Little boxes: changing perceptions and including young people in socially sustainable participatory planning

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ABSTRACT: In recent years, a great deal has been written about the benefits and ethics of including young people in participative decision-making. This has been accompanied by a burgeoning interest in including their views in participatory planning exercises that has not always been realised in practice. Drawing on a detailed analysis of the perceptions of adults and young people involved in a participatory planning exercise on Australia's Gold Coast, we believe that there are two major hurdles to the 'full' engagement of young people that are in some respects two sides of the same coin: the sometimes paternalistic perceptions and often dismissive attitude that many adults have towards the participation of young people; and the perceptions that young people may have of themselves and their subordinate place in an adult-dominated planning environment. Together, such views act to place limitations on the participation of young people because they set up unrealistic expectations for both adult and younger participants in terms of how and why young people participate, and what this participation should 'look and feel' like. In this paper, through the metaphor of boxes, we propose a number of issues that should be addressed when involving young people in participatory planning processes to ensure the most from their participation for all involved.

Keywords: *youth participation and engagement, participatory planning, internal exclusion, water planning*

> *And the people in the houses all go to the university*
> *And they all get put in boxes, little boxes all the same*
> *And there's doctors and there's lawyers, and business executives*
> *And they're all made out of ticky tacky and they all look just the same*
> *And they all play on the golf course and drink their martini dry*
> *And they all have pretty children and the children go to school*
> *And the children go to summer camp, and then to the university*
> *And they all get put in boxes, and they all come out the same*
>
> Malvina Reynolds, Little Boxes

Introduction

It has been argued that "the social and political response to young people in Australia falls somewhere between the lack of a consistent commitment to youth at best and social exclusion at worst" (Maunders, 2001:70). In recent years, however, a great deal has been written about the benefits and ethics of including young people in decision-making. This has been accompanied by a burgeoning interest in including their views in participatory planning exercises. Planners have worked hard to minimise the exclusion of young people and others not traditionally represented in participatory planning processes. This includes a concerted effort to recruit a broader range of people to participate by addressing factors that might

contribute to their exclusion such as timing and accessibility. Another strategy has been to target particular groups or communities of interest and to provide specific segregated engagement activities for them within the context of a broader participation initiative. These segregated activities have been particularly popular with planners wishing to include the views of young people (Cameron & Grant-Smith 2005).

There is, however, considerable work still to be done to ensure that this participation is meaningful to young people (Kirby et al, 2003) and informs decision-making. Although advocates of youth participation are clear about the benefits of including the views of young people, in many respects their advocacy acts to reinforce hierarchical relationships with young people in which they are seen as apprentices to the adult participants or planners. Similarly, the majority of academic and advocate evaluations of youth participation tend to study the impacts of participation on young people in terms of the development of their capacity as "citizens-in-training". Few study the impact of the participation of young people on the decisions made in participatory processes and, even fewer, the developmental effects that their participation might have on adult participants.[1]

Drawing on a detailed analysis of perceptions of adults and young people involved in a participatory planning exercise on the Gold Coast, Australia, we believe that there are two major hurdles to the 'full' engagement of young people that are in some respects two sides of the same coin: the sometimes paternalistic perceptions and often dismissive attitude that many adults have towards the participation of young people; and the perceptions that young people may have of themselves and their subordinate place in an adult-dominated planning environment. Together such views act to place limitations on the participation of young people because they set up unrealistic expectations for both adult and younger participants in terms of how and why young people participate and what this participation should 'look and feel' like. As a result, the failure of young people to participate fully in these processes is either put down to their lack of commitment, experience or capacity, or is considered to be a failure of the participatory process and techniques applied by the planners. However, we argue that more consideration should be paid to the potential impact of internal exclusion (Young 2000) caused by the attitudes and behaviours of adults involved.

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[1] See Zeldin et al., 2000 for a rare exception to this.

In this paper we discuss this potential for internal exclusion through the metaphor of boxes. We believe that, despite good intentions, in practice the inclusion of young people in participatory planning activities has the potential to be treated as simply another 'box to tick' by already overworked but well meaning planners, rather than as an opportunity to provide young people with the opportunity to be truly equal participants and contribute in ways that may benefit decision-making. On a deeper level, we also believe that the metaphor of boxes provides a useful analogy for exploring the attitudes about young people in planning processes and the way that young people are treated in these processes. Importantly, it is also a way of looking at the limitations caused by the way that young people might perceive their own role in participatory processes on the basis of these.

Based on these ideas, we tentatively propose a number of issues that should be addressed when involving young people in participatory planning processes to ensure the best outcomes from their participation for all involved.

Young people's participation in planning: a view from the literature
The ways in which adults design and include young people in participatory processes either consciously or sub-consciously serve to reinforce the perceptions that they have of young people (Sinclair, 2004). Negative, or at best agnostic, views about the value of the contribution of young people to participatory planning can be reinforced by the way that young people are identified within participatory processes as "youth representatives".

Because the most common preconceptions that adults have of young people are based on a view that the young have numerous deficiencies and are generally disengaged with society, the literature about young people's participation in policy and planning tends to emphasise their disengagement and deficiencies, rather than the resources that they bring to the processes. As such, the benefits of young people's participation such as the promotion of citizenship and social inclusion, and personal and social education and development are often expressed in terms of benefits to the young person participating (Checkoway et al., 2005). While it is sometimes acknowledged that their participation may result in the provision of more appropriate services or the better utilisation of existing services or other decision-making outcomes (Kirby et al., 2003) the benefits of their participation to other, generally adult, participants, are rarely acknowledged (Frank, 2006).

While the academic planning and participation literature has done a good job of articulating and promoting these theoretical benefits, it has been reported that planners in the United States and Australia have little in the way of professional knowledge about including young people and do not systematically address their needs in the planning process (Frank 2006: 351). As a result, despite these benefits, there is a danger that the current push toward the inclusion of young people may simply be treated as another 'box to tick', where young people are included only because they have to be (Freeman et al., 2003:59) in processes that are often ill-equipped to accommodate their inclusion for any number of very valid reasons.

The institutional, policy, skills and other barriers that may constrain planners and others when they attempt to include young people in participatory initiatives include:

- negative attitudes about young people and their capacity to be involved in decision making (Zeldin et al., 2000);
- the ability to form reciprocal and trusting relationships between young people and adults involved in participatory activities including facilitators, planners and other professionals, other participants and adults involved in making decisions about them (DCS 2006);
- the capacity of those involved in working with young people in terms of their training and background (Freeman et al., 2003) and the need for adults to change their understandings of young people and how to work with them (O'Donoghue et al., 2002)
- hierarchical power structures and cultural norms that favour hierarchical relationships between adults and young people (Golombek, 2002:8);
- structures and processes for decision making and participation where young people are forced to fit in with established 'adult' ways of working (Freeman et al., 2003);
- time frames governed by bureaucratic needs rather than the needs of participants, and younger participants in particular (Freeman et al., 2003);
- the resources necessary to support the participation of young people (Kirby et al., 2003); and
- a culture of performance measures, whereby it is difficult to justify planning activities with outcomes that are difficult to measure, such as facilitating young people's participation (Freeman et al., 2003).

In terms of these barriers, adults often stress the inadequacy of structures and processes (DCS, 2006:16) or the deficiencies of young people themselves (Checkoway et al., 2005) as providing the greatest barriers to the participation of young people. However, by way of contrast young people generally identify attitudes and the absence of 'listening relationships' as the reason for their lack of involvement or poor participation experience (DCS, 2006:16). Based on the following case study we found these observations to be accurate.

Young people are often included in planning activities to provide a specific 'youth' perspective. What this means in practice is defined by the planners running the process and inviting their involvement. It is often based on a constrained viewpoint of what young people may be interested in and the contributions they may make to decision-making. Generally such an approach restricts the involvement of young people to a small sub-set of issues and excludes them from engaging in broader issues that may affect them throughout their life. Young people have greater interests and concerns beyond where the next skate park may be located and have the capacity and interest to participate beyond such narrow issues if given the chance (Cameron & Grant-Smith, 2005). This is part of what makes the participatory approach taken by the Gold Coast Waterfuture Strategy interesting and worthy of review.

Young people's participation in planning: a view from the field

The Gold Coast is situated between the ocean and hinterland on Australia's east coast in the state of Queensland. With close to half a million residents (DIP, 2008:1), the Gold Coast is the second most populous city in the state and the sixth most populous city in Australia. The Gold Coast is renowned for its sunny subtropical climate, popular surfing beaches and variety of tourist attractions. The Gold Coast receives approximately 10 million overnight and daytrip visitors each year (GCCC, n.d. a) and is home to more than 82,000 people aged between 10 and 24 years (GCCC, n.d. b).

The Gold Coast City Council has a history of trialling innovative participatory planning and community capacity building projects to engage with its residents on a variety of planning and policy areas (Cuthill, 2001, 2003, 2004), including the operation of the Gold Coast City Junior Council[2] (GCCC, n.d. c) and running separate participatory sessions for young people

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[2] The Junior Council has approximately seventy members who are grade 10 and 11 high school students from state and private schools across the city (GCCC, n.d. c).

to explore alternative ways of involving them in planning activities (Cuthill, 2004). The Gold Coast City Council has also been proactive in conducting research into issues believed by Council to be affecting younger residents such as their perceptions of the leisure opportunities and constraints available to them as young people living on the Gold Coast (Lloyd et al., 2005:22). The involvement of young people was also integrated into plans for public participation in the development of the Gold Coast Waterfuture Strategy, which is the focus of this paper.

The Gold Coast Waterfuture Strategy was developed through a participatory planning exercise driven by the Gold Coast City Council to create a 50 year water supply plan for the Gold Coast (Gold Coast Water, 2006). The strategy was developed between 2004 and 2005 and brought together more than twenty stakeholders from a broad range of state and local government agencies, community organizations and business interests in the form of a community advisory committee.[3]

A list of potential representatives for this Community Advisory Committee was put to council for approval before formal invitations were issued (Pers. Comm. Gold Coast Water Project Team member, July 4, 2008). The stakeholder groups invited to participate were broken into four main categories of interest: community including environmental; industry and business; state government; and local government. Within the community group category, the Gold Coast Junior Council was asked to select two members to represent the views of young people on the Community Advisory Committee through a process of self-selection and/or election if more than two members were interested in participating on the committee; two members self-nominated.

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[3] The empirical data for this paper comes from a number of narrative interviews (Elliot 2005) conducted with members of the Gold Coast Waterfuture Community Advisory Committee as part of a broader doctoral research project focussing on the development of trust and the role of power in participatory engagement processes for water planning (See Edwards, 2009). The data was collected via a multi-method approach which included semi-structured interviews with committee and project team members and reviewing documents relating to the operation of the Gold Coast Waterfuture Strategy Community Advisory Committee such as meeting minutes. Questions covered in the interviews were primarily focussed on eliciting information about perceptions of power and trust and covered a range of issues including: questions related to processes issues such as the presentation and communication of information and committee structure and operation; and questions related to issues associated with communication, dialogue and relationship building between participants.

The Junior Council provided ready access to young people with a history of involvement in council initiatives and who met adult expectations of "appropriate" young people for participation in the Community Advisory Committee. Selecting participants from an existing youth committee is often seen as an attractive and expedient option for planners because it is considered to be both quick and easy because they get to deal with young people with whom they already have a relationship (Freeman et al., 2003:66). However, it could be argued that by restricting the views of young people to those already represented on the Junior Council, an opportunity was missed to increase the diversity of young people involved in council activities and to provide more young people or young people with a specific interest in water planning with the opportunity to be heard.

Often the negative assumptions and stereotypes that are applied to young people in general are more strongly evoked for certain 'groups' or 'types of young people. Restricting committee membership to those already on the Junior Council ensured that only young people who meet adult expectations of who constitutes an appropriate young person were included. It is as Claire Freeman and her colleagues note regarding the participation of young people in local government activities in New Zealand: "Since adults were deciding which young people should be involved, their view of young people influenced the type of representation that the general population of young people could obtain" (Freeman et al, 2003:62). It could therefore be argued that dipping again into this restricted pool of young people fosters exclusivity which sees only the most privileged or skilled young people being chosen to participate (O'Donoghue et al., 2002); as it transpired, both of the younger community members involved in the process were intelligent and articulate individuals who attended private schools.

Unfortunately simply "inserting one or a few youth into an adult-created and adult-driven process runs the risk of involving youth as tokens or decorations, precluding any opportunity for meaningful participation or substantive influence" (O'Donoghue et al., 2002:20). This risk of tokenism was recognised by the project team running the process who noted:

> As we moved through the sequence of the project and realised that one of the areas that we probably missed out in the earlier ones was the youth group, the people likely to probably bear most of the consequences of our decisions today. So in that sense we went out of our way to incorporate youth groups, generally, I think sourced from youth council. [Gold Coast Water Project Team member]

Other adult participants also noted that they felt that the inclusion of the two young people in this process was tokenistic:

> I think that you know, we had a lot of older people, for the want of a better term, and these couple of young, I mean the token school students that in actual fact didn't manage to get to too many of the meetings. [Adult committee member, representing State Government interests]

From a process support perspective, the Gold Coast Water Project Team attempted to address issues that may have prevented the committee's younger members from attending meetings, such as providing a taxi to take them home following meetings. However, there were a number of aspects of the operation of the committee which may have limited the capacity of its younger members to participate fully. These are discussed in the remainder of this paper.

Adult views of young people's participation

Young people are often aware of and respond to the attitudes held by adults whether they are planners or other participants. This was certainly the case for the younger members of the Waterfutures committee:

> I think some of the older people were a bit sort of, rightly so, a bit, um, they were thinking that oh, [they are] too young to be here. [he/she] doesn't know what is going on, which is, I mean in hindsight is true. Like that is sort of how it was, like they, yah I felt that they looked down on me, you know.[he/she is] just a kid and, yah I did perceive that a bit that I was sort of maybe ostracized a bit and I felt a bit awkward. [Younger committee member]

It has been argued that adult views of young people's participation fall into three primarily themes: *developmental* which sees young people as lacking the knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviours and social connections that adults possess; *vulnerable* which sees young people as less powerful than adults and in need of their adult protection; and *legal* which sees young people as possessing fewer rights and responsibilities than adults (Frank 2006:353).

While the idea that young people in the Gold Coast Waterfuture process were less worthy or capable was not mentioned by the majority of committee members, it was certainly a view held by some:

> I am a little bit sceptical of young people being involved in this because it's is like saying you know we are doing brain surgery, what is your opinion? Should we go through the front or the side of the head? Well, you are bald, so let's go through the front. I mean, how the fuck would I know? What life experiences, did they bring? [Adult committee member, representing State Government interests]

However, most adult committee members held a more mixed reaction to the participation of the younger committee members:

> There was two students, two students, on the committee, senior students, grade 11 students I think, a girl and a boy from a private school and ah, the boy, he won some competition, a geography competition. He ended up in the final in Japan. I think, he did fairly well. I think, he won the Australian. So it was good to see him there and asking questions, intelligent questions and making comments. We didn't see a lot of the girl there, but there was a lot of the things that were a bit over their head. So as far as not being mature or knowing how things worked, and you felt that they were getting a bit lost in the whole thing. [Adult committee member, representing community interests]

Young people's understanding of their role in planning

Depending on who is defining the term 'young person' it can describe anyone from a toddler to a person in their twenties. The skills, interests and capabilities of a 'young person' can, therefore, be widely varied. As a result there is often a negative focus on their real or perceived deficiencies or, more positively, on their capacity for development. However, regardless of the emphasis, young people are placed at the bottom of a hierarchy which places adults at the top. Given the prevalence of this view in the media, this is perhaps something that young people have also accepted. By accepting their position at the bottom of this hierarchy, young people may be either less inclined to participate when given the opportunity or to participate less fully, giving adults perceived support for their perceptions that young people are disengaged. Having been 'conditioned' to believe that they do not know as much or feeling that they are there simply because the organisers are compelled to include them, young people may feel intimidated, and not want to participate to their full extent. The same could be said for placing young people (or an adult participant for that matter) in a process where they are surrounded by experts using highly technical language or jargon but not providing lay explanations of this information or other support to understand it. In the Gold Coast Waterfuture process, there is some evidence from the young people themselves that they felt they were positioned inferiorly to the adult participants and that this impacted their ability and willingness to participate:

> So um like I felt a bit intimidated, there were all these older people and there were all sorts of councilors and all sorts of well-respected people in their professions and I just sort of felt like, oh god, a little high school student. [Younger committee member]

Not all boxes are the same: adult roles in young people's participation

The committee was facilitated by an independent chair whom, while experienced in this type of work, had no explicit experience with young people. The young people were treated the same as the adult members of the committee. In one sense this is appropriate because the

facilitator did not assume that the younger participants should be treated as if they were subordinate members of the committee. However, in some respects it may also have contributed to their lesser participation because it did not acknowledge that different participants have different communication needs and styles. Getting the most out of young people's participation (for both participants and the process) requires that adults not only be supportive but also skilled in garnering young people's input (Freeman et al., 2003).

In this case, being placed in an expert adult environment with minimal background knowledge relative to the other committee members, the younger committee members often found the committee process to be very intimidating and they were often made to feel that they couldn't ask clarifying questions, as they might be perceived as being stupid or not deserving of their place on the committee.

> This is three years ago, and I am still young now…I was quite shy and I was
> really intimidated by the whole thing. [Younger committee member]

While a number of authors have written about the process requirements for including young people in planning activities, they are often "silent about the roles that adults must play as supporters and educators" (O'Donoghue et al., 2002:21). It is often the case that adults themselves may not be aware of the impact their attitudes and behaviours may have on younger participations.[4]

In attempts to present themselves as competent and knowledgeable adult participants many adults do not ask questions even if they require further clarification on technical matters or other issues. Through this behaviour they may unintentionally discourage younger participants from asking questions or presenting their views in the way most comfortable for them. One of the young participants in the Gold Coast Waterfuture process noted this behaviour in some of the adult participants when it was clear that they had difficulty comprehending certain materials:

> After months and months went on, that I kind of realised I wasn't probably the only one
> who felt that way, I think some of the others also felt a bit that they didn't have a thorough
> grasp of what was going on. [Younger committee member]

Adult participants are also often careful to ensure that they present their views in a very professional and rational manner which discourages other ways of expressing views that do

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[4] Or for that matter women participants or those from non-English speaking backgrounds etc.

not conform to "adult norms". Some argue that it is the responsibility of adults to "help youth learn how to recognise the norms of the public arena or the specific practices of the field in which they hope to participate" so that they views are considered credible (O'Donoghue et al., 2002:22). Such claims only allow youth to participate with their own voice to a certain (small) extent but to otherwise conform to adult norms. We argue that it is also the responsibility of adult participants to be open to the diverse views and ways of expressing them that young people present (Young, 2000).

Opening boxes

Planners and adult participants may not consciously place young people into the boxes they have mentally created for them, but Freeman et al., (2006:66) argue that it is impossible for them to be immune to the prevailing and generally accepted view of young people as "incompetent, self-centred and easily distracted by leisure opportunities, in need of protection as well as potentially threatening."

Effective participation is underpinned by ensuring that young people's participation is part of an organisation's culture and that young people have a place in decision making that is based on adults adapting to and accepting young people's ways of working. It also requires a process which provides the time and opportunities necessary for adults to develop strong relationships with young people based on respect in which the young people's time and effort is valued and has some real effect on outcomes for them (DCS, 2006:7). Such changes can have real benefits and in some cases young people's participation has improved adult perceptions of youth in general and their capacity to contribute in a meaningful way (Frank, 2006:362; Zeldin et al., 2000:31). However, a systemic approach is required to translate a commitment to participation into practice and to affect this kind of change. Such an approach would require:

- Giving young people responsibility and voice by actively soliciting a wide range of young people's views, actively listening to them and incorporating their views into outputs where possible (DCS 2006);
- Building young people's capacity through providing opportunities to participate, and build additional skills and abilities by involving adults throughout the process to mentor and educate young people (Kirby et al., 2003) and providing similar

opportunities for adults to learn from their experiences with young people and to share these experiences with other adults (Zeldin et al., 2000);

- Encouraging youthful styles of working in both planners and adult participants (Frank 2006);

- Providing opportunities to highlight the achievements of young people to begin to change attitudes about their potential and contribution (Frank, 2006).

Based on these ideas, it is argued that the way forward is to create more and better participatory structures and opportunities that begin to redress attitudinal barriers in adults and young people and processes. Such changes will achieve inclusive participation and motivate young people to be involved and adults to support their involvement (Sinclair, 2004:114). The perceptions that adults and organisations hold about young people are not lost on the young people themselves. They are able to gauge the environment around them and respond accordingly. Their reactions may also contribute to reinforcing the perceptions that the adults hold about them, creating a self-reinforcing cycle. With most of the academic and practitioner-based work in the field of young people's participation aimed at adult audiences, two issues need to be addressed.

First, adults and organisations should rethink their currently held perceptions of young people. They should become open to the new possibilities that young people may have to offer. As one participant in the Gold Coast Waterfuture stated, young people on the Gold Coast are smart. They do have good ideas and are more than willing to share those ideas if there is a willing audience. It may not be in the same 'language' that adults speak, but opening their minds through the use of rhetoric as suggested by Young (1995) would allow more adults to recognise these valuable ideas.

Second, academic and practitioner-based research and outputs need to broaden their audience and include young people as readers. Letting young people know what others have experienced and felt can help them understand that they are not alone, it can help them understand that they won't necessarily be put into a particular box, nor will their ideas be discounted wholesale. By working with young people and disseminating the outcomes of this research, young people can get a sense of the changing perceptions that academics and practitioners are experiencing and attempting to disseminate to the wider community.

Conclusion

It has been argued that we know very little about the kinds of roles that adults can play to support more effective youth engagement and the organisational features that encourage youth participation (O'Donoghue et al., 2002:19). Barry Checkoway and his colleagues argue

> If there were [sic] more knowledge of youth participation in public policy as a subject of study—including empirically-based case studies—it would contribute to its growth as a field of practice (Checkoway et al., 2005:1150).

We would add that these studies should not only be from the perspective of adult participants or organisers, but must also incorporate the perspectives and insights of the young people themselves (see Wood, 2009, 2010).

Most of the more innovative and optimistic literature on youth participation tends to focus on community-based and non-government youth participation processes, which tend not to integrate the participation of young people into mainstream participatory processes, but focus on youth-specific processes. These organisations do not face the same sets of constraints as public institutions and may offer a broader range of participatory experiences and decision-making influence (O'Donoghue et al., 2002:17). As a result, these experiences provide only tentative guidance for the participation of young people in traditional local government planning exercises (Frank, 2006), which have an additional set of restrictions placed on them. While this one case study may be insufficient to draw broad, general conclusions, the findings presented in this paper do indicate some the challenges associated with local government's attempts to move toward participatory planning processes which involve young people. Through this paper, we hope to have drawn planners' attention to how adults (both as organisers and participants) contribute to participation outcomes when young people are involved. Attending to these matters may cost neither extra time nor money, but perhaps a greater challenge and something more difficult to come by is "the need for adults to change **their frames**, that is, **their understandings** of youth and how to work with them" (O'Donoghue et al., 2002:22, emphasis added).

Revisiting Malvina Reynold's *Little Boxes,* there is a danger that processes which involve young people are based on ideas of young people as an homogenous group. There is a tendency to only want to deal with the "pretty children", who go to school, behave in acceptable ways and to not want to engage with the messiness and uncertainty that being

young necessarily involves. Young people are not simply junior versions of other committee members there to learn how to be 'good' and 'productive' members of society and should not be treated as such. Instead the diversity that they can bring to the table should be harnessed. Many authors have noted dangers and challenges associated with letting young people out of the boxes that the adult worldview has constructed for them but the benefits are likely to be worth it.

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