

Elevating Youth Engagement

“Yet, without the participation of experts we won’t be successful. And the expert is the child”

Janusz Korczak

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Introduction

The Berry Street Childhood Institute (BSCI) was established in 2012 following Berry Street's commitment to pursue a leadership role in raising awareness about the challenges confronting childhood in the 21st century. This commitment was part of our *Strategic Directions 2027*, which set an intention to increase our impact nationally, without increasing service delivery outside Victoria. The Berry Street Childhood Institute seeks to contribute to: increased understanding and awareness of what sustains a good childhood; and wider and more effective action directed at the amelioration of adverse childhood experiences.

Berry Street believes all children should have a good childhood. The Berry Street Childhood Institute contributes to this vision by collaboratively building and sharing knowledge, encouraging public dialogue and mobilising leadership. From the outset BSCI has understood that young people have a key role to play in defining childhood and leading action and social change towards the improvement of childhood for all children.

A Youth Engagement Coordinator role was part of the founding structure of the BSCI and formative discussions during the development of the Institute included a robust debate about why and how young people should be involved in the Institute's work. This discussion reviewed youth participation frameworks and models, as well as contemporary arguments justifying and challenging our reasons for engaging young people. The outcome was a set of aspirational Youth Engagement Commitment Statements¹, outlining an intention to work alongside young people as equal stakeholders and partners in our work. The Institute acknowledges that, although significant steps have been made towards attaining this goal, there remains a great deal of growth and work ahead before we can call these statements a true reflection of our work.

This paper is a step in that direction. It provides an overview of the history and development of youth participation and engagement nationally and internationally paying specific attention to a context that is of particular relevance to our work; that of child welfare. This paper will also review the development of youth participation within Berry Street itself, before setting the future directions for the Berry Street Childhood Institute.

It should be noted that the Institute understands 'young people' to broadly encompass those aged 12-25, however some projects and initiatives will require a narrower age definition, depending on their focus. For example the 2014 creative competition, *Imagine* (www.imagine.org.au), used social media as a key promotional tool. Facebook and Twitter both have a lower age threshold of 13 and therefore the competition was opened to young people aged 13-25.

¹ See <http://www.childhoodinstitute.org.au/YouthEngagementCommitment>

Concepts and debates about the legitimacy and relevance of youth participation and engagement have a long and contested history. In recent years and in the context of broad (vague) acceptance that youth participation and engagement have a role in society, frameworks for youth participation and engagement have emerged, developing from the levels of Roger Hart's linear 'ladder' model, through the flowing 'pathways' of Harry Shier (see below).

Arguably, a sign of significant progress is the existence today of a number of highly respected, youth-founded, and youth-driven organisations pushing for socio-political and environmental action across Australia and internationally. A handful of these organisations have become veritable powerhouses of public support. Their unstoppable growth has contributed to a seismic shift in how social, political and environmental action is done in Australia. Their capacity to mobilise vast armies of passionate and socially/politically/environmentally conscious young people to action is behind a range of highly visible, large-scale public campaigns that are increasingly hard to ignore.

A range of factors has combined to make this an era that is arguably one of the most exciting in modern times for young people, particularly those interested in asserting an agenda for a better world. However, not every young person has been brought along for the journey. Rather than experiencing political or institutional systems woven through with the voices, endeavours and innovations of young people, we find that, if they have a voice or access to a platform at all, many young people continue to speak without being heard. In fact it is more likely to be the case that those who find their voice will create their own platform and forge ahead with their own agenda *in spite of* (and even *because of*) unresponsive organisations, institutions and governments. A striking characteristic of some of the most successful of the youth-driven initiatives is their independence from existing institutions or organisations².

"It is my firm belief that the effectiveness of youth participation and engagement is not measured by the number of people involved, or even the level to which they are involved, but by the extent to which their involvement can drive and influence real change."

(Woodroofe 2011:97)

In non-youth-led organisations and government bodies the vast majority of youth participation and engagement models continue to be measured in terms of numbers and 'levels' rather than the outcomes they are able to influence. Woodroofe's simple and powerful sentiment goes straight to the heart of the issue for contemporary youth participation and youth-driven movements: without willingness, or responsive structures and systems, young people are still being prevented from effecting real change. The key, the very point – that young people are stakeholders in the solution, the change-making, the development of whatsoever they may be participating in – is all too often lost. It is lost in what has been described as a "dissonance between the idea of relative citizenship and the reality of young people's experience of full

² For example: Oaktree Foundation, Australian Youth Climate Coalition, Left Right Think Tank, The Verb.

membership, belonging and participation in Australian Society” (Walsh 2011:27). Among other things, what this equates to is a range of sectors, institutions and government bodies who claim (largely with wholly good intentions) openness to the voice and opinions of young people, but who do not have the flexibility of infrastructure or capacity to act on what they hear. This is not for want of trying. There are countless youth advisory groups, youth boards, youth reference groups and similar established by organisations seeking to ensure that their work is informed by the needs and opinions of young people. While some are no doubt effective for the purposes for which they were established, anecdotally, youth participation workers often report³ a disconnect between the expectations of organisations and those of the young people in relation to the capacity to effect change and influence culture. Further, even where the expectations may be similar, outcomes are often thwarted by a lack of organisational capacity to respond.

This paper is concerned with understanding a context in which, while some youth-led initiatives continue to gather strength and power, institutions, organisations and governments struggle to respond and adjust in the face of input they receive from young people they support and serve. It will seek to define some of the challenges that this era of youth empowerment poses for institutions, communities and governments in ensuring that this ‘new world order’ is one that does not leave behind those marginalised by disadvantage. It will review the Berry Street experience of youth engagement and outline the Youth Engagement Commitment that formed a key part of the establishment of the Berry Street Childhood Institute. Finally, it will speak to the development of strategies within the Institute that aim to ensure that young people are welcomed as peers and key stakeholders to drive and influence change in the field of child and youth wellbeing, alongside a range of other experts.

³ The author was a member of the Youth Participation Practice Network (YPPN), convened by Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, from 2007-2013. The YPPN membership was made up of workers from across Victoria for whom youth participation was all or part of their role. Meetings and online communications covered discussion of the challenges and successes of youth participation work and involved individuals sharing stories, experiences and current challenges with the network, seeking feedback and peer support.

Youth Participation & Engagement: History & development

Rights & Frameworks

Arguments in support of youth participation often cite human rights declarations and conventions in their justification. By applying a human rights lens to the conceptualisation of childhood and children over the last century it is possible to understand the development of broad social attitudes towards children and their role in the world. Martin Woodhead, in his foreword to *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation* (Percy-Smith and Thomas 2010) notes that the Swedish author, feminist and social reformer, Ellen Key espoused an empowerment agenda in relation to children as early as 1909 (Woodhead 2010:xix). Key's advocacy predates even the five-principled predecessor to the 1959 UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child, the 1924 Geneva Declaration on the Rights of the Child. Woodhead goes on to mention others who, in subsequent years, were integral to the development of rights frameworks, including Eglantyne Jebb whose work formed the basis for the development of the Geneva Declaration, and Janus Korczak, an original signatory of the Geneva Declaration who claimed, controversially **for the thinking of the time**, in his 1929 book *The Child's Right to Respect*, that "The child is a rational being. He knows full well what his needs, difficulties, and obstacles in life are." (Korczak 1992:176).

Although progressive for their time, until the development of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 (UNCRC), rights frameworks still broadly understood children and young people more as 'humans-in-development' than as whole human beings; not yet significant enough to benefit from the same rights as adults. They were understood in terms of their right to be protected, educated and nurtured by their parents, by other adults and by government bodies.

"Whereas the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection... Whereas mankind owes to the child the best it has to give... This declaration... calls upon parents, upon men and women as individuals, and upon voluntary organizations, local authorities and national Governments to recognize these rights and strive for their observance by legislative and other measures"

(United Nations, 1959)

The adoption of the UNCRC introduced recognition of a child's civil and political rights (Woodhead, M. 2010) marking the first time (in an international rights context) that children were recognised as having the capacity to exercise *their own* rights (Article 5). The UNCRC also articulates the child's right to have a voice and be heard (Article 12), their right to expression and information (Article 13), their right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 14) and their right to freely associate with whomsoever they choose (Article 15).

The coming together of rights frameworks that understood children as active holders of rights with vocal advocates for the legitimacy of the child voice in the early 20th century paved the way for the development in the latter part of the century of a handful of clearly articulated frameworks for child and youth participation.

In 1980 Roger Hart developed The Ladder of Participation in an effort to “organise” his thinking around children’s participation (Hart 2008:22). The Ladder was rapidly adopted as a framework for youth participation offering, as it does, a common language and an easy tool for understanding a range of different approaches to youth participation.

Hart’s ladder depicts a linear ascension through types of participation, starting with three forms of non-participation (manipulation, decoration and tokenism) and rising through degrees of participation to end, at the top of the ladder, with ‘Child-initiated, shared decisions with adults’.

While it has been much critiqued, not least by Roger Hart himself (Hart 2008), the ladder has provided a basis from which various other frameworks have been developed (Ibid:23).

In 2001 Harry Shier wrote an article in which he took the foundations of Hart’s ladder, distilled the principles and turned them into an organisational ‘flow chart’ (Shier 2001).

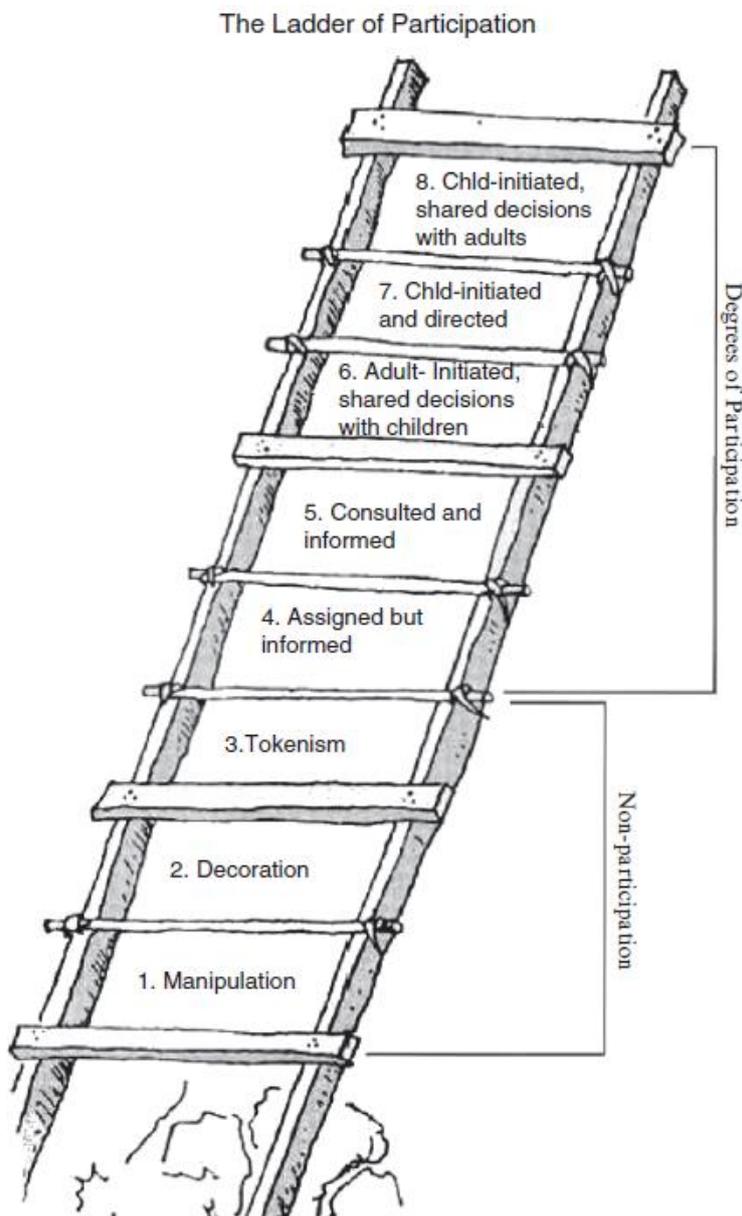


Image viewed 15 March 2013 <http://blog.artscouncil.org.uk/blog/children-and-young-people/quality-principle-5-actively-involving-children-and-young-people>

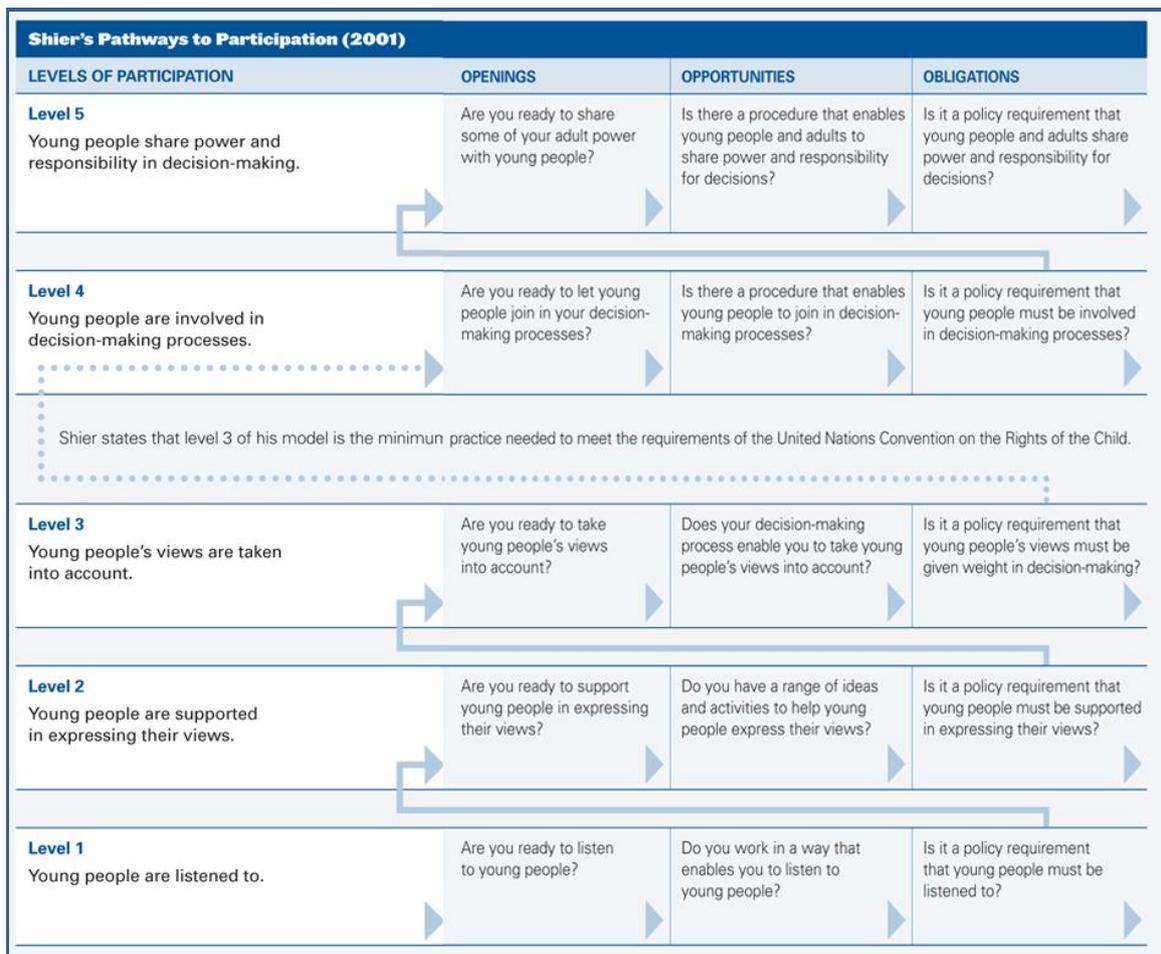


Image viewed 15 March 2013 <http://www.myd.govt.nz/documents/engagement/shier.pdf>

Where Hart's ladder represents a set of benchmarks, Shier's 'Pathways to Participation' recognises the need for a whole-of-organisation approach to participation. It offers something of a step-by-step guide to climbing up the ladder through the development of attitudes, policy and practice, thereby cultivating a culture of participation.

The existence of rights, frameworks and advocates still doesn't appear to have overcome the 'hangover' effect of early concepts of children as 'helpless, dependent and unable to make reasonable decisions' (Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2011:6). Many institutional structures continue to reflect at best a disregard for the capacity and role of children and young people, and at worst a suspicious distrust of their motivations and intentions.

"[16-year-olds are] too distracted by adolescent interests to become responsible and informed voters. They are still growing up and need more time to learn about the world before they take on the responsibility of voting"

(Australian Electoral Commission 2007)⁴

⁴ This comment was adapted by the Australian Electoral Commission from a contribution to a political online blog. The AEC used it as part of an educational resource to demonstrate a counter argument to the debate for the voting age to be lowered to 16.

This clash of stated intention (as articulated in rights and frameworks) with the reality of unresponsive institutions has an impact on young people.

In the late 1990s Sean Healy wrote about the perceived culture of apathy among young members of the so-called Generation X (Healy 1999). He painted a picture of a generation affected by punitive and negative political, legal and media-driven attitudes towards young people. This generation, he believes, grew up in a time when their parents were engaging in activism on many fronts. Although they were not directly part of that activism “the majority of young people still identify with a rebellion against the political establishment... they view it as an opponent of their own social and personal ideals” (Ibid:203).

This era of quashed ideals and developing rebellion provided an apt precursor to a generation (Gen Y) that is now choosing to disregard traditional political mechanisms and forge ahead regardless. Passionate, intentional ignorance of derogatory attitudes from older generations and socio-political systems is becoming the hallmark of a growing number of movements for social, political and environmental change driven by young Australians. Young leader, Shona Cools notes:

“If we can see a better way of doing it, or something’s not working properly, there’s no hesitation in seeing if we can do something”

(cited in Walsh & Black 2011:25)

While the youth sector has continued to hold forums, write reports and debate around the how-to of youth participation, young people have leapt up the ladder, gathered themselves and stepped into the forum to do things their way.

Cools describes a sense that the agendas being driven by young people are often counter, or at least different, to those being actioned by government.

“I think though that the way we’ve been brought up is very much about doing things in the most efficient and effective way possible, which in many cases often leads people outside of that government setting.”

(Ibid:23)

While there are powerful examples of young people leading the way in their chosen field (see Appendix 1), these are not indicative of a national socio-political landscape interwoven with youth-driven initiatives or driven by the well-articulated arguments of passionate young people. Rather they indicate a generation that has decided to take action *in spite* of the barriers they have experienced to participation.

“In their actions and aspirations the profound value changes led by young Australians are evident and compelling: they are looking for new institutions to stand up and make a change... A 21st Century call to action!”

(Kernot 2010:piii)

It has been said that the 21st Century is an exciting time to be a young person. For those so driven, and possessed of the wherewithal and opportunity to take advantage, this looks to be an exhilarating truth.

This “21st Century call to action” being experienced by many young people is also characterised by the challenges that it poses for institutions, governments and communities to adapt, respond and engage, and by the young people who are being left behind in its wake. It is a time for assessing socio-political responsibilities and obligations through a new lens; that of empowerment and participation rights for young people alongside the realities of marginalisation and disadvantage for significant numbers of young Australians.

Youth Participation & Engagement in Child Welfare

In a 2011 monograph, Victoria’s Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare exposed the far reaching adoption of obstructive attitudes in relation to some of Australia’s most vulnerable children and young people.

“children in the child welfare system – both as individuals and collectively — have been systematically denied the opportunity to have their voices heard and to participate in decision-making... their attempts to speak out and voice their wishes, opinions and experiences have been, and continue to be, ignored or trivialised by their caretakers, the courts, program and policy makers and government.”

(Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2011:9)

This is not a situation confined to the child welfare sector. Exclusion from participatory mechanisms and the lack of engagement in self-empowering initiatives is an issue for a range of other marginalised groups. Young Indigenous Australians, young people with disabilities, culturally and linguistically diverse young people, homeless young people, those with alcohol and substance abuse issues, those in the justice system – all of these groups experience barriers to participation and, possibly more notably, to being heard. Young people in Out of Home Care are often also ‘members’ of any number of the categories mentioned above.

Statutory care can be an isolating and insular environment. Being in care immediately marks a young person out as having a complex family background and, in all likelihood, traumatic childhood experience. It also carries a range of stereotypes including expectations of anti-social behaviour, substance abuse and ‘delinquency’. As a ‘ward of the state’, children and young people in care often find themselves restricted from some of the rites of passage and experiences of their peers due to exclusion from mainstream school and/or institutions, lack of funds to support them, or restrictions placed on their activities by policy. For example, until relatively recently children and young people in care were not able to have sleepovers at friends’ homes unless all family members over eighteen years old had been police checked. In addition, in Victoria the Commissioner for Children and Young People hosts a debutante ball for young people in Out of Home Care every other year in response to hearing from some young women that they had missed out on the events in their local community. While these are both examples of change in response to feedback and advocacy from young people and the broader sector, they are very much in the minority. In the case of the

sleepover example it is the result of many years of advocacy, so many in fact that the young people involved in the early days had long ago left care by the time the change took place.

Additional statistics that illustrate the disadvantage underscoring the lives of young people in Out of Home care include:

- Education instability is widespread. In some states and territories up to 20% of children report experiencing four or more changes of primary school and between 40-60% of young people in each state report experiencing three or more secondary school placements (McDowall 2013:60-61).
- Over 20% of children and young people in care report that they do not have internet access (Ibid:31);
- Over 40% of children and young people in Out of Home Care have experienced more than two placements during their time in care (ibid:xvi-xix).

The marginalised status of young people in Out of Home Care is compounded by a systemic lack of genuine respect or support for their participation. Empowerment, engagement, participation and a sense of agency can play a key role in healing and the development of resilience, wellbeing, strength and connection. However, despite debates and discussions about best practice in youth participation spanning many years, the sector continues to be challenged by the need to establish an effective, sustainable and respectful approach. Given that the welfare sector has as its core mandate the protection children and young people from harm, it is high time it also recognised that:

“Denying policy makers the benefit of children’s experience and expertise can and does lead to poor decisions, which may themselves expose children to harm”

(Lansdown 2010:18)

Conclusion: Towards a new paradigm

With every call to action there is an opportunity to respond. In this case, and in the child welfare sector, there is also an obligation. However, there must be different and better approaches if we are to ensure that youth participation is respected for its ability to effect change, welcomes the perspectives of all young people and leaves no one behind. Therein lies the challenge, both for young people striving to make themselves heard and to governments, institutions and communities as they seek to hear a representative voice: how might we climb the 'tree' if, as Roger Hart implies, the ladder only reaches so high?

"...from my perspective, I see the ladder lying in the long grass of an orchard at the end of the season. It has served its purpose. I look forward to the next season for I know there are so many different routes up through the branches and better ways to talk about how children can climb into meaningful, and shall we say fruitful, ways of working with others."

(Hart 2008:29)

The answer lies in a combination of approaches, attitude changes and challenges to the perceived 'way of doing things'. Given the length of time for which concepts of youth participation and client participation have been bandied about, meeting with the nodding heads of a sector that claims to understand, but shows little sign of really engaging, perhaps an important first step would be to re-assess what it is that we mean or intend by youth participation.

Rys Farthing (2012) provocatively asks the question: "Why Youth Participation?" In asking the question, Farthing highlights the fact that the reasons given for 'doing' youth participation have lost their meaning through over-use. If we know the reasons why and yet we continue to fall short of achieving meaningful youth participation, it seems possible that now is the time to re-assess, with a frank and honest lens, our motivations, and indeed our intentions when it comes to engaging with young people.

Farthing poses counter-arguments to many of the standard reasons given for why youth participation is important. She suggests that these traditional justifications for youth participation often imply an image of what society *should* look like and, therefore, the role that young people *ought* to aspire to and be supported to achieve. She argues that:

"Critical reflection around these deeper questions – reflecting on your normative judgements about what are good things for young people and what a good society looks like in the first place – is perhaps the only way to ensure that youth participation can better the lot of the young."

(Farthing 2012:91-92)

This poses a challenge to a sector experiencing a paralysis of sorts in relation to youth participation, especially if we accept that children and young people themselves are the key to truly effective critical reflection on this issue.

“participation isn’t just about adults ‘allowing’ children to offer their perspectives... It can also involve young people confronting adult authority, challenging adult assumptions about their competence to speak and make decisions about issues that concern them.”

(Woodhead 2010:xxii)

In the context of the child welfare sector where children and young people’s ‘best interests’ have long been defined by adults, participation must also be about children and young people defining what constitutes ‘issues that concern them’. This represents a massive shift in values, attitudes and assumptions for the child welfare sector. Used to playing the role of statutory parent in the paternalistic sense, Woodhead’s words represent the difference between parenting with authority and a set of iron-clad rules versus parenting by negotiation, with respect, flexibility and openness.

It is not enough to listen to, or even to hear what young people have to say. It is not enough to pay attention to only those who have the capacity, the wherewithal and the opportunity to *make* their voices heard. If we truly aspire to a society that provides all children with a good childhood then we must also be prepared to challenge our notions of what ‘good childhood’ means. We must be prepared to respond to the lived experiences of those who have not and are not experiencing a good childhood and we must be prepared to do so in ways that, while new and confronting, may just prove the key to real shifts in outcomes for the younger generation.

“civic and political engagement of youth will not improve if we persist in an institutional mindset that insists that young people must conform to the traditional political system. We must start with an honest assessment of existing democratic institutions and practices and a willingness to refurbish them to become more relevant to the needs and expectations of both young people and the broad population.”

(McKinnon et al 2007:iii)

As McKinnon implies, by partnering with young people to create new approaches it is likely that the outcomes will have benefits beyond young people alone. In this process Roger Hart’s ladder is not entirely defunct – it should be lifted out of the long grass in the orchard and looked over for damage, wear and tear. The Ladder can offer us a start, Harry Shier’s schema can take us a little further by forcing us to reflect on whether our institutions, governments and communities are prepared and have the mechanisms to go further up the tree. Ultimately, a range of entirely new ‘apparatus’ is called for if young people are to be empowered, enabled and respected enough to influence real change. Young people should be the leaders, partners and key stakeholders in the development of this new paradigm.

Youth Participation & Engagement: The Berry Street Experience

Although there are several examples of individual staff, services and regions developing ad hoc, localised approaches to youth participation prior, Berry Street has been actively pursuing an *organisational* youth participation agenda since 2005. The establishment of the Berry Street Childhood Institute in 2012 has

provided an opportunity for that agenda to broaden its focus and further develop. Arguably, the journey to this point reflects, to some extent, the issues of incongruity detailed earlier in this paper; big ideas and great intentions meeting with conflicting expectations and the limits of resourcing, time and organisational readiness.

Youth Empowerment Project: 2005-2006

In 2005 Berry Street worked with the CREATE Foundation to develop the Youth Empowerment Project. Based on objectives concerned with youth development, service improvement, sector leadership and organisational reputation the project engaged a young care-leaver, Jennifer⁵, who had undertaken the CREATE Foundation's Young Consultants training. Jennifer was given the task of developing and running organisation-wide consultations with young people and staff in all Berry Street programs and services. Using the outcomes of the consultations, the project was expected to generate a range of training and support resources that would empower and enable staff to continue to engage young people in participatory activities. A secondary anticipated outcome was to establish Berry Street as an organisation that young people could trust to hear what they had to say on issues of importance to them.

The project had some real successes. Jennifer developed and ran consultations in a trivia night format that had the additional benefit of providing staff and young people with a fun, informal evening that facilitated relationship building as well as generating data for the project's objectives. These were well-received by participants who indicated that they would appreciate more opportunities to be consulted in fun, interactive ways.

Unfortunately there were also some significant flaws in the structure and support of the project. The brief was ambitious, especially given the size and scale of Berry Street. Jennifer was only able to carry out the trivia night consultations with a handful of staff and young people from residential care services in the Berry Street Northern region. Inconsistent oversight of the project resulted in confusion regarding the tasks that were required and ultimately the project ended with no clear plan for the continuation of the work started by Jennifer.

Despite its flaws, as a first foray into a strategic approach to the development of organisation-wide youth participation approaches, the intention was well-placed and provided important insights that have informed subsequent work.

Youth Advisory Group 2008-2009

The Youth Empowerment Project exposed a need within Berry Street for further development in the youth participation area and in 2007 a full time role was created. The Internal Consultant – Youth Empowerment

⁵ Not her real name

and Participation (ICYEP) was given the responsibility for a handful of youth-related projects and a remit to develop an organisation-wide framework for youth participation. With no specific budget assigned to the portfolio, all funding was sought on a project/initiative basis. In mid-2008 the ICYEP established a Youth Advisory Group (YAG) with the intention of empowering young service users to inform the development of the framework. Initially, YAG membership included eight young people from services in every Berry Street region and from a range of program areas (residential services, home based care, community development and intensive case management). It was anticipated that the process would take between seven and nine months.

As with the Youth Empowerment Project, there were significant successes for the YAG. Its existence alone was an indicator of progress within the organisation. In addition, the young people that made up the original group were diverse in terms of their backgrounds, experiences of Berry street services and their current circumstances.

The YAG members agreed early on that although, diverse as a group, they did not have the authority to speak on behalf of all the other young people in Berry Street programs and services. In doing this they began the process of breaking a strategic task into practical activities. They developed the idea of a centralised Youth Forum, to be run like a mini festival, through which they would get other young people's input and feedback on how a youth participation strategy should operate.

The Youth Forum planned to make use of the trivia night questions that were developed in the Youth Empowerment Project to guide the activities. Bands were booked, equipment was sourced, young people had been invited.

With less than two weeks to go the attendance list was only ten young people. Experience suggests that there is a likelihood of 50% or more attendees dropping out before the event and a quick phone around to the relevant programs confirmed that this was likely to be the case. While this might have been appropriate for a less ambitious consultation plan, the Youth Forum was designed as a major event for 50+ young people to attend. The event was cancelled.

A survey of staff, asking why they felt it had not been a successful project, revealed a range of issues including:

- Logistics – too far to travel, too hard to cover the staff requirements, not enough notice etc.;
- Young people were sceptical – the word 'forum' meant that some young people were put off, the entertainment wasn't emphasised enough;
- Staff/programs felt it wasn't necessary – some programs noted they already have informal and formal ways of getting feedback in their programs, some staff didn't understand from the publicity, what the benefit would be for the kids or what it aimed to achieve;
- Other commitments took priority.

The failure of the Youth Forum was a blow to the morale of the YAG. Some members had dropped off over preceding weeks and a core group of just three remained, two of whom had finished high school and were starting to move into the next phase of their lives. The YAG disbanded in late 2009.

The ICYEP role became increasingly project based, working on such diverse themes as cybersafety, independent living, health and wellbeing in residential care, social enterprises, adventure and outdoor experiences and small grant-making. All of the projects had an element of youth participation, however a strategic approach to youth participation across the organisation remained undeveloped for some time.

The YAG was a learning curve for Berry Street. It demonstrated that the importance of giving youth participation time and resources to develop and succeed cannot be overstated. There is no model of youth participation that can be done quickly, cheaply, meaningfully *and* effectively. Further, in the context of an organisation with the program diversity and geographic spread of Berry Street, centralised youth advisory activities pose significant challenges and without significant resources, they are limited in their potential for success.

Berry Street Client Participation: 2011-ongoing

As a Community Service Organisation, Berry Street is subject to internal and external quality auditing processes against the Department of Human Services Standards. These standards aim to ensure a good quality service is delivered at all levels of Community Service Organisation. Client participation (which necessarily includes young people) is clearly articulated in these standards both as a standalone section, and as a component of the other sections.

As part of Berry Street's commitment to continuous quality improvement a range of client participation initiatives have been under development since 2011, and/or are due to be launched soon.

A client participation procedure is due to be launched before the end of 2014. Subsequently a client participation strategic plan will be developed through an organisation-wide consultation process. This plan will document regional action plans as well as actions to be undertaken across the organisation over coming years.

Youth Engagement & the Berry Street Childhood Institute: 2012-ongoing

The Internal Consultant Youth Empowerment and Participation role was reviewed and redeveloped in 2012 with the establishment of the Berry Street Childhood Institute. Situating it within the BSCI from the outset has both returned the strategic focus to the role and positioned the Institute as a unit with a fundamental commitment to working alongside young people. The national reach of the Institute also broadens the scope of the role, now the Youth Engagement Coordinator, by seeking to connect with young people *outside* Berry Street services as well as within them. The Institute recognises the important role of young people in building and sharing knowledge, and contributing to an understanding of what sustains a good childhood. This in turn

gives credence to the notion that young people in care have a right to participate in and be heard on matters *beyond* their care experience.

As part of the establishment of the Berry Street Childhood institute the Youth Engagement Coordinator presented a discussion paper to the BSCI Reference Group. This paper sought to clarify the parameters for youth engagement within the Institute. The outcome of that discussion was the development of a set of seven Youth Engagement Commitment statements, loosely based on principles set out in *The Guidelines for the Ethical Engagement of Young People* by First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada (Alderman 2006).

The Youth Engagement Commitment statements are aspirational; an indication of the BSCI's intent and approach. They serve to remind us that youth participation should not be a 'thing' that we do, rather it should be the way that we do things.

The following is taken directly from the Berry Street Childhood Institute website (www.childhoodinstitute.org.au):

We have made a commitment to engage young people in the work of the Institute because of their fundamental right to be heard. We know we have a lot to learn from young people as experts in the experience of contemporary childhood and have challenged ourselves to find the best ways to enable young people to share their knowledge. For the young people in services such as out of home care, genuine opportunities for participation have been very limited and we are keen to redress this balance.

Our work alongside young people is based on the following principles:

1. Young people are partners in our work, not resources

We aim to work alongside young people, not just tap into them as a resource as and when it suits us.

2. Being challenged is how we grow

We expect young people to challenge us. We hope we challenge them too.

3. One Young Person ≠ All Young People

We recognise that everyone brings different perspectives to an issue. We won't ask one young person to speak for all young people.

4. Accessibility

We want all young people to be able to talk to us about the issues that affect them, so we'll do what we can to make that possible.

5. The person fits the project

We don't engage young people just because they're young. We try to engage all our partners, young and old, in projects that align with their interests and skills.

6. Safety

We won't ask anyone working with the Berry Street Childhood Institute to place themselves in a situation or space that makes them feel unsafe emotionally, physically, culturally or spiritually.

7. No False Expectations

We do what we say we will do, we're clear on our limitations, and we like to get all perspectives before we act on an idea or an issue. Young people are one of a diverse range of stakeholders with an interest in issues affecting childhood and youth.

To date a range of activities and projects have enabled the Institute to exercise these principles and shift closer to the aspirational goals. The following are three of the key initiatives that have taken place in the first two years of the Berry Street Childhood Institute's existence.

Youth Stream

In 2012 the Youth Engagement Coordinator was approached by the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) to develop and run the youth stream of their upcoming conference *Connect For: Improved outcomes for Victoria's vulnerable young people*. YACVic wanted vulnerable young people to have the opportunity to engage with the issues being addressed at the conference and to respond to and be heard on these issues.

The Youth Engagement Coordinator established a conference working group that included staff and young people from three other youth-focused organisations. The working group included Melbourne City Mission, Ardoch Youth Foundation and CREATE Foundation. This group of professionals and young people developed the format for the youth stream, publicised the opportunity, invited young people to attend, facilitated the two-day event and provided support to the young people.

The working group planned to use an 'unconference' model⁶ to ensure that young people attending had the opportunity to form the agenda and direct the discussions. A cross section of Victorian youth agencies were invited to nominate young people to attend, which resulted in eighteen young people attending from agencies including: Youth Substance Abuse Service, Mirabel Foundation, Hope St, Youth Disability Advocacy Service. They met for the first time on the first day of the conference and several admitted that they were unsure why they were there or what it was they were attending. By the end of the second day, fourteen of them stood united on stage in front of 600 professionals from the youth and education sectors, and each spoke from their own experience about what can be done to better support vulnerable young people. They received a standing ovation and a barrage of questions that extended their session beyond their allotted time. It was widely agreed by delegates that their presentation had been the highlight of the two day conference.

The two-day process was hugely empowering and affirming both for the facilitators and for the young people. So much so, in fact, that several members of the group continue to meet and look for ways to have an impact together, over two years after the conference (see below).

The strength of the youth stream model was in several elements:

Funding

⁶ For a definition see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unconference>

In contracting the Youth Engagement Coordinator to undertake this work the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria also provided a budget. This funding enabled the purchase of equipment and presentation materials, payment for all the young people attending and for the young people facilitating, and a small payment for the agencies that made up the working group. In addition it enabled the post-presentation celebration activities (see below). The funding required to allow *good* youth participation and engagement to happen is often underestimated. The ability to pay young people for their time makes it easier for them to participate and communicates the fact that they are valued as experts. The existence of funding for a project like this also means that there is a greater range of options available in terms of activities and support materials.

Freedom

The brief from YACVic was to involve vulnerable young people in the conference and enable them to provide feedback to the broader conference on the issues under discussion. This semi-blank canvas meant that the young people truly had free reign to define their approach and their response, making both more effective and powerful than they might otherwise have been.

Preparation

To some extent the working group was *over*-prepared for the event. Templates were produced for activities and a selection of 'ready-made' alternatives to an on-stage presentation⁷ was made available in the event that the young people decided they were not comfortable standing on stage. This level of preparation and the 'safety net' it offered meant that discussions over the two days could be driven by the young people, rather than by an urgent need to produce ideas and materials for the presentation. In fact the group chose to make use of the prepared materials as well as getting up on stage to speak, en masse.

Group size and dynamic

Of the almost 30 young people signed up to attend, only 18 actually came. This sort of attrition rate is not uncommon and in fact, this meant that the group was an ideal size for rapid cohesion and that everyone had an opportunity to contribute to discussions. The positive dynamic that subsequently came about would have been hard to plan for, but the young people very quickly created an atmosphere of mutual support and respect that included everyone. Overnight they also created their own closed Facebook account and used it to talk about their hopes and ideas for the conference.

Setting expectations

Through the setting of a group charter at the start of the first day, a shared understanding of the 'rules' for participation were set. Although some participants swung away from these occasionally, they remained connected to the group and the disruption was never enough to derail the process. In addition the facilitators clearly stated what was expected of the group in terms of outcomes and the presentation options which enabled the group to stay on track.

⁷ These included: the capacity to film the young people speaking to camera and then projecting this on the screen in the plenary hall, booking a freestyle rap artist who could be briefed on the key points of the young people's discussions and then perform a rap using those points, and creating an artwork illustrating the key points that could then be presented to the Minister for Youth, Ryan Smith.

Shared goals and solutions focus

In the context of the conference the 18 young people had a shared goal: to make the professionals in the room aware of ways they can do better for young people. All of them had positive and negative experiences to share, however facilitators were able to focus on the goal and bring discussions back to solutions and ideas for improvement, rather than dwelling in negative experiences. This enabled the group to engage their creativity and enthusiasm and created a sense of hope and optimism that became infectious. It also meant that they all committed to the goal and felt they had a stake in how the end product looked and sounded.

Youth-driven agenda

Handing the power of setting the agenda over to the young people let them know that their ideas, input and decisions were respected and expected. Their awareness of the time pressures also meant that they both drove the agenda and managed their time. On the second day the facilitators were able to play a purely support role while the young people pushed each other to develop materials and practice their presentations in time for the main event.

Prestige and influence

The knowledge that they would be presenting to decision makers - professionals from the youth sector *and* government ministers – had a significant impact on the group’s perception of their role. It enabled them to believe their words could have a genuine impact and that their experiences were truly valuable. It gave them a huge amount of pride in their work and motivated them to make their presentation as strong and cohesive as it could be.

Flexibility

The unconference model did not operate to the original plan, however the fact that the model is unplanned by definition meant that the agenda was entirely flexible. While the young people decided what to talk about, they also agreed that they preferred to work in larger groups on the same issues, rather than splitting into smaller workshops to discuss a range of subjects. The facilitators’ ability to adjust to the direction set by the group was integral to its success.

Time-limit

With only two days to form the group, have discussions and turn those into a presentation, the emphasis was on efficacy and efficiency. Discussions were not allowed to ramble and key points were noted to keep things on track and ensure no part of the discussion was lost. As noted above, on the second day the group took full responsibility for time management and coordinating their activities. The time limitations bolstered their commitment to creating a quality presentation.

Celebration

Following the presentation the young people were on a huge high. They were buzzing with the praise and respect they had received in response to their heartfelt presentations and they felt very connected to one another. The room the group had worked in for the two days was cleared and an inflatable, Velcro fly-wall

and sumo wrestling mat (with padded sumo suits) were set up. Refreshments were provided and the group were able to play, wind down and celebrate their achievements rather than leaving straight away.

Following the conference there was a strong desire on the group's behalf to use the momentum of the event to try to effect change in the youth sector. The Youth Engagement Coordinator has supported between seven and ten of the young people to continue to meet and try to find a direction and purpose from which to drive change. While they have struggled to settle on a manageable idea, they continue to be a group of passionate and committed young people, as a result of the shared experience of the 2012 conference.

In late 2014 five members of the group (still known as the Youth Stream) will be part of the pilot of a new leadership program run by the Berry Street Childhood Institute. The program will provide them with the skills and experience to better focus their thinking and, hopefully move them towards action.

Good Childhood Conference

The 2013 Good Childhood Conference marked a significant milestone in both Berry Street history and in the establishment of the Berry Street Childhood Institute as a knowledge institute. During the development of the conference plan it was agreed that the conference should be a space in which young people were able to engage alongside adult professionals in discussions about good childhood.

Three young consultants were engaged to run a process of consultation with young people internal and external to Berry Street services. They spoke to over 80 young people, asking them questions relating to the ways in which they would like to receive information about the conference, what would prevent them from attending, what they would like to hear about at the event and what sorts of things might encourage them to attend. This input was presented to the Conference Working Group by the young consultants and used to inform all aspects of the conference. An example of initiatives and actions that took place as a result of the consultations included:

- Establishment of a 'Youth Space', run by young people, for young people. This was intended to be an information point as well as a space in which young people could hang out and meet other young attendees;
- Offering youth scholarships to enable a number of young people to attend free of charge;
- Ensuring each session included youth-friendly workshops and publicising these in the program;
- Including a youth panel as part of the plenary sessions.

In total 62 youth scholarships were granted and a handful of young people attended as fee-paying delegates.

Feedback from adult professionals and young people was largely positive. Although it was recognised that there is a lot more that could be done to make an event such as this one youth-friendly, the Good Childhood Conference successfully engaged a number of young people and made them feel welcomed and involved in the conversation.

Imaginate

Imagine is a national multimedia and creative arts competition for Australian young people asking them to respond to the question ‘what should a good childhood look like?’

The competition was developed through extensive consultation with youth workers and youth agencies in Victoria, South Australia, New South Wales and Queensland. Consultations focused specifically on how to ensure that vulnerable young people and those experiencing disadvantage were able to access the opportunity to participate. With no direct line of communication to young people it was necessary to consult first with the ‘gatekeepers’ so that *Imagine* would have the best chance of reaching young people. Key actions undertaken as a result of the consultations were:

- The breadth of creative options for entries was extended from a simple film competition to four creative categories, which were left largely undefined to ensure that both ‘mainstream’ and ‘niche’ projects could be accepted;
- There were almost 30 opportunities to win prizes throughout the competition to ensure that all entrants had more chance of winning *something* along the way;
- A range of tools for youth workers, teachers and young people were developed and housed on the website to support the development of entries. The tools included lesson plans, workshop templates and templates for planning.

The competition was intended to enable the Berry Street Childhood Institute to:

- Better understand the context of childhood and what makes a childhood good in Australia today;
- Engage young people in a conversation about childhood and place their experiences and input at the forefront of a national discussion;
- Bring the idea of ‘childhood’ and the importance of a good childhood into the public arena in Australia;
- Get the public excited about and engaged in short and long-term action and campaigns led by the Berry Street Childhood Institute;
- Raise the profile of the Berry Street Childhood Institute and position it as an entity that wants to hear from the broader community.

A website was developed to house the competition entries and essential information, and social media accounts were established on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Google+. *Imagine* was launched on March 3rd, 2014 and entries remained open until May 26th, 2014.

As a project that marked a lot of ‘firsts’ for Berry Street and the Institute (first time communicating with young people nationally, first time communicating with young people outside Berry Street programs, first time running a national competition etc.), the benchmark for success was set at a low 50 entries. At the close of the submissions period exactly 90 entries had been received and processed. A further four were received, but could not be processed due to badly uploaded materials, copyright issues and/or incomplete entry information.

In addition the social networking aspect of the competition publicity has seen the BSCI grow a network of young people across Australia from zero to over 830 followers, over 90% of whom are aged 13-24 years old. The quantity and quality of the entries significantly exceeded expectations and has provided BSCI with a source of powerful insights and illustrative materials relating to the notion of good childhood. Following the closure of the competition and announcement of the final prize winners the BSCI has invested time in the analysis of the messages and themes that emerge on closer study of the entries. Once words, phrases and messages had been extracted from the entries Victorian prize winners were invited to attend a workshop alongside a handful of Berry Street staff. Together they worked to collate the words, phrases and messages into themes. From the themes a set of statements has been developed:

My childhood is perfectly imperfect:

It's the simple things - love, family, belonging;

My imagination is where I make my hopes and dreams;

When I explore and get curious, I discover and grow;

I am superhuman, fun and free;

My childhood is my right – respect it and protect it!

This statement forms the basis of workshop presentations being undertaken with leadership teams in each Berry Street region and with Take Two to ascertain any potential impact on policy and practice within Berry Street. A full report on outcomes will be available following the conclusion of all the workshops. To date (August 2014), however, sessions have raised some important questions and issues that should be central to any ongoing discussions within Berry Street about notions of child and youth participation. For example:

- Although the presentation is based entirely in notions of childhood, the language of childhood has been conspicuously absent from responses to workshop tasks and questions. Even concepts of play and fun are couched in welfare, social work and therapeutic language. Arguably, if the sessions were to ask the same questions in relation to the children of the staff in each session, the language of responses would be significantly different. In an organisation whose vision is for all children to have a good childhood this speaks to an incongruity between vision and practice.
- All sessions have included some discussion about whether we can legitimately claim to make childhood good for our clients at all. Some discussions have looked at the idea that we might claim to make childhood *better* for some children and young people, but that 'good' is a stretch. Others have gone as far as to say that in some cases children and young people would have had a greater chance of a good childhood if they had stayed with their family.
- The phrase "I am superhuman, fun and free" has raised concerns in some sessions because of the implications of infallibility that might fuel self-destructive behaviours and dangerous risk taking in vulnerable young people. Some have also noted that a flipside of the idea of being 'superhuman' is

the element of resilience it implies when a young person bolsters their own strength by seeing themselves as the hero in their own lives.

These are just a handful of the reflections that are emerging from these workshops across the organisation. Participants (team leaders, senior managers and directors) have also been asked for their thoughts on policy and practice changes that could be made which would significantly improve the childhood experience for children and young people in our care. These and other reflections will be part of a full report on the workshop outcomes, to be presented to the Executive Management Team later this year.

Plans are also under development for a large scale celebration of the competition outcomes. This event will also aim to increase the competition's impact by providing a springboard for launching the Berry Street Childhood Institute's good childhood campaign agenda.

Berry Street Childhood Institute Youth Engagement Strategy

Introduction

The current climate offers a perfect opportunity to instigate a paradigm shift, both within Berry Street and across the child welfare and youth sectors. The landscape in which we operate includes: an external environment that is eager for young people to lead, but frustrated by consistently unresponsive (even obstructive) structures; an internal appetite and impetus for action and change; the establishment of the Berry Street Childhood Institute with a mandate to collaboratively build and share knowledge, encourage public dialogue and mobilise leadership internally and externally; and the existence of the Youth Engagement Coordinator role as a fundamental role of the Institute with a remit to provide leadership, support and advocacy in relation to youth engagement internally and externally.

Legitimacy as a leader in this shift can only be claimed if our own house is in order. Organisational intention is not in question here; youth engagement features in one form or another, and with varying force, in a number of Berry Street strategies and policies. Thus with one foot firmly rooted in Berry Street's almost 140 years of practice and the other stepping forward into innovation, knowledge building and leadership, the Berry Street Childhood Institute is ideally placed to take a fresh look at *how* and *why* we engage with young people. The answers to both lie in some of the fundamental principles that guide Berry Street's work.

The 'how' of an approach to youth engagement must be guided by the principles of the Berry Street Childhood Institute's Youth Engagement Commitment Statement:

- 1. Young people are partners in our work, not resources** - *We aim to work alongside young people, not just tap into them as a resource as and when it suits us.*
- 2. Being challenged is how we grow** - *We expect young people to challenge us. We hope we challenge them too.*
- 3. One Young Person ≠ All Young People** - *We recognise that everyone brings different perspectives to an issue. We won't ask one young person to speak for all young people.*
- 4. Accessibility** - *We want all young people to be able to talk to us about the issues that affect them, so we'll do what we can to make that possible.*
- 5. The person fits the project** - *We don't engage young people just because they're young. We try to engage all our partners, young and old, in projects that align with their interests and skills.*
- 6. Safety** - *We won't ask anyone working with the Berry Street Childhood Institute to place themselves in a situation or space that makes them feel unsafe emotionally, physically, culturally or spiritually.*
- 7. No False Expectations** - *We do what we say we will do, we're clear on our limitations, and we like to get all perspectives before we act on an idea or an issue. Young people are one of a diverse range of stakeholders with an interest in issues affecting childhood and youth.*

For an answer to the question of *why* the Institute seeks to engage with young people, rather than looking to human rights, patronising notions of personal development, or self-serving ideas of service efficacy, we should instead look to the fundamental values of Berry Street: working together, courage, integrity, respect

and accountability. These values must sit at the core of the Berry Street Childhood Institute's reasons for committing to youth engagement.

It is no longer good enough to just hear what young people have to say. Organisations like Berry Street should be seeking to *work together with* young people, having the *courage* and *integrity* to be guided and informed by what they have to say. We must do more than pay lip service to the notion of young people as the experts of their own experience; they deserve the same *respect* we give other experts in the field. We must seek to be *accountable* to them as the recipients of Berry Street services and as future leaders. Further, it is part of the Berry Street Childhood Institute's remit to engage the expertise of young people across Australia in informing a cohesive and grounded approach to improving childhood.

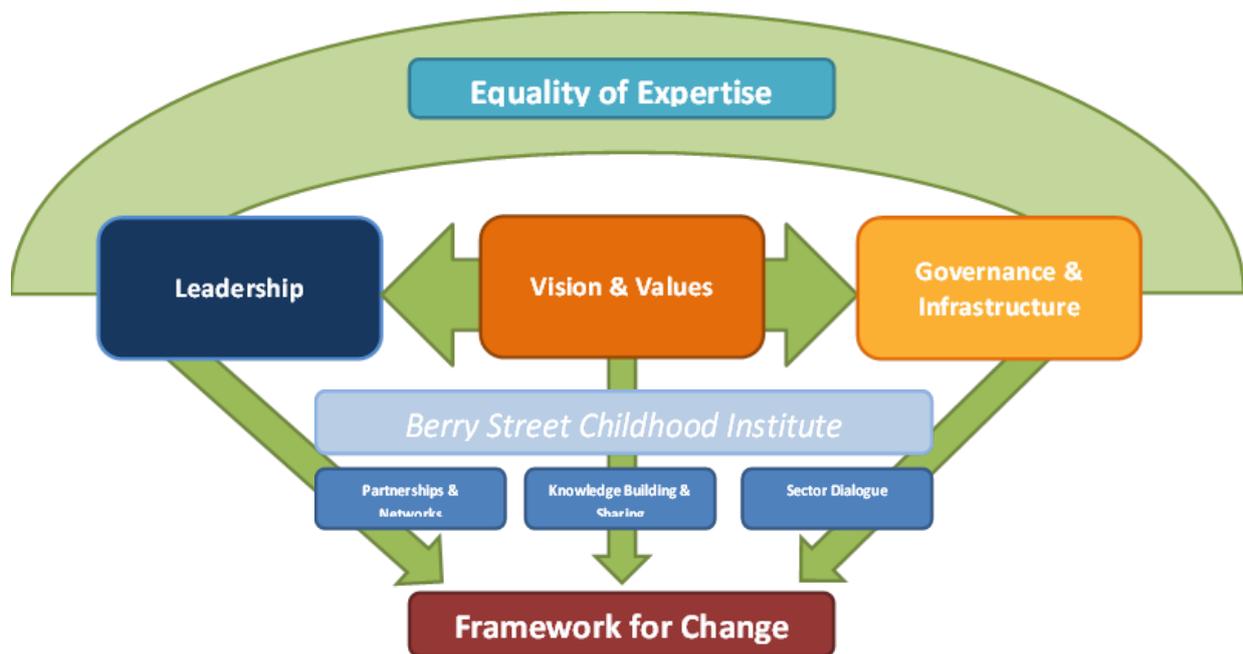
A paradigm shift of this magnitude requires endorsement, support and encouragement from the highest levels of an organisation. It also requires leadership, passion and commitment.

The following outlines a strategy for the development of a model that aims to fundamentally shift the way in which Berry Street approaches youth engagement, in turn placing the Berry Street Childhood Institute in a position to collaboratively lead a similar shift in the child welfare and youth sectors.

A Model for Youth Engagement & Social Change

The development of a Berry Street model of youth engagement must start with an overarching concept of *Equality of Expertise* in which young people are valued and respected as key stakeholders: invited to define the issues that constitute ‘their interests’ and subsequently included around any table at which those interests are being discussed. This doesn’t mean that their input is given precedence over that of others. Nor does it mean that it won’t be. As with any collaborative effort, their input will be given equal weight to that of other key stakeholders.

Before we can arrive at a point at which Berry Street has the capacity to welcome young people to the table in a range of settings there is work to be done. We must address questions of *leadership*, both in terms of the role of young people as leaders, and the role of staff in elevating and integrating youth engagement. Further, as noted above, while the existing *vision and values* of Berry Street are unquestionably relevant, children and young people must be re-instated at the core of how we contextualise and communicate them. Finally, the capacity of Berry Street’s *governance* structures and broader *infrastructure* must be bolstered to ensure they can integrate and support the input and engagement of young people.



The Berry Street Childhood Institute and the Youth Engagement Coordinator have a key role to play in the promotion and establishment of youth engagement as a practice standard. As the unit with a focus on innovation, knowledge building and leadership it is ideally situated to draw on national and international experience, as well as Berry Street’s long practice history, to lead a response to this ‘call to action’. However, it is the Institute’s role to *inform* and *inspire*, but not *develop* or *embed* Berry Street policy and practice. Thus, close collaboration and co-development of a model with the Policy, Practice and Innovation (PP&I) team will be key to the capacity for an organisational culture shift in relation to youth engagement.

The Institute concurrently has an important role to play as a leader of youth engagement dialogue in the broader sector as well as a sector-wide elevation of the role of young people in driving social change. Through the development of targeted partnerships and networks, strategies to build and share knowledge about youth engagement, and campaigns to stimulate sector dialogue, the Institute can build the scaffolding to support the Berry Street model of youth engagement and construct an effective *Framework for Change*. Ultimately, in order to guard against a return to the stasis and inaction we are currently accustomed to, a structure to facilitate and support change must be established. Such a framework will articulate and guide a process for turning input into action and driving social change.

Equality of Expertise

The idea that young people are the experts of their own experience is not a new one. Nevertheless it is unusual to see young people's expertise respected in such a way that elevates them to an equal status with professionals. Even where youth engagement is being 'done well' its success tends to be measured more for its role in providing professionals with input and feedback, than for the integrated role of young people in devising, developing and implementing organisational development or social change.

At the core of the development of Equality of Expertise as a philosophy and a practice standard will be the consistent, frequent posing of a key question:

Where are the young people?

This question is intended to provoke discussion and to challenge people at all levels of the organisation to review the meetings, forums and groups in which they participate:

- If young people are present, what power do they have? Is their input given the same weight as the professionals and adults in the space? Are they adequately supported? Is the meeting run in a way that ensures they are included in all discussions?
- If they are not, why not? Are the reasons for their lack of physical presence excuses or are their legal, safety or policy reasons they cannot be physically present?
- If young people are not and cannot be physically present, are their views/needs/interests represented?
- How have they been supported, enabled and empowered to communicate their views/needs/interests?

It is not enough to say that the way a meeting runs is not 'youth-friendly'. If a meeting structure is not youth-friendly, perhaps it should be changed – a more youth-friendly format is likely to benefit everyone, may inject new energy, and will certainly challenge perspectives.

Nor is it enough to say that the subject matter is not ‘in their interests’. While it may seem time-consuming and we may feel we can make an educated assumption about what will and will not be in their interests, if we value young people as experts, we must respect them as such and empower them to define their own interests.

Young people across Berry Street should have direct and easy access to a range of mechanisms to have their voices heard and they should be supported and encouraged to play an active role in campaigning for change, whether that is on a personal, local, community or global level.

Acknowledging and challenging the current exclusion of young people from many areas and levels of the organisation is the first step towards culture change that aims to see young people:

- Involved in a range of policy, procedure and process activities including recruitment, induction, evaluation, practice-based training, policy and service development, and more;
- Developing and facilitating training for internal staff and external audiences;
- Speaking at internal events on their own behalf, and externally on behalf of Berry Street;
- Developing and running campaigns through the Institute;
- Sitting at the research table as partners and experts, not just subjects; and
- Participating in Berry Street governance processes.

An important aspect of demonstrating a commitment to youth engagement is not only in the actual engagement of young people, but also in treating the theoretical dialogue around the subject with the same respect and pursuit of knowledge as we might with subjects like child development, innovative approaches to Out of Home Care, or trauma-informed approaches to our work. With this in mind, the Berry Street Childhood Institute’s speaker and fellows networks must be developed to incorporate local, national and international experts in child & youth engagement and participation (including young people).

Internal Leadership

Internal leadership is essential to both elevate and embed youth engagement as a practice standard across Berry Street. Plainly speaking, culture change of this magnitude is hard. It takes time, effort and coordination. Focused leadership must come from the Berry Street Childhood institute’s Youth Engagement Coordinator role. This role is akin to that of an agitator and a champion for the cause; elevating youth engagement by providing motivation, posing the challenging questions and ensuring the issue remains on everyone’s agenda.

Finally, the tools for embedding youth engagement as a fundamental standard across the organisation lie in the development of policy and procedure. This practical leadership must be driven by the Policy, Practice & Innovation team as part of their client participation work and through their capacity to inform organisational policy and service development.

Specific focus areas for internal leadership include:

1. Establishing youth engagement as a fundamental approach to all our work, as opposed to a ‘thing’ we do sometimes, by working with a range of internal committees, working and leadership groups to: pose the question “where are the young people?”; facilitate the resulting discussions; promote the concept of ‘Equality of Expertise’; shepherd the strategic goals of each group to include youth engagement; and to coach them towards integration of that strategy into practice. The groups should include, but not be limited to:
 - Cross-Regional Forums
 - Quality working groups
 - Meetings/committees/working groups concerned with the development of:
 - Evaluation frameworks
 - Recruitment and induction procedures
 - Foundations for Practice
2. Development of a youth leadership program to build the capacity of young people to participate in key Berry Street and Berry Street Childhood Institute events, processes and projects such as:
 - The Berry Street Annual Celebration
 - Berry Street induction training
 - Berry Street end of year celebration
 - Research committees
 - Evaluation processes
 - Learning and Development events
 - BSCI Training and Events opportunities

Vision and Values

The *Imagine* workshops, exploring the notion of good childhood in Berry Street’s practice, are revealing a widely-felt sentiment that child welfare work has drifted away from any real connection with childhood, let alone ideas of a *good* childhood. It is vital that work is done to reinvigorate and inspire what is clearly a depleted workforce. A combination of professional development and internal publicity is required to bring practice back to the essence of the Berry Street vision and the fundamental meaning of the values we commit to work by.

This work includes:

1. Co-development and implementation with young people of a suite of workshops and training sessions for delivery to practice staff. These include, but are not limited to, sessions addressing such themes as:
 - Rediscovering childhood in child welfare
 - More than a ‘case’ – our work from the perspectives of young people

2. Development and delivery of an internal publicity campaign linking the Berry Street values to youth engagement.

Governance & Infrastructure

It goes without saying that commitment to the elevation of youth engagement from the Berry Street Board and executive are integral to the success of this strategy. Berry Street and the Berry Street Childhood Institute must offer an environment and infrastructure that not only welcome young people, but which also make it feasible for young people's voices to be heard and acted upon.

Work to build on organisational capacity to include young people in a range of organisational procedures and governance activities includes:

1. Development and delivery of a workshop(s) to the Berry Street Board and Executive Management Team addressing:
 - a. Childhood in the context of OoHC;
 - b. How our values relate to young people; and
 - c. Bringing young people into our governance structure
2. Drafting an options paper outlining what Berry Street and the Berry Street Childhood Institute would look like if they were genuinely child-led. The paper will review existing models and initiatives and provide recommendations.
3. Connecting with the youth leadership program (mentioned above) to engage the young leaders in a range of meetings, initiatives and project development processes, and providing also providing feedback to the Berry Street Board.

Partnerships & Networks

The Berry Street Childhood Institute needs to build its networks and partnerships based on a youth engagement advancement agenda and on future projects (such as The Panel project being driven by Dr. Wise). This means seeking to connect with and work on specific projects and initiatives with:

- *Young people*

Before we can claim to work alongside young people the BSCI must focus on building strong and active networks with young people, both internally to Berry Street and across Australia. Specific projects (underway or in development) linked to this area include:

- Development of the youth leadership program mentioned above;
- Follow up post-*Imagine* with an aim to engage the 830+ Facebook audience in ongoing action and/or campaigning projects,
- A model for internal youth engagement based on an initiative by Hackney Youth (UK),
- Schools Engagement Project – a leadership and awareness raising project in partnership with secondary schools.

- *People who do youth engagement well*

Within Australia examples of organisations that are child- and youth-led include:

- Many organisations in the mental health sector
- Inspire Foundation
- Reach Foundation
- The Young and Well CRC

Further, there are a range of youth-founded and owned organisations such as Oaktree Foundation, The Australian Youth Climate Coalition, The Verb, Left Right Think-tank, and others. And finally there are effective youth advisory mechanisms and models for youth participation in a range of organisations, including the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic).

Outside Australia there is opportunity⁸ to connect with individuals and organisations who are forging a path, or running successful youth engagement initiatives. These include:

- Cindy Blackstock (Canada)
- UK Youth (UK)
- Citizenship Foundation (UK)
- Hackney Local Authority (UK)

- *People who want to move things forward*

There is a small, but passionate and growing group of individuals in the child welfare, youth and youth-related academia sectors whose increasing frustration at paralysis in relation to youth engagement is sparking a drive to instigate real change. These include:

- Samia Michail, Principal Researcher at Uniting Care Burnside,
- Members of the Youth Participation Practice Network, previously auspiced by YACVic,
- The Young and Well CRC.

- *Changemakers and influencers*

Young people are not high on the priority list of the current state or federal governments. Nevertheless, this is a good time to establish strong relationships with key opposition politicians as well as bolstering non-government relationships with influential organisations such as YACVic, the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC), state-based Children's Commissioners, and the National Children's Commissioner.

⁸ Lauren Oliver, Youth Engagement Coordinator, visited the UK earlier this year and will be visiting New York in November. Both trips include opportunities to meet with local organisations in relation to this work.

The Youth Engagement Coordinator will develop an ongoing 'map' of key political and non-political influencers in the youth and child welfare sector. Engaging these people will be part of any project strategy that seeks to inform change.

Knowledge Sharing

Knowledge sharing is a key component of the BSCI's work. A range of training events and workshops will be developed with the expertise of young people and professionals locally, nationally and internationally. The expertise of others builds on the strength of our own and is key to our ability to advance. In all the examples below, where a young person can be identified as the expert they will be engaged to share their knowledge.

- *Bringing knowledge from overseas*

There is an opportunity, with Dr. Bruce Perry's visit in 2015 and the focus on 'child-led' approaches, to engage an overseas expert on child-led work as part of the schedule of events. Harry Shier, whose work is mentioned in the earlier sections of this document, is understood to be exploring opportunities to visit Australia next year.

International experts in youth engagement will be identified and their potential as fellows and/or guests of the Institute will be assessed.

- *Championing expertise within Berry Street*

Where youth engagement work is being done well within Berry Street and where young people are driving innovative projects, these will be shared both internally and as part external events such as conference presentations, training events and forums (see below).

- *Championing expertise within Australia*

The young people who established Oaktree Foundation, AYCC, The Verb and Left Right Think-tank are experts in engaging their peers. The BSCI will look to engage representatives of these organisations to develop professional development opportunities for professionals focussing on how to drive change *with* young people.

Sector Dialogue

The BSCI's explicit intention is to encourage public dialogue on issues relating to childhood, however in the context of a fundamental shift in approaches to youth engagement the priority is to engage the child welfare and youth sectors in that dialogue. This will be done through targeted campaigns on two levels:

- *Campaigns based on what young people tell us*

There is a plethora of data that has been extracted from consultations with young people on a range of issues. It is now time to act on what has been said by young people. For example:

- The As Eye See It black and white photography project has produced three reports over six years, outlining the messages and themes communicated by young people through their photographs. In 2015 the BSCI will drive a project to combine the messages from the previous

- reports and from the 2015 exhibition and create a campaign advocating for changes to policy and practice in Out of Home Care based on the words and pictures of the young participants.
- *Imaginate* has generated profoundly insightful reflections on the nature of childhood. These in turn are inspiring some important discussions at a leadership level within Berry Street. The outcomes of these discussions and the work of the young people are beginning to form a campaign that addressing the importance of childhood within the Out of Home Care sector.
- *Campaigns run by young people*
As the BSCI's network of young people grows and becomes active we will be able to draw on their expertise and input to inform additional campaigns. Projects like the youth leadership program and the Schools Engagement Project will feed directly into a campaign strategy in which young people will devise and lead their own campaigns for change. This work will be guided by existing models like Citizenship Foundation's Youth Act program, which guides young people through a full program of capacity building and campaign implementation.

Framework for Change

In addition to knowledge development and sharing, the Berry Street Childhood Institute has a focus on knowledge translation; the act of turning what we *know* into what we *do*. It is this focus that will drive the development and subsequent articulation of a Framework for Change, to translate the input young people bring to the table into tangible actions and, ultimately, social change.

The Framework for Change, like Equality of Expertise, will be underpinned by a key question, asking:

How are we improving childhood?

Berry Street's vision is that all children should have a good childhood. It therefore follows that the improvement of childhood for those not experiencing a good one should be the overt driving force behind everything that we do. Every program, every forum, every event should be able to justify its role in the context of improving childhood. Furthermore, existing practice, policy and procedures should be reviewed with this same lens and adjusted where the focus on improving childhood has been lost or usurped.

The Berry Street Childhood Institute's role in this process is to scaffold organisational capacity for change by:

- Building an active, engaged network of young people across Australia;
- Engaging in partnerships/projects that are driving change based on the input of children & young people;
- Co-developing and delivering training with young people, internally and across the child welfare and youth sectors, on themes including:
 - Bringing childhood back to the forefront of child and family welfare work

- Understanding children and young people as more than a 'client' or 'case'
- Running campaigns with and inspired by young people challenging people to do better for childhood.

By building networks and relationships with decision makers and change-makers, and by educating and inspiring people the Institute will be both generating the impetus and establishing the pathways to make change possible.

Conclusion

This document is advocating for a fundamental shift in culture in relation to young people, not only at an organisational level, but at a national child welfare and youth sector level. This is no small task. It requires the development of a detailed work plan and clear outline of all projects that are part of the overall strategy. It also requires leadership, focus and commitment.

There are some clear logistical/resource issues associated with achieving the goals in this strategy. The most significant are the fact that the Youth Engagement 'team' is currently only one person, and that the budget for Youth Engagement, apart from salaries, is entirely reliant on project-related fundraising.

It is important to note that, while the Youth Engagement Coordinator *is* the only role with a dedicated youth engagement portfolio, it is not a role that functions in isolation and this strategy is dependent on the role's ability to build, maintain and function within strong partnerships and networks. It is also important to emphasise that 'ownership' of the youth engagement portfolio does not infer sole responsibility for the implementation of a strategy of this size.

Fortunately the Berry Street Childhood Institute team works closely together on projects and initiatives. Many of the elements of this strategy carry an implicit understanding that they are a 'team effort'.

Further, the strength of this strategy is in the idea that youth engagement is not a 'thing' that we do; it is how we do what we do. The work related to embedding 'how we do what we do' in organisational practice sits across several areas of the organisation. Most notably for in this context, the Policy, Practice and Innovation team hold key responsibility and must work with the Youth Engagement Coordinator and the Berry Street Institute to drive the youth engagement agenda as part of their work on client participation.

Finally, internal secondments, student placements and volunteers all provide important opportunities to build capacity and knowledge within Berry Street, influence future sector workers and inspire individuals who volunteer their time.

In terms of financial resources, a budget for the implementation of the strategy will be developed alongside a detailed plan. Subsequently a funding strategy will need to be developed in partnership with the Development Team.

Logistics and resources aside, this document remains an ambitious statement of intent. However, as noted above, it comes at a time where leadership is sorely needed and both Berry Street and the wider child and family welfare sector are ready for change. To ignore this opportunity would not only signal an acceptance of the ongoing subjugation (and therefore further disadvantaging) of young people's role in social change, but it would also ignore our responsibility, our obligations, and indeed our values as an organisation.

If the strategy described above is implemented and successful, in 2016 the following will be true:

*Berry Street and the Berry Street Childhood Institute **work together** with young people, not only hearing what they say, but having the **courage** and **integrity** to be guided and informed by them. We **respect** children and young people as the experts of their own experience and we seek to be **accountable** to those experts, both as users of our services and as important future leaders.*

And it will be at the core of how people understand our values.

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Appendix 1: Youth-led initiatives and organisations

The example of Shona Cools own initiative, Linkz Incorporated (mentioned in the document above), is outlined in Walsh and Black's 2011 book *In their Own Hands: Can young people change Australia*. Shona saw a gap in support for Indigenous young people, used her own experience and knowledge to develop a solution and is now running a successful not-for-profit fostering connections between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (www.linkz.net.au).

Arguably one of the best known examples of an Australian youth-run initiative is The Oaktree Foundation (www.oaktree.org). Established in 2003 by Hugh Evans and Nicolas MacKay "to harness the potential of young people to reduce poverty and empower developing communities through education"⁹, The Oaktree Foundation has grown from 30 volunteers to 300 in ten years. With a firm grasp on the use of social media, a collective voice of over 73,000 members and the ability to corral the energy of like-minded young people across Australia, Oaktree has established a reputation for running high-impact advocacy campaigns that achieve political outcomes¹⁰.

The Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC – www.aycc.org.au) was founded in 2006, led by Anna Rose and fifty young delegates representing more than twenty youth organisations. With nearly 60,000 members today, they see themselves as "building a generation-wide movement to solve the climate crisis"¹¹. Like The Oaktree Foundation, through a series of high-impact advocacy campaigns they are proving themselves a force to be reckoned with¹².

These are just a handful of examples. Others include: Our Say (www.oursay.org), using social media to provide young people with direct access to political leaders in a bid to revitalise democracy in Australia and internationally; Left Right Think Tank (www.leftright.org.au), a non-partisan, youth-led think tank aiming to involve and engage young people with policy in Australia; and any number of the incredible initiatives coming out of the Foundation for Young Australians Young Social Pioneers program¹³. In fact the development of the Young Social Pioneers program itself speaks to an era in which young people are increasingly seen as legitimate and powerful players on the socio-political and environmental change scene.

⁹ <http://theoaktree.org/about/> viewed 16/3/13

¹⁰ Their 2007 Make Poverty History '07 campaign in marginal electorates saw both major parties commit to increase Australia's overseas aid from 0.33% to 0.5% of the nation's GNI. <http://theoaktree.org/about/high-impact-advocacy/> viewed 16.3.13

¹¹ <http://aycc.org.au/about-us/> viewed 16/3/13

¹² In April 2012 AYCC founder Anna Rose appeared on ABC documentary *I Can Change Your Mind About Climate* with climate change denialist and retired politician Nick Minchin in which each was given the opportunity to convince the other of their point of view. The documentary was shown immediately preceding the political panel show Q and A for which both Rose and Minchin were panellists in a longer discussion about the climate and political inaction.

¹³ <http://www.fya.org.au/initiatives/young-social-pioneers/meetthepioneers/> viewed 16/3/13