

Consulting with children: multiple layers of insight

jonathon.sargeant@acu.edu.au

ACU|education

Children's Voice in Australia

“Children do not have an official or defined role to play in mainstream politics and policy making. It is easy, therefore, for decision makers to overlook including children in these processes. And, if children are invited to ‘sit at the table’ their voices are rarely truly heard.”

Australian Human Rights Commission

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

- Many Australians, both adult and child have a poor understanding of the convention and its core principles.
- Reticence to enact Article 42 of the convention which states: *“States Parties undertake to make the principles and provisions of the Convention widely known, by appropriate and active means, to adults and children alike “(UNCRC 1989).*

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

- There is no National commissioner for children, but some states do have them.
- No Australian Education law or policy refers to the UNCRC directly.
- Australia has no Bill of Rights nor does the Constitution require the automatic incorporation of international treaties.
- The protections of the UNCRC are more a consequence of the Australian cultural and political systems than any application of the UNCRC since ratification.

Myths of Child Rights

- ◆ *Some adults feel that we are seeking to allow children to have a voice that is more important than the adult voice.*
- ◆ *Children's rights invasion*
- ◆ *Children's voice is more important than the adult voice.*

Where do the myths come from?

Images of Childhood.

Generation Xbox, Gen Z, Nintendo Generation, iPod Generation, Millennium children, Nought-y Generation, alpha kids

Childhood is popularly not considered to be in a child's best interest;

- media influence
- public safety
- materialism
- constructed and technological age
- information rich, knowledge poor
- exploitation
- sexualisation

Generational mixed messages

- Teachers / Helping Professionals
 - Engage the kids V Results at all costs
- Parents
 - Get involved V Don't interfere
- Teenagers
 - Be responsible V You're not old enough
- Primary school children
 - You are the future V You wouldn't understand

You are the future, you wouldn't understand.

How do we know this?

How do adults see children?

The Childhood Paradox

free
marginalised
powerful
annoying
little
disadvantaged
becoming
vulnerable
abused
inexperienced
loud
silenced
delightful
innocent
trapped
fragile
carefree
lovely
altruistic
ignored
uncontrolled
determined
obnoxious
misunderstood
empty
naughty
exploited
resilient
cute
selfish
sweet
weak
needy

Children's "place"

- ◆ *Many adults feel invaded by children*
- ◆ *It is not about who is more important, it is about the equity of visibility of views and opinions.* Elena Giacomini, 2009
- ◆ *Most professions that deal about the needs of children and what is best for them"* (Smith, 2007, p. 3).
- *Our realities are connected to how we view and relate with the world around us*
- *What we know is shaped by aims, desires, culture and intentions we place on working with children*
- *How we 'meet' the children, decide on research tools and balance our different interpretations are not merely a matter of technique but a philosophical dialogue about our positions on consulting with children*

Children's "place"

- Many children accept and adopt the "roles" that adults designate to them.
- Children often do not know the "script"
- Movement from being a member of a family to a social group, to a class (primary school) to a member of a timetable (secondary school)
- The under appreciated role of the child in driving social change.

Children's influence

- Assimilation
 - "schools will give the government an immense moral influence in the country, such as is not to be attained in any other way" AJHR, 1863, E-9, p 18
- Marketing
 - "We're relying on the kid to pester the mom to buy the product, rather than going straight to the mom." Barbara A. Martino, Advertising Executive
 - Persistence nagging is not as powerful as Importance nagging
- Propaganda (children's books)
 - *Don't Trust a Fox in a Green Meadow or the Oath of a Jew*
 - *Shrek*
- *iconography*
 - *The Diary of Anne Frank*

Sources of information readily available to many children

Strangers Parents Song Lyrics Siblings
Neighbours Radio WWW Chat rooms Advertising
Peers Neighbourhood Home News
Social Clergy School Cyberbullying Internet
Advertising Television Extended family Social Networks
Clubs Private MySpace Global information Gaming
Facebook Strangers Advertising Personal Experience
Mobile phones (SMS) Gossip Reading Grandparents Neighbours
Strangers Peers Print media Sport Teachers
Strangers Teachers

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 3

1. In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.
2. States Parties undertake to ensure the child such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being, taking into account the rights and duties of his or her parents, legal guardians, or other individuals legally responsible for him or her, and, to this end, shall take all appropriate legislative and administrative measures.
 1. States Parties shall ensure that the institutions, services and facilities responsible for the care or protection of children shall conform with the standards established by competent authorities, particularly in the areas of safety, health, in the number and suitability of their staff, as well as competent supervision.

(UNICEF 1989)

UNCRC

Article 28

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular:
 - a. Make primary education compulsory and available free to all;
 - b. Encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child, and take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need;
 - c. Make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means;
 - d. Make educational and vocational information and guidance available and accessible to all children;
 - e. Take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates.
2. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that school discipline is administered in a manner consistent with the child's human dignity and in conformity with the present Convention.
3. States Parties shall promote and encourage international cooperation in matters relating to education, in particular with a view to contributing to the elimination of ignorance and illiteracy throughout the world and facilitating access to scientific and technical knowledge and modern teaching methods. In this regard, particular account shall be taken of the needs of developing countries.

UNCRC

Article 29

1. States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:
 - a. The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;
 - b. The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;
 - c. The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own;
 - d. The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;
 - e. The development of respect for the natural environment.

(UNICEF 1989)

UNCRC

Article 12.1;

“States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child”

Article 13 states, in part, that a

“child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive, and impart information ... orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child’s choice”.

(UNICEF 1989)

Key assumptions

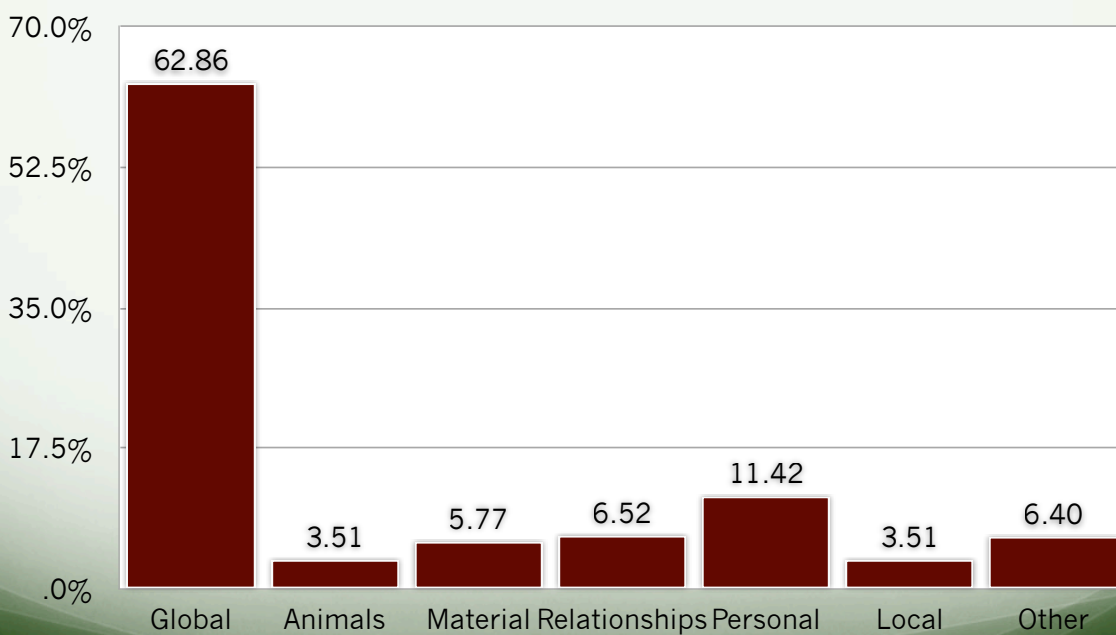
- Children’s voices do not stand alone, they only become strong by appropriating the voice of others (Kupfer, 2009)
- Adult voices, therefore, may carry children’s voices in to new contexts and give them a larger and wider audience to which the child’s voice was originally intended
- Significant time spent observing children’s communication competencies and preferences results in a much stronger relationship between the consultants and children
- Children in every context have the right to expect a role in decision-making irrespective of their age, ethnicity, locale or developmental competence
- Young children *are* capable of making powerful and persuasive contributions to our knowledge about quality and appropriate strategies for improving their experiences in prior-to-school, non-school and education settings

The children's answers

The children show;

- honesty in their answers
- understanding of questions
- consistent interpretation of the questions.
- a direct and personal association to their own lives.
- an ability to prioritise their thoughts.

If you could change one thing in the world, what would it be?



What is one thing you would like to tell an adult

- Stop thinking they are cool and smart. They should listen to us*
Stop being so agro all the time*
- When I have a fight with my friends*, When I get problems*, If people bully me*, If people make fun of me*, When I have fights with my parents*, If I have fights with my sisters*
- That there is a lot of good & bad stuff going on in my LIFE.
- That they can be bit mean sometimes. That I can be mean sometimes without intending to be.
- That she will never understand what I have been through and she shouldn't try to make me the same as everyone else.
- How many things are happening in my life at the moment & how it is to cope with it all.

What is a question you have for adults?

- How to be sure to trust friends and teachers in what they know best?
- Why do people insist on lying and trying to make others lives rubbish.
- How was the earth made?
- Why did god take my friends Liam's life?
- What will happen after you're dead.
- Why can't every country be good to each other?
- Why are some people born deaf and blind
- Why are people racist? How come Africa has so much poverty? Why do we have homework
- Do you think that homework fails to allow your brain to relax after a hard day at school
- What to do when a friend dies.
- What happens when you die...I was going to say the meaning of life but...TOO BORING!!
- Are you happy with who you are?
- Why does people have to die, especially parents?
- **Why did my dad die? And is he proud of me?**

What would adults say you would say? Why?

- They'd say all we want is a new phone, or DS or something like that.
- They think we just want them to buy us stuff
- They think we don't care about anything in the world
- They think we're really superficial

Why?

- ◆ That's what we look like but they don't really care or ask us.

Why were your happy and worry answers so different to the change question?

- Because you put the word world in the question.
- We'd already talked about our own lives and if we answered that way again that would be selfish

Where to now?

- Children are not ignorant of the issues affecting the community - locally and globally.
- They use an “importance filter” to place priority on those that effect their own world at any particular time.
- Information from the adult world gets through but children respond based on the "importance filter".
- The child maintains a local and family orientated focus and views the future with an optimism that is not based on ignorance but on a genuine expectation and hope that the future will be positive.
- Article 12 – Voice, Article 13 – Communication choice
- Provision is strong in the Australian context but a greater need to move from protection focus to participation
 - Significant challenge
 - Article 42*
- Increase opportunity for children of all ages to freely express their views and have it included in the conversations surrounding matters affecting them.

Consultant Dilemmas

Building a consultation strategy: Doing what you say you'll do

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Consultation Unknowns 1

- **How will your work impact/improve the children’s lifeworlds?**
- **What are the key characteristics of the children in your work?**
 - **Age, Gender, Community context, Speakers of other languages, Special Needs, Socio-Economic-Status, Culture/Ethnicity**
- **What do you expect will be the challenges in consulting with these particular children?**
- **How will consulting with these children intentionally inform your work?**
- **Do you use appropriate language?**
 - **Child friendly**
 - **Parent friendly**
 - **Organisation friendly**
 - **Legally defensible**
 - **Mandatory reporting**
- **How will you recruit your participants?**
- **Why will you recruit your participants in this way?**

- **How will you go about gaining informed consent from a child?**
- **How does a child's age impact on gaining informed consent?**
- **How will you know if the child *fully* understands the nature of their involvement?**
- **How will you validate that the consent given by the child is in fact what the child's intends?**
- **What will you do if the children choose to, or appear as if they would like to stop participating?**
- **How will you ensure that you follow the procedures you have proposed?**
- **How will you identify if your participants are distressed or unwilling to continue?**

Formulation

- What are you actually trying to find out?
- What will be the main role/s of the children in your project? Do you really need to involve them?
- To what extent will your preparations consider how children and their perspectives might be included over the entire process?
- How does your planned project consider the mandate of Article 13 of the UNCRC?

Building a Consultation team: the Consultant Capacity Analysis

- What Team attributes will ensure the success of the project?
- What Research Team attributes are still required for the success of the project?
- How will you address these needs?
- Team of 1?

Other Considerations

- **The consultant – participant relationship**
- **Consent**
- **Power**
 - The balance of power between you and your participants
 - Are you a teacher-researcher?
 - Will your participants know you?
 - Will the participants perceive that they must comply with your wishes?
- **Children's capacity**
 - Physical
 - Emotional
 - Cognitive
 - Psychological
 - Social
 - Age – uniqueness of life stage

Other Considerations

- **Anonymity and Confidentiality**

This is particularly important if the topic is sensitive i.e. truancy, sexual preferences, abuse, etc. Some issues that need considering include:

- Who will witness the data collection?
- Who will see the data?
 - Their teachers, parents, peers
 - How will the data be collected
 - Private interview
 - Written survey
 - Drawings
 - Group (public) discussion
 - Video
 - Online chat room

Next steps...

- you should have a clear idea of **how** and **why** your project will contribute the knowledge base on childhood and how you expect children to be **included** in the overall process.
- Increase opportunity for children of all ages to freely express their views and have it included in the conversations surrounding matters affecting them.
- How...? That's up to you.