area of the sector nor was a greater percentage from government or non-government personnel. But it can be said that

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from the highest levels to those in the frontline (although less, it must be stated, from those working with children and young people on a day-to-day basis), a great amount of discussion has been generated by the establishment of the first national consumer body for children and young people in care.

Although you may feel many of these statements are damning in their own right and deserve little if any reply, I will attempt to respond to each of these with the seriousness with which they were presented to me.

Question: What happens when you empower young people and they start 'beating up' on services, providers and direct carers?

Response: Children and young people generally don't 'beat up' on service deliverers without a reason. Unfortunately this may have nothing to do with the service a child or young person is currently part of, but is an outcome of systems abuse, lack of opportunity or support to deal with life experiences to date. None of these issues is going to be automatically made right by asking them what they think or what they want. What does change however, is a child or young person's ability to deal with situations that have happened to them if they believe that the system (and not just an isolated worker here and there) is willing to listen and respond to what they say. This kind of empowerment usually has positive rather than negative outcomes for all involved.

Question: What about all the other consumer bodies? Don't they also have equal status in this debate?

Response: There has been much talk about other so-called consumer groups and their rights to a place within the debate. So far there are only two, parents of children and young people within the care system, or adult survivors of the care system which operated some 20 years ago. Whilst AAYPIC in no way begrudges the legitimacy of these individuals right to have their say, seek compensation and so on, they are still not consumers within the current system of development and reform. The only real consumers are those who are actually themselves directly in receipt of services. In some cases, this is indeed whole families. However, within Australia at present, most child welfare service provision is focused on children and young

people. I believe that the attention being given to some groups is in direct relation to their ability to articulate their case as adults to other adults within the community.

Statement: You can't really think that children and young people in care are actually going to be able to sit round the table and give constructive input into the nature and delivery of child welfare in this country?

Response: Well, yes we do! One of the positive outcomes of giving people a say is that they usually take advantage of the opportunity. One of the most damaging outcomes of the care system for children and young people in Australia however, is that this group often feel they have nothing to offer and are most reluctant to put forward their views and risk getting knocked back yet again. In the past, those that did were usually branded uncontrollable and in need of behaviour modification. To ensure the most effective input by young people, AAYPIC has developed a training program for and by young people in AAYPIC State and Regional groups to develop skills in meeting procedures, lobbying and communication. AAYPIC feels sure that not only will these skills be useful whilst in care, but will also make a difference for young people in many other areas of their lives.

Question: What rights do children and young people have over service providers and workers in getting their outcomes achieved? This will surely be at the cost of worker and agency outcomes?

Response: Workers and service providers are not consumers of their own services. They may be employees of large, hierarchical institutions or organisations. Their rights as workers and employees may also be breached in respect to any number of areas. However they are not consumers of services provided by an organisation/government to the wider public on behalf of the government or a community agency. As for the cost, the development of a consumer movement could surely only benefit good practice, which in the final analysis has as much to do with philosophies and goals as resources. As for outcomes, we come back to the same question - if agency and client outcomes are not the same then something's very wrong!

Statement: It will be impossible to keep such an organisation going given the mobility of children and young people in the care system. It's doomed from the beginning!

Response: AAYPIC is not a static organisation - it is a network with a focus on bringing young people together to share common experiences, for specific issue discussions, input into policy development and much more - from a uniquely consumer perspective. AAYPIC has a clear philosophy of participation, not only consultation. In the last decade, consultation has become a catch-all for those who may wish to justify a particular, often already well-developed position or view on a given issue. Participation demands, as do young people, a situation of equal status around the discussion table. There is no doubt that we are entering a period of potential instability in the provision of child and family welfare services within Australia - a range of short term and emergency placement options and increased use of foster care means that the status and position of children and young people in the medium and longer term will be increasingly difficult to monitor. This is an issue for the entire field, not AAYPIC alone.

Statement: This organisation could only be confrontational and destructive given the amount of damage and upheaval which has occurred for children and young people in care in this country.

Response: Yes, there has and still is widespread systems and personal abuse occurring for children and young people within the welfare system. Some within the child welfare field believe that lack of national accreditation and uniform legislation are in part responsible for this, as is bad practice - including lack of consultation and participation by children and young people in decisions affecting their lives. Unlike governments, young people need a long term view on their existence.

There are some areas upon which the AAYPIC could naturally be confrontational, however, there is a difference between confrontation and problem solving - solutions-focussed outcomes. Within AAYPIC, young people want solutions and they want to take part in coming to those solutions and implementing them. The very fact that AAYPIC will

advocate for the rights of consumers will be seen by some as confrontational.

Statement: There is no way, given the very nature of the care system, that this organisation could possibly have the same visions, aims and goals as the child welfare sector in this country.

Response: Why not? Some see the entry of consumers into the equation as creating another new level of us and them. AAYPIC rejects this notion and will actively seek to bring players together to ensure the best outcomes for children and young people. This includes those who have not necessarily seen themselves as part of the sector, but who play an increasingly important role in either policy development and reform or service delivery. If, at the macro level, the visions, aims and goals of the child welfare sector in this country are access to the same life choices and opportunities for children and young people in out-of-home care as all Australia's children then we are indeed all starting from the same position. Although the micro level of how that is achieved may vary greatly, for a great sporting country like ours, keeping our eyes firmly on the goal seems to be the most obvious way to move ahead.

Understanding AAYPIC

As can be seen from these statements, the notion of children and young people as consumers rather than powerless and grateful victims is difficult for many to fathom. So what does it take to have real purchasing power as a consumer of the welfare system? Is adulthood in itself a basic pre-requisite? (It is certainly not so in the retail industry!) Consumer groups in the human services sector are relatively recent. The outstandingly consistent

examples of consumer groups who have created change and momentum have been within the disability and health arenas. The child welfare sector could gain from looking more closely at what has made these lobbies so effective.

A strong belief system still exists in our community which says, 'A child needs two parents and a family, no matter what the quality of that relationship and family life may be', and 'furthermore, if we provide food, shelter and some supervision then the emotional, spiritual, educational and psychological needs or rights of our child are no one else's business'.

Good practice is not only possible, it is actually happening. What we need to ensure is that the best practice of today is the minimum standard of tomorrow.

Surprisingly, amazingly to many, young people are in fact voting with their feet and an increasing number are leaving impossible home, foster care, extended family care and residential care environments in exchange for the isolation and loneliness of the streets. Contrary to a now annual media hype trying to prove otherwise (for the past 15 years!), most of these young people would rather have had any other option. The complexities of life and survival on the streets, so far from anything which most of us could even begin to contemplate safely shielded in largely middle class suburban Australia, are difficult to capture, and except for the most perceptive of journalists, it is no doubt easier to just grab the photo opportunity and run with it.

What the public do not know and the media don't often wait around long enough to find out - is that 95% of these children and young people do not in fact come straight from home. They are the rejects of a myriad of welfare systems across Australia, which seemingly have spider web-like nets which seek to capture, but never engage, children and young people, and, at the first fall of rain, disintegrate almost entirely and have to be painstakingly put together again in readiness for the next victim.

The key issues still remain for whoever finds their way into the welfare maze or suddenly finds themselves within it. For children and young people in care, the core issues of quality and continuity of care still remain as enormous millstones around the tightening neck of a welfare system, which on the one hand strives to train, develop, professionalise, research, accredit, industrialise, therapise, monopolise, debate, philosophise, reform, deinstitutionalise and personalise the provision of child welfare services and its workers whilst striving to serve the needs of clients - first and foremost.

In all of this, the voices of consumers have grown more and more distant as the walls of the maze become thicker and sturdier, and more protective of those who have fought for and secured their place. There are agencies in Australia who truly and sincerely struggle with the challenge of providing the best possible care to children and young people. Good practice is not only possible, it is actually happening. What we need to ensure is that the best practice of today is the minimum standard of tomorrow. Where, I wonder, is the rightful place of the child or young person? Hopefully, from hereon in, with the guide map, the beacon and the keys to the front and back doors.

for more information on AAPIC activities in each state, call the following people:

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