Youth Participation in Service Development

By Melanie Atkinson

I want to discuss the idea of youth consultation and participation in relation to the establishment of a new service in Christchurch (Arahina ki Otautahi) for children and young people in the care of Child, Youth and Family who are not engaged in education or training.

In managing the establishment of this service over the past two years I have looked at ways for it to be shaped by the voice of children and young people. While there is New Zealand literature which has captured the views and experiences of young people who are in care and also young people who are disengaged in education, I wanted the formation of this project to incorporate a youth participatory approach.

The first activity to formally involve young people was a youth consultation process to inform the property brief for the Ministry of Education. I met with students who were in residential care at the Te Oranga Care and Protection residence and attending Kingslea School, to facilitate some activities about the potential learning spaces and outdoor spaces that needed to be developed for this new service. A key resource that informed my approach was a guide[i] for involving young people in school design developed by Lighthouse (The Scottish National Centre for Architecture, Design and the City) in 2005 to help people create their own strategies for working with young people to design future learning and teaching environments.

The guide provided a range of tools and activities for facilitating participatory consultation with young people. The approach was relevant for youth and, while they were set in the context of designing a learning/teaching environment, many of the processes would be appropriate for other contexts requiring a participatory approach. The guide is fairly comprehensive and covers ten different stages, but the most useful material for me was the ideas for the consultation workshop activities.

In most cases a participatory consultation would be with future 'users' of the learning environment, however in this case the youth at Te Oranga that I worked with would not go on to attend this new service. Given this I felt that a smaller scale approach than described in the guide was more appropriate. However, scaling it down also brought with it the potential for the approach to become tick-box consultation and tokenism. Hart's Ladder[ii] (1992) provides some key questions that assist in determining to what extent the nature of the involvement of young people in a project is meaningful participation. The Lighthouse guide has a questionnaire and also encourages the facilitator to reflect on their approach at regular intervals in order to grow their practice and move beyond token consultation.

I am currently in the planning stage for the second activity, where the aim is to incorporate youth participation into the staff recruitment procedures. There are a variety of models that have been used in other organisations, for example;

- Applicants delivering a presentation for a panel of young people on a given theme
- A youth panel that have prepared a list of questions for the applicants

- One or two young people becoming members of the recruitment panel
- Young people facilitating informal discussions with applicants around an appropriate theme

While there are established youth councils or the like, I think in this situation there is value in partnering with young people who are currently in care and/or not engaged in education. Additional considerations for planning the approach include how to provide young people with the necessary support to ensure they have the capability and confidence to actively and meaningfully participate. Two resources from the UK that are proving to be particularly useful; a 'How To Guide'[iii] for involving children and young people in the recruitment and selection of staff, produced by 'Participation Works Partnership' and also an interview panel training pack[iv] for children and young people developed by YouthCAN.

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[i] http://www.gov.scot/resource/doc/920/0049548.pdf
[ii] http://www.myd.govt.nz/documents/engagement/harts-ladder.pdf
[iii]

http://www.participationworks.org.uk/files/webfm/shop_files/how%20to%20guide%20Recruitment/index.pdf
[iv] http://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/extra/article/109379/Involving-Children-and-Young-People-in-the-Recruitment-and-Selection-of-Staff

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