

***Child protection is everybody's business – contributions from the  
Queensland Commission for Children and Young People***

**Engaging with children and young people – beyond theory to practice**

Paper presented  
by

***Kathy Mandla***  
***Commissioner for Children and Young People***  
***Queensland***

at the

**8<sup>th</sup> AIFS Conference**  
**Melbourne**

**12-14 February 2003**

## Introduction

This paper, the final of four in the symposium *Child protection is everyone's business – contributions from the Queensland Commission for Children and Young People*, will focus on children and how we engage with them. To do this with some effect, I would like to highlight some rather peculiar adult traits that children find most irritating, and rightly so.

Before I start this exercise, I hope you can spare me two minutes to get to the ladies room. You see, I was in a bit of a hurry getting here and sorting out exactly where I was supposed to be. I have noticed that no one here is quite game enough to tell me to “wait until you've finished your speech”, or comment, “you silly sausage, you should have gone before you came”.

This is where my boss comes in. Sometimes, when rushing from meeting to meeting I ask her if I can grab a coffee before our meeting starts - or sometimes, go to the ladies. She generally says “yes, fine, we'll start when you get back”.

Now let's pretend that the Commissioner is not my boss, but my mother. She would probably still let me go to the ladies room. Now try to imagine that she is still my mother, but that I am only 5.

Can you still see her saying, “yes dear, these people can wait because nature can call at any time”? Or rather, “No, just wait...I said wait! ...No, you just have to wait, it's your own fault for not going before we left home!”

### **This brings us to lesson no.1 – the rules of engagement.**

The first lesson when engaging with children is not patience, but understanding issues from a child's-eye-view. To do this effectively, we need to engage with children as we do with adults. Children have the same human rights as adults, and are entitled to be treated with dignity and respect. They have the right to express their views. All countries in the world, save two, agree with this view, and have ratified it in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

It is important for adults to understand that children's priorities may differ from our own. For example, completing one's homework does not rate as highly as completing the turbo-charged leggo Droid starfighter; and from our child's construct of the world, there may be good reason for this.

So in practice, when a child complains to one of the Commission's Community Visitors or Complaints Officers – they try to understand the issue from the child's perspective. Where a child in care complains about not being able to access their clothing allowance, or being placed with foster carers they don't like, we listen and seriously consider their views. As you may be aware, many children have committed suicide for what some adults would consider lesser issues than these.

In trying to understand children's points of view, we should also try to remember ourselves in less wrinkled days. I am sure we all have “significant traumas” from our childhood that haunt us still when adults didn't understand us, or refused to see things from our perspective.

Children who complain to the Commission do not always get the outcome they want. However, our staff explain to them the reasons for decisions that affect them in a way which is appropriate for their age and capacity to understand - engaging with them in our decision making process. Using an analogy, it is a bit like, being told "I know you ordered the chicken but we are out of chicken. However, madam might like to try some of our other wonderful dishes and we will throw in a complementary dessert for the inconvenience..."

## **Lesson no.2 – concepts and planning**

Children often have great ideas but how often do we act upon them in decision making processes? How can children be expected to learn to plan their time and activities if we don't involve them in our planning?

If the government is going to build a facility for children, those responsible for the project should engage with them at the conceptual stage. This helps get it right the first time - which is obviously more cost effective in the long term. For example, 10 adults might sit around a table and decide to build a sports facility for the young people in their community. "Let's build a football field. I loved footy when I was young." The facility is built but hardly anyone uses it, because football is out and skate parks are in and no one likes the local football coach.

So when the Commission was invited to participate in a committee to progress the development of a sports and recreational facility for Indigenous children on Palm Island in North Queensland, we saw our role as not so much telling the committee what children wanted, but *telling the committee to ask children what they wanted*. The children wanted a building shaped like a turtle. We were delighted. The Northern Territory underwent a similar exercise and the children there wanted a building shaped like a crocodile.

## **Lesson no.3 – developing and building**

So we have the concept for our building – a turtle. Now there are turtles, and there are turtles. Some turtles do not meet building standards and some do. Perhaps there are some features turtles that can't support a roof in cyclonic conditions. Children will understand these things – if we explain the ins and outs of turtle construction. There is room for negotiation and variation in the development and building process, and it is important the clients (the children) are part of this process.

Imagine engaging an architect to build a house – say, a Mediterranean dream home made from mud clay. Then, when building began, the builders constructed a 1970s weatherboard cottage. Between the initial concept of mud bricks, and the final outcome – the weatherboards – there was obviously a lot of decision making in which the client, was not involved. It may have been because the humidity of the climate was not suitable for mud clay, or the budget didn't allow for it – but if this was not explained, the client would obviously be extremely dissatisfied with the outcome.

In the same way, it is important to ensure that children are part of development and building processes where the outcomes affect them. Children are entitled to

know what we do with their ideas, and how they contribute to the scheme of things.

As mentioned earlier in this session, the Commission consulted with Indigenous children in Cape York schools in formulating its submission to the Fitzgerald Cape York Justice Study in 2001. The study was carried out by the Queensland Government to address violence in Cape York communities. The primary school children consulted provided ideas and solutions about how their communities could be better places to live. The Commission analysed their feedback and incorporated it into the final submission to the study. When the draft of the submission was complete, a copy was also sent to the principals of participating schools so they could read the collective views of their students, and see what recommendations the Commission had made to Government on the basis of their feedback. In this way, the principals and children could see that their input was being noted and acted on.

When the Report on the Fitzgerald Justice Study was released, the Commission's submission was included in full, and included all the comments made by the children consulted. The Commission wrote to the schools again and told them where they could access a full copy of the report so they could show the students that their views had been published.

In addition, the children's views appeared in Queensland's leading newspaper with the observation that this was probably the first time government had consulted with Indigenous children on an issue which deeply affects their lives – violence.

The Queensland Government released its whole-of-government response to the report, and that document also reflected some of the views of the primary school students. The Commission again informed the schools of this outcome.

To see the views of Indigenous primary school children effectively reaching and touching the minds of Brisbane-based policy makers was heartening. It effectively meant that an eight-year-old in remote Queensland could and did participate in government decision-making processes and influence the Queensland Cabinet! A five-year-old once told me that one drop of water could raise the level of the ocean. He was right.

#### **Lesson no.4 – reviewing and evaluating**

People don't always get it right. If one of our peers makes a mistake, we often say, "it's O.K. to make mistakes, as long as you learn from them," or, "it's O.K., you're tired," or, "you couldn't have known."

How often is this same reasoning applied to children when they make mistakes?

Do we allow children to review **our** decisions when **we** get it wrong?

In 2002, the Commission conducted a project to look at volatile substance misuse by young people in Queensland. This is a growing problem which has attracted significant media attention throughout the state. The project was initiated after a group of young people who were users and ex-users of volatile substances

approached the Commission with concerns about the impact the practice was having on their lives and that of their siblings.

At this time, there was little research on the causes of volatile substance misuse, or possible solutions for reducing its incidence. So the Commission went to the people who knew – those young people engaged in misuse – now or in the past. The reasons they gave for misuse of volatile substances ranged from boredom, to getting high (cheaply) and escaping from problems at home. They also suggested strategies to reduce volatile substance misuse, and told the Commission they had actively encouraged retailers to adopt more responsible retail practices. Their views and suggestions were incorporated into the Commission's report, "Volatile substance misuse in Queensland" which proposes a seven stage community-based strategy to address misuse.

This strategy is currently being trialled in several cities and towns throughout Queensland. The Commission is hopeful it will impact on levels of misuse. In addition, the Commission's staff have worked with communities throughout Queensland where volatile substance misuse problems exist to ensure that young people are included as part of the decision-making process at all stages of the strategy, including its evaluation.

The strategy proposed is not a magic fix-all solution, but a practical application of the policy cycle to a problem at the community level. In this sense, it is poses methodology for solving problems and can (and should) be applied to the specific circumstances of each different community and the young people misusing volatile substances. At its crux is the involvement of young people in any proposed solutions. This is necessary to ensure that communities get it right, or at least come close to the mark.

Strategies developed to deal with misuse without consulting young people have resulted in the following scenarios:

- Police taking spray cans used for sniffing and throwing them in the bin. After police exit, the young people retrieve the cans from the bin and are sniffing ten minutes later
- Stores refusing to sell spray cans to young people. Instead, they steal them from stores or elsewhere
- Adults educating school children about the dangers of sniffing. This leads to an increase in volatile substance misuse, as more children know how they can get high from products they did not previously realise were intoxicating.

### **Lesson no.5 – power**

If governments and society's institutions and structures are to move beyond tokenistic involvement of children in decision-making processes, adults must be prepared to share some of the power they hold as decision makers. More than a few of us may have played the role of the "benevolent dictator" when engaging with children. In this sense, it is interesting to note a significant rise in the use of the term "best interests of the child" in government circles. Yet there has been no corresponding increase in explanations about how to determine a child's "best interests". In the legal domain, particularly in family law, there has been an

ongoing tension between a child's best interests and the direct views and wishes of the child.

However commonsense, as well as most children, would tell us that such terms are not mutually exclusive. Children's views and wishes must be considered when determining what constitutes their best interests. This implies a certain sharing of power.

For some time, governments have discussed how to effectively "engage" with the community and its various members, including children. When addressing issues impacting on children, or issues children wish to influence generally, our decision-making processes need to be considered from a child-centric perspective. In the turtle building project mentioned earlier, the issue for the Commission is not so much, "How do we involve children in building this facility?" but rather, "*how do we get the facility the children want?*"

The Commission currently faces the challenge of finding effective ways to engage with children during the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect's Brisbane conference in 2004. It is hoped we will be able to maximise children and young people's participation in proceedings. The Commissioner is a co-chair of the conference's organising committee and the Commission also co-chairs the children's participation sub-committee.

We are aware there are many different forms participation can take. These have been captured in a number of models, 'ladders' or 'typologies'<sup>1</sup>. These models help us understand the level of participation in any particular practice and also help us plan activities involving children.

Drawing on others' work, Gill Westhorp<sup>2 3</sup>, of the Youth Sector Training Council of South Australia, identified a six-stage continuum of youth involvement. This continuum does not imply that having more or less control is best, but that options exist and some will be more appropriate in certain situations than others.

The first stage of the continuum is 'ad hoc input'. This looks at input occurring through opportunities such as creative art workshops, or periodic activities held on youth days or during youth weeks to stimulate input. It may also include individual discussions with staff, suggestion boxes, documented policies on client input or complaints procedures, regular staff sessions and information sessions to keep participants informed and enable responses.

The second stage is 'structured consultation'. This kind of input can be gathered through general forums, workshops and discussion groups involving young people, issue-specific forums, focus groups, cooperation with other youth organisations, research and surveys to gather the views of young people, or reference groups.

---

<sup>1</sup> Extract from: Guijt, I. and L. van Velduizen. (1998). ***Participation and Sustainable Agriculture: Comparing Experiences with PRA and PTD***. Drylands Issues Paper 79. London: IIED.

<sup>2</sup> Westhorp, G. (1987). ***Planning for Youth Participation: A Resource Kit***, Youth Sector Training Council of South Australia.

<sup>3</sup> The Foundation for Young Australians (nd). ***Youth Partnership and Participation, Resource 2: Principles of Youth Participation***, [Online] Available: <http://www.ayf.org.au/Resources/Youth%20Participation/5.htm>, [Accessed 8 April 2002].

Next is 'influence'. This stage embraces the use of advisory groups or youth councils or other formal processes to gather input which can be acknowledged and acted on through the recommendations of advisory groups, meetings organised between youth forums and others involved in management to ensure interaction and flow of information, and youth representatives given the opportunity to sit on management committees. Input gathered through delegation can come from youth spokespeople, youth researching youth, peer education, employment of young people, subcommittees and staff selection panels. Other input can also be generated through project publicity and media work, fundraising, hospitality roles, training programs, or documented "terms of reference" to provide guidelines, direction and checks and balances for delegated responsibilities.

'Negotiation' encompasses integration of young people into existing structures, mentoring, youth advocates, youth participation, documented agreements, policy forums, and adapted meeting procedures and structures that are more "youth friendly".

Finally, 'controlled input' can come from young people's groups with no adult involvement, which limit membership to young people. In this stage, young people have voting rights, balance of power on management, and central involvement in planning or reference groups of young people with responsibility for the strategic directions of the project. When young people participate at this level, adults take only support roles providing advice, helping to refine ideas, and supporting decisions.

An example of children's participation through 'controlled input' was highlighted at last year's 'Students' Speak Out!' breakfast – an event held during Queensland Parliament's first regional sitting in Townsville, North Queensland. The Commission was keen to ensure that children had the opportunity to meet with the Members of Parliament and directly represent their views and concerns to them. The Commission organised a breakfast where around 100 North Queensland students were encouraged to raise their views with around 40 Parliamentarians.

With only one or two Parliamentarians to each table of five or six students, the students did not feel outnumbered. The breakfast was well received by students and Members of Parliament, and provided the opportunity for Parliamentarians to hear on the views of their younger constituents first hand. The breakfast was hosted by students, cooked by students and items for discussion were determined by students. The Commission merely provided support for the event.

In addition, the Commission is currently developing a child advocacy training program to help agencies working with children to engage with them in a way that promotes and protects their rights, interests and well being. The program will look at how to work creatively with children at all stages of decision making processes.

As the Commission evolves and seeks to develop new ways of engaging with children and young people, and better mechanisms for their active citizenship in society, we are challenged to share more of our power with our key client group – Queensland children. To do this, we must advocate for governments and communities to follow our lead in involving them in decision-making processes.

We need to rethink the lexicon of child protection in the context of engaging, involving and empowering children to determine their best interests in partnership with those entrusted to protect them. Our engagement mechanisms should also empower children to be better equipped to protect themselves. To achieve this, we need to share knowledge and the power that goes with it.

By sharing our power with children we do not “give it up” but rather enhance the collective power of communities and the children who are a part of them. By working in partnership with children, our collective power to influence decision making is much greater than the sum of its parts.

There are a few eight-year-old children in Cape York who may be starting to believe that this might be so.

That concludes these lessons. You’ll be relieved to hear there is no written homework today. However, the next time you involve children in your decision making processes, take the time to look at the world through their eyes and explore with them ways in which they can exert their influence. It may prove quite empowering for you as well as them.