

Honouring Children's Voices: Children as Consultants in a Playground Enhancement Project

Presentation to 6th Australian Family and Community Strengths Conference – Strengths & Assets Summit, University of Newcastle, 30 November 2010

Nadine Cameron and Liz Orr, Brotherhood of St Laurence

OVERVIEW

This presentation looks at the importance of consulting children in relation to those public projects that are likely to impact them, the specific findings from our consultation work and principles for collaboration between different levels of research. This was not an evaluation as such so we can't speak about how our consultation has compared to others or measured against pre-established criteria. Our project was very successful, though, so we can speak with confidence about why we think it worked.

What we want to get out of this presentation is to press upon you the importance of consulting children and prepare you to look with interest for our future publications where we will be able to go into much more detail.

CONSULTING CHILDREN

The concept of consulting children on matters of relevance to them is not new. It is more than twenty years since the idea was given endorsement by 192 countries, including Australia, in the context of the Conventions of the Rights of the Child. Article 12 of the convention states: 'When adults are making decisions that affect children, children have the right to say what they think should happen and have their opinions taken into account'. Yet, routine consultation with children in the development of services that are likely to impact them is rare within either the private or public sectors.

The embracement by Australian federal and state governments of the social inclusion agenda, however, has provided some impetus to local authorities and community agencies to seek children's input in relation to specific public projects. What social inclusion means for children, according to Pam Cahir (2008), CEO of Early Childhood Australia, is that children have the 'opportunity to develop their talents and capacities to the full and be active and valued members of society'. An aspect of this, according to Cahir, is that individuals in positions of authority commit to hearing the voices of children.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The Hume Early Years Partnership facilitates the collaboration of over 30 agencies in the City of Hume and is the governance group for the Communities for Children (CfC). In 2009 the facilitating partner of CfC, Broadmeadows Uniting Care (BUC), called for expressions of interest to undertake projects in one of two categories. The latter category supported the CfC strategy, 'We are all community'. Building on evaluation feedback – specifically from the Parents Advisory Group – that called for greater engagement with children in future work, the Brotherhood of St Laurence, together with the City of Hume, submitted a project proposal to engage children in the Broadmeadows area in the design of a concept plan for the enhancement of a local park, the Jacana Reserve. This site was selected because of its location close to schools and the central business and transport area. It also had the geographic infrastructure that would enable the project to deliver outcomes.

The project was seen as an opportunity to ensure that, through consulting directly with children about its design, Jacana Reserve would be reflective of the diverse needs and interests of children in Broadmeadows. The project aimed to document the elements and principles of successfully engaging children in consultation processes and share these with the partnership members. This in turn could support advocacy efforts regarding the involvement of children in consultations about future projects undertaken within the City of Hume.

A reference group was formed with the project partners, local schools, and the parents' advisory group. The in-kind support from these groups and other local schools and agencies was facilitated by a vibrant part-time Children's Voices project worker.

WHY PLAYGROUNDS MATTER

It is important that playgrounds are designed well. Playgrounds are a central site for children to develop their physical capabilities and social skills and learn about the natural environment and wider society. According to Fiona Robbe, good design not only communicates about 'the world, friendship, family and the community, it also presents concepts and abstract ideas in ways that are accessible for children'. Ideas such as time, space and numbers, for example, can be represented through particular design features either graphically or three-dimensionally.

CONSULTATION PROCESS

Values/Principles underpinning the consultation: We began with the premise that children of primary school age are capable of understanding concepts and communicating suggestions that are highly relevant to the development of services of which they are ostensible beneficiaries. So, that is, we understood children don't just have the right to have 'a bit of a say' but are capable of making recommendations that are original and highly useful to projects. Moreover, we understood that failure to consult children can compromise the utility of the final product. Adults charged with the final responsibility of selecting and implementing a design may lack crucial knowledge of either those things that appeal to children generally or that appeal to that group of children for whose use the public facility is intended. Children can also conceptualise their environment and learning experiences in ways that are difficult for adults to anticipate or intuit. Claire Warden comments that too often, left to plan without the expert advice of children, adults will often make play spaces too safe or simple, thus suppressing the 'thrill of adventure'.

Description of process: The consultation process had two main components, working with an initial primary school – Broadmeadows Valley Primary School – and then a workshop, held on International Youth Day which brought together children from BVPS, Upfield, Campbellfield and Meadows Primary Schools. Both the Broadmeadows Valley Primary School consultation activities and the activities at the workshop involved approximately 50 children – boys and girls from grade 2–6 (ages 8–12) from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds.

The Broadmeadows Valley Primary School students were, in a first session, asked to state responses in group discussion to the following questions: What are your favourite activities when playing outside? What actions do you like doing outside: e.g. running, climbing, jumping, digging? What are your favourite activities in the park? We chose to ask them these questions rather than what they would like in the park for a few reasons including that:

- 1) It is easier to cater to activities children have specified they enjoy in a final design as opposed to particular equipment they have requested and

2) It is easier for children to give meaningful answers about what they enjoy doing than have them think through which equipment provides them with the most enjoyable experiences when they do not have *immediate* access to all relevant equipment.

This strategy is consistent with the recommendations of Built for Kids, a guide to creating Child-Friendly Spaces by the NSW Commission for Children and Young People.

An initial brainstorm list was supplemented by another list that the children created following a visit to the park. On a subsequent day, the children were asked to *draw* images of what they would like included in the park.

During the workshop consultation involving the four schools –the children were organised into six groups of a mix of ages and again asked to both brainstorm lists of ideas for the park in small groups which they then presented to the larger group and, following this, to draw images of their ideal parks. Both the written lists and the images were presented in a manner that was selected by the children.

What about the consultation process worked, or how did we manage to elicit good data:

- **Having engaged staff.** The staff from Broadmeadows Valley Primary School in particular, but all the schools, value students developing knowledge, academic, physical and social skills but also place a strong emphasis on students being able to contribute to community life.

It is essential that any activities involving children are facilitated by those who don't just know the participating children well but have a **deep belief in the purpose of your project** because their level of enthusiasm – whether strong or very low – will be transferred to the children who look to them for guidance.

In addition, the steering committee comprised largely those for whom it was not merely a duty but **a passion** to see that the children of Broadmeadows have the opportunity to shape their communities. So again, you need not just experts in areas relevant to your project – architects, landscape gardeners, for example – but experts who are sympathetic to children and are willing to see children as experts on their own lives.

- **Engaging the child participants properly.** Our main project worker, Megan Nagy, physically sat on the same level as the children when she worked with them to reinforce the flat hierarchy that would be operating between herself and the child consultants. She was casual enough, and accessible enough, in manner and in her choice of language to ensure that the children didn't feel intimidated, but rather excited, by the task being set out before them, and serious enough that the children could sense the information they gave would be the genuine basis of a real world project implementation.
- **Ensuring that the children understood the process and the outcome, and that both 'belonged' to them.** The children were informed of the rationale of the project and the process and kept apprised of progress all the way up until its implementation. This allowed the children to retain trust in the project team and allowed them to feel effectual. The children were also encouraged to feel from the outset that the project 'belonged' to them; that they were themselves researchers; that it was through the empirical data they collected about the activities they enjoyed and hypotheses they formed that the council would be able to design a good place for kids. They understood too that they would ultimately be the beneficiaries of the project they were having input into.

- **Giving the children the capacity to consider the parks through a range of modalities**

Whilst this couldn't be organised for the workshop consultation, the Broadmeadows Valley Primary School students were given the opportunity to use both their imaginations and their senses to arrive at their ideas about what could be done with Jacana Reserve. The visit to the park allowed the children to respond with fresh information 'in their bones' if you like, about what they like doing. Decision-making informed by immediate experience *can* be especially important for children given that they tend to have fewer experiences or memories to draw on to formulate preferences. This is especially true for children with a kinaesthetic learning style.

- **Allowing the children to respond in a range of media**

That the children were able to respond in writing and then in images to the question of what they would like to see in parks was important to the success of the project. The children at the multi-school consultation were asked whether they preferred drawing or writing about the park and they were evenly divided. Some said they didn't like writing down their answers because they felt self-conscious about not being able to spell. Others were happy to put words down but felt embarrassed about not being able to draw. We can think about drawing or sculpting as more accessible media for children and that is true for some children. But the older children are aware of the extent to which what they depict in graphic form departs from an accurate representation of objects and that self-consciousness can interfere with documentation.

- **Allowing the children at the workshop to respond in whatever way they felt comfortable**

When each of the six groups of children presented their lists of things relating to parks that they liked and their pictures of their ideal parks, some groups had their whole group come up to speak, others chose to use representatives. Some groups read their own personal lists, other groups read out a collective list. This kind of flexibility reinforced for the participants that they really did have a say over this process.

- **Making clear to children that their input is respected by giving them as many opportunities to speak/present as they needed**

Every opportunity was given during both the Broadmeadows Valley Primary School consultation and the multi-school consultation for each child to speak. Even at the end of the time officially given over to the presentation of lists and pictures, the consultation team made time for those who might have belatedly got up the confidence to speak up to have ago. And indeed there were a few children who, not given this opportunity, might have felt they hadn't contributed to the best of their ability. So patience and anticipating that children can warm up to these things slowly can be important.

- **Allowing children to raise questions about the design process**

The children did not just have contact with the project team but were given the opportunity to ask the City of Hume Manager of Parks and Horticulture, who had the job of conveying the children's interests to the architects, a range of questions about the design process and parks development in general. The questions they asked, which will be detailed in future papers, were quite sophisticated and underscored the extent of children's capacity to be involved in projects at this level.

OUTCOMES

The outcomes of this project involve both processes and products and are also both short and long term. In the short term, the project demonstrated a meaningful respect for children because it was undertaken within the context of knowing there was a budget to implement some playground enhancements. Furthermore, respect for children's voices and choices was demonstrated through the way the project was structured and delivered. The workshop day was a very engaging event for all concerned, and to see and hear the increasing number of children participation in brainstorming and presenting their ideas was heartening for the adults present. The fact that the reference group agreed to a democratic voting process for the ultimate decision and that indeed a double flying fox with landscaping will be launched at the Jacana reserve on 16 December, is another example of respect for the children's decision.

The ownership of this project sits broadly as evident by the other products. The project team have documented events in a range of media: a booklet and PowerPoint presentation will be made available to all schools, Hume Council, HEYPG and on the BSL website. These are ways we hope to convey information and share ideas about successful consultation with children.

The process outcomes include a sustainable interest by the Parents Advisory Group, Hume City Council, local schools, BSL and the HEYPG to continue this approach and project into the future. Plans are underway to facilitate the involvement of children in the upper age group 10–12 in a Hume Youth Conference during Youth Week.

However, our main aim of building in a recognition of the importance of incorporating consultation with children into everyday planning is an ongoing venture.

COMMENTS ON THE COLLABORATION

Collaboration between ground level researchers doing the consulting and a second tier researcher documenting the consultation process can be very fraught. Among the things that have made this collaboration successful are:

- **Having a few 'sets of eyes' is better for the documentation of process. Those deeply immersed in a process always have blind spots.** We all have behaviours and implement strategies and methods of which we are largely unconscious. Even those actions we commit deliberately we might not realise link to form a pattern of similar behaviours or strategies. For this reason, it is always a good idea, if documenting your process and not just the outcome of a consultation is important to you, to have *someone* else involved.
- **The fact that the primary research, or consultation team and the secondary researcher – the documenter – kept as their main focus the capacity for children to participate.** The fact that both tiers of researchers retained in their sights that children being allowed to impact a major public project was our priority meant we were all prepared to admit areas of ignorance, shortcomings and mistakes. And conflicts borne of insults to ego were, for this reason, avoided.
- **Bringing together practice wisdom and theoretical knowledge allows analysis of process from two different perspectives.** The documentation of this process benefited from the intelligence associated with years of practice experience with the relevant population as represented by the project manager and project worker and knowledge of strategies for which documented evidence exist and the philosophical and policy impetus for implementing them. This project also became in some respects a piece of action research insofar as discussions not only between
- **Involvement in the delivery of a project on the part of both the research and service delivery areas of an organisation lends greater credibility to the broader advocacy that can come from undertaking a project such as this one.**

FUTURE QUESTIONS FOR EXPLORATION

Our research threw up lots of questions for further exploration. Unfortunately we don't have time to go into them here but they will be detailed in our report and further presentations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Only engage project workers who like and know how to work with children. Also, be aware that, whereas consultations should always be guided by previous findings on what works with children, the kinds of data you will collect and the parts of the process that receive particular emphasis will also be dependent on the previous experiences and theoretical interests of your project team.
- Just 'asking' children is not enough to allow them to feel empowered; they should be kept informed of the progress of the project they have been involved in up to the point of implementation and even the results of evaluations and conference papers!
- Inform children about and assist them to understand the symbolic importance of what they are doing, ie that they are not just giving feedback in relation to one particular public project but, rather, proving that children have the capability to contribute to public projects of scale.
- Validate different conceptualisations of parks. Be aware that children not born in Australia, and born in different parts of Australia, will have different experience and sense of what a park should look like.
- Think of what opportunities that involving children in consultations might offer their parents. Involving parents who have recently migrated or are marginalised in the facilitation of workshops with children might assist them to become more involved in their local communities and schools in the future.
- Think of a range of uses to which your data can be put beyond your immediate project. In the case of this project there are moves to establish a Youth Advisory Council in Hume.
- Use the traction, or interest, you have created amongst professionals involved in facilitating consultations with children to create other child-centred activities.

CONCLUSION

Consulting with children is consistent with the new Victorian Early Years Learning Framework and the National EYLF. The EYLF, developed by COAG, is part of the broader National Quality Framework pertaining to early childhood education and care. It not only specifies access for all children to early childhood education but sets out principles for fostering healthy learning and development. A particular task identified for early years educators is ensuring that all children are 'connected with and can contribute to their world'. This project is an example of using the skills children have in working as part of groups, completing structured activities, work together to share resources fairly, and can be empowered to make choices that influence outcomes in particular contexts that relate to their world (see page 21 of the VEYLDF 2010).

Internationally and locally, through projects such as the present one, we are accumulating evidence for the best way to consult with children. The current policy environment demands we include children in the design and running of our cities and communities. So no excuses: What are you waiting for?