CHILDREN'S CITIZENSHIP:
PARTICIPATION THROUGH PLANNING
AND URBAN DESIGN

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INTRODUCTION

A major challenge for researchers and practitioners working on matters related to children and young people's participation in civic life is how to obtain meaningful and influential contributions on planning and urban design activities from children within the constraints of adult policy and practice. The key elements of this challenge concern methods of communication between 'experts' and children, children's competence and skills to participate in planning and urban design activities, and traditional rationalist approaches to planning. A number of researchers and practitioners from planning and urban design, children's development, and citizenship have grappled with aspects of these issues.

Healey (1997) and Forester (1999) and have advanced current understanding of communicative practice. Hart (1997) and Driskell (2002) have established that children are competent and can learn the skills required to participate in planning and design processes that affect their lives, and Malone (1999, 2006) and Alderson (1999) have advocated for, and advanced children's rights through UNICEF Child Friendly Cities initiatives and other planning mechanisms. Unfortunately, children's participation in planning and urban design practice does not reflect the level of engagement enjoyed by adults, or envisioned by advocates who regularly work with children. Children's experiences and views, when they are elicited for planning and urban design activities by researchers and practitioners, tend to be tokenistic representations that are constricted to older children and child-specific spaces and places.

An earlier article by Wilks (2010) drew attention to the importance of children's contribution and its recognition at state government level. Wilks noted that in 2006 the NSW Commissioner for Children and Young People advocated that as a community, we need to find better ways to encourage children and young people to confidently connect with their communities, to take 'safe risks' and exercise their judgement about a range of matters. By not doing so we are missing out on the unique insights that children and young people can bring to a range of issues, but more importantly, young people are missing out on better outcomes around their own health and well-being.

Increased participation by children and young people in local urban and environmental design processes is a means to increasing their level of social and neighbourhood connection, as well as expanding the breadth and standard of their play and recreation activities (NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2006). However there is a tension in this reality, because whilst recognising children as they 'are', we need to also recognise the opportunities and constraints of current planning/political systems. As researchers and practitioners, we need to assist children to learn what they need to most effectively participate as whilst

challenging existing ideologies of childhood and existing legitimate participation processes to facilitate their contribution.

Perhaps one of the greatest barriers to children and young people's participation is adults' notions of their role in society. Head and Gleeson (2007: 1) lament the lack of attention given to children's needs in urban policy, and the scarcity of research into "understanding how the built environment shapes children's well-being". Iveson (2006: 107) proposes that a belief system has been constructed around children and young people in terms of their 'protection' and 'preparation', portraying them as 'citizens in waiting'. Tranter and Sharpe (2007: 191) argue the need for children to be theorised as "competent beings and capable social agents", capable of making "creative 'functional' contributions within environments". James et al. (1998) also argue for the views of children to be listened to insisting that they are capable social actors in their own right.

Atencio (2007: 97) believes that the spaces and places in cities are, in effect, 'resources' for children and young people to use in order to understand "who they are and to interact with those around them". Malone (2007: 15) regards the frequent positioning of children by adults as "invisible" and as "passive recipients" of whatever environments they happen to find themselves in as both ill-conceived and ill-informed. She argues that children are constantly "negotiating and reconstructing spaces in powerful and significant ways".

Similarly, Iveson (2008: 109) argues for local planning processes to recognise the things that "children and young people *can* do rather than one which is premised on a series of (adults') assumptions about what they *cannot* do". If we cannot manage to do this, we will continue to see "collisions between adults' and children's worlds, with children coming out the losers more often than not" (Gleeson et al. 2006: 153).

Morrow (2001: 46) concluded that social capital in the form of civic participation was generally lacking for young people, and that they moved through 'virtual' and geographically fragmented networks and social spaces. She asserts that they are denied a range of participatory rights that limits their sense of self-efficacy and feelings of control over their environment. Morrow calls on government agencies to start viewing children and young people as 'stakeholders' in government policy as opposed to evaluating their contributions as 'successful or unsuccessful outcomes'.

Thus what many authors are advocating is a far greater sharing of responsibility for decision-making between young people and adults, and it is clear that local environments are a pertinent setting for such exchanges to take place. However, what is equally acknowledged is that governments "must work towards realising the potential of children to become 'authentic participants' in decision-making processes" (Gleeson, 2006: 152), and that this should be a high priority.

Corkery et al. (2006), in their research into the perceptions of young people around the built environment, found substantial evidence that they need to be acknowledged as "equal stakeholders in the design and development process". Participation simultaneously benefits children through increased awareness, knowledge and skills, and helps adults form more realistic assumptions about children's needs, desires, and ambitions. They found many students "possessed a limited awareness of public spaces as a designed environment for any activity other than sports", and concluded that:

> *To ignore the voice of young people in the creation of the built environment risks ignorance in pretending to know what is meaningful and relevant to them...(thus) we must be conscious of involving and empowering young people in the creation of their world (Corkery et al., 2006: 8).*

There is thus much to be done and thought about in terms of enabling children and young people to understand and take part in the decision-making processes of the many institutions that affect the quality of their daily lives. Against this theoretical background, and in the context of urban planning and design, this paper explores how semi-formal programs jointly

conducted by local councils, universities and public schools (primary and secondary) can support children's participation in planning and urban design. It seeks to demonstrate how sharing of knowledge and skills between planning and design professionals and children, can lead to more meaningful and influential contributions from children in planning and urban design processes, and ultimately to their well-being.

In particular, we focus on two exploratory programs conducted in one New South Wales (NSW) and one Victorian regional city. The two central aims of these programs are to develop children and young people's sense of spatial competence, confidence and efficacy in their local environment, and to support the establishment of leadership groups with the confidence and skills to contribute to on-going local government planning and urban design activities.

BACKGROUND

In 2004, the International Secretariat for Child Friendly Cities published *Building Child Friendly Cities: A framework for action* which urged governments and non-government organisations to support children's rights as well as provide a framework for doing so.   Two years later, UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities Initiative had been launched in 1996 at the UN Conference on Human Settlement (Habitat II), and it is closely allied with the 1990 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. At this conference it was declared that the well-being of children is the key indicator of a healthy habitat, a democratic society, and of good governance committed to children's rights.

There are now many Child Friendly Cities initiatives around the world providing avenues for children and young people to develop and exercise citizenship and participation skills. Such programs assist children and young people to interact with local government and community resources, to develop spatial competence and confidence, and to investigate a variety of issues in their local environments. Common to all programs is the belief that children and young people's participation in the life and decision-making of their communities is central to their health and well-being.

In 2008 Wilks travelled to the UK to research different participation in planning projects and their applicability in the Australian context. Of particular interest was a London-based project entitled, *My City Too,* that sought to achieve deeper engagement with children, *My City Too* was established in 2007 through London's Open-City program to assist young people to engage with the built environment, to learn about how environments are created, and to develop the creative design appreciation skills to evaluate, make input and comment on development proposals. This project aimed to create real skills development compared to other projects being implemented at the time (http://www.mycitytoo.org.uk/).

Through the *My City Too* project, practitioners continue to work with young people across London to inspire and encourage them to take an active role in helping create better spaces and places in London for children and young people. The project seeks to place young people at the heart of built environment policy and to assist them to take an active role in London's future development:

Young people are our future. Yet research shows that many of them feel that they have little or no influence in decisions about their city. Young people must be fully involved in place making and policy-making if they are going to value, respect and take ownership of the spaces and places around them

My City Too has established a panel of about 35 young people aged 12 – 16 years known as the 'Young Ambassadors'. These young Londoners have a strong desire to see spaces created for them in the heart of their communities, rather than always on the edges of their communities. To assist them in their goals, volunteer architects and urban planners work with the ambassador group to engage them with urban design and architecture, and to equip them with the skills to make informed contributions to planning and design. As a result of these

efforts, many London Boroughs have invited them to sit on their local Design Review Panels in an advisory capacity, providing feedback and commentary on public design proposals.

This model influenced the objectives, design, and implementation of two Australian projects. Essentially, the projects are about communication and children's competence, and the need to unsettle the continued dominance of rationalist planning. As such, there is a dual purpose of the children's leadership group. First, professionals help children to develop their knowledge and skills so they can actively participate in discussions about planning and urban design issues and developments affecting the city. Second, children participate in discussions and/or act as an advisory committee about planning and urban design issues and developments affecting the city. In their capacity as participants, the intention is for children to be engaged in many types of issues and developments, not only those related to matters traditionally considered important to children such as parks or playgrounds.

METHODS

Participants

New South Wales

Modelled on the success of *My City Too*, Southern Cross University and Coffs Harbour City established a 'Young Ambassadors for Design' project in 2010 in a local high school. Every two weeks during 2010 and 2011 local planners, engineers and architects willing to give time attend workshops and site visits with the students to talk about their work and the career paths they have taken. The workshops involve approximately ten students from Years 9 – 11 who are interested in pursuing a career in the design and environment professions.

This school has an enrolment of a significant number of students from low socio-economic status and backgrounds of disadvantage and it was hoped, among other things, that participation in the *Young Ambassadors* would assist these students to keep 'rolling' with their goals to enter university and to study in one of the design professions. The project has enjoyed a high level of support from a school executive keen to raise its students' aspirations around going on to higher education. It became evident that instrumental in the success of the project was the role of the school's design studies teacher who 'championed' the project, ensuring that it fitted in with the rhythms of daily school life and assisting the students to make the curriculum links between the project and what they were doing at school.

In the meantime Coffs Harbour City Council identified some opportunities and avenues for the Young Ambassadors to make an input into the planning and design processes of Council. In doing so, Council was addressing a strongly articulated desire by the young people for ongoing and meaningful consultation in local government activities, an outcome from Council's "Vision 2030" consultation processes in 2009 that sought the views of Coffs Harbour's young people. Opportunities for input in planning and design processes also provided a focus for young people to develop their skills and commentary.

Victoria

In Victoria, the foundation for developing a Young Ambassadors group was undertaken through implementation of the *Place of Our Children in Community Building* project. This project was commissioned by the City of Greater Bendigo, and was supported by a council based CFC (Child Friendly City) program, CFC Leadership Group, CFC advocate, and budget. A major aim of the project was to elicit children's views about their urban environment. As part of a joint research team comprising university researchers and local planning, urban design, and recreational consultants responding to a call for an expression of interest, the authors submitted a proposal to trial a methodology to elicit children's views and to develop a children's leadership group. The research team was awarded the contract in late 2010. During the research, three council staff representing children's programs and urban design, formed part of the research team.

Through negotiation with council, three school sites were selected for implementation of the project. Two sites, one primary school and one secondary school, were located in the same geographical area. This particular area is an outer suburb characterised by disadvantage as indicated by lower than average employment status, wages, and educational attainment. In the primary school, two classes were selected for participation by the school principal. The classes comprised grade 5 and grade 6 students, all of whom participated. In the secondary school, the participants comprised students from one grade 8 class, and five grade 10 students with a specific interest in planning, design and arts related fields. The program for the third site is currently being implemented.

Research techniques

The Victorian project was designed as pragmatic reflexive research. Research activities were conducted to achieve outcomes relevant to both research and practice. The primary research outcome was the trial and development of participatory planning methods with children and young people from leading practice in this field. The primary practice outcomes were children and young people's knowledge and skills development about planning and urban design issues, and improved contemporary planning practice. We simultaneously researched their views and insights about their environments, as well as our own processes of eliciting children's engagement in planning and urban design activities. As a result of the different processes of project initiation and the different requirements of schools participating in the projects, the methods used for each location and their respective sites are slightly different.

New South Wales

In fortnightly workshops and on site visits young people shared the work of local urban planners, architects, landscape architects, engineers, and ecologists. Together, they visited parks, playgrounds, creek walks, and the design professional's places of work, to observe and find out about what they do, and how they do it.

The young people learned about things such as the contested nature of 'the public interest' in urban design, important design principles in the planning of the natural and built environments, and how design professionals interface with each other. They also developed an understanding of how urban design projects 'work' in terms of practicalities such as choice of materials, colour, texture and form, of timelines, and of wider frames such as the dynamics between humans and their environments. The students used flip cameras to record their thoughts about what they were seeing and doing.

In 2010 the young people implemented the knowledge and skills gained through participation in a planning initiative. They wrote a lengthy submission to the council's draft *2010 Coffs Harbour City Centre Plan* providing detailed comment on several planning and design proposals and 'visions'. A number of their ideas are discussed in the results section below.

Victoria

In Victoria, children's views were sought about specific sites for which council was developing planning and urban design plans. For the outer suburb schools, the site nominated for children and young people's contribution comprised a parkland area around Lake Neangar for which a masterplan had already been produced but for which a series of detailed design consultant's briefs were still being written. Council sought children and young people's contributions toward more detailed development of the parkland site. As a result of the project, information and data gathered during the workshops was utilized by Council in the framing of the consultant design briefs. For the inner suburban school, the site nominated for children's contribution was the inner city commercial area. Council was seeking children's contribution about how they use the urban space.

A series of activities were conducted in all three schools over a period of nine hours spread over three non-consecutive days. These activities were designed to increase children and

young people's understanding of cities, their local environments and planning and urban design issues. They comprised introductory discussions with children about cities, planning and urban design, and children's participation in planning and urban design processes.

Children learned photography skills from a professional photographer to assist children to capture their observations visually. Researchers conducted walking and photography tours with children of nominated sites to elicit their spoken and photographed perspectives of the locality, and for researchers to observe children's behaviour within the sites. A selection of their photographs was developed into a visual presentation accompanied by multiple choice survey questions to identify children's preferences for specific environmental and design elements. The students used hand-held electronic 'clickers' to record their responses to the survey questions.

Further discussions about children's experiences of the site, and their environmental and design preferences were also conducted based on the selected photos. While these activities formed the process for children's participation in planning and urban design for the nominated sites, they also served to build relationships between the local council, the researchers, the schools and the children. It is anticipated these relationships will support the development of a Young Ambassadors children's leadership group.

RESULTS

New South Wales

In late 2010, Coffs Harbour City Council released a draft *2010 Coffs Harbour City Centre Plan*. The aim of the plan is to set strategic directions for the city's growth over the next 23 years, including the identification of three key precincts in the city to accommodate redevelopment opportunities. In response to the council's call for public comment on the draft document, the Young Ambassadors wrote a submission, commenting on some of council's urban design proposals. The main points indicated young people had a strong understanding of urban issues and the potential changes that could affect their life in the city. Young people raised matters that revolved around their strong preference to not see urban design in Coffs Harbour try to emulate Sydney. The following excerpt demonstrates young from were concerned about the affects of proposed population density on the pace of the area and increased vehicle traffic:

> *Council's Proposal:* "IMPROVING THE PACIFIC HIGHWAY AS THE GATEWAY
>
> TO COFFS HARBOUR CBD"

> *Young Ambassadors' Response:* "We think the above sketch looks just like parts of Sydney, and doesn't have a Coffs Harbour feel to it. The buildings are too high and don't look like coastal architecture. If there is going to be many people living in the city centre, it will become very busy and make the traffic a lot worse."

Young people indicated that there is currently a relaxing atmosphere and feel to Coffs Harbour. Rather than importing designs from Sydney, young people suggested that amenities such as shade and light were of greater importance in the regional city centre, as illustrated below:

> *Council's Proposal:* "CREATING A LIVING CITY"

> *Young Ambassadors' Response:* "We are concerned that a number of the artist's impressions in the draft document such as the one above make it look as though the planners want Coffs Harbour to look and feel like Sydney. We don't want Coffs Harbour to be like Sydney, it's a coastal town, and the city centre should be a relaxing place. The city centre needs a lot more shade in summer, and more water features as well. We like the idea of terraced buildings as this will allow more light into the street below.

While the young people acknowledged that increased density in the city centre could benefit business and increase vibrancy, changes needed to be accompanied by building and design that incorporated colour and light to improve aesthetics and safety.

> We question whether the property values are amenable to residential development, that is, if residential use is an economically viable use. However, having people living in the city centre will be good for the businesses as these residents will spend their money there, and there will be more 'life' in the city centre at night and on the weekends.

> More colour is needed in the city centre, e.g. banners identifying Coffs Harbour. The buildings in the artist's sketches look very drab.

> More treatment of the alleyways is needed to make them feel safer, for example the walkway alongside Woolworth's supermarket in Park Ave is dirty and feels unsafe. Mirrors along the walls of alleys would create colour and light.

The young people also identified potential social issues. In the submission, young people supported increased 'life' on the streets at night and on weekends, as noted above. However, they also believed that access to alcohol should be restricted to ensure greater local amenity.

> We think that if there are going to be people living in the city then the bottle shops should not be open in the evenings to keep the city centre quieter and safer for the residents.

These results suggest that young people are competent observers of their urban environments and can provide valuable critical assessment of local government planning proposals. The responses were articulate. They were logical, coherent, and addressed planning matters in a manner that formed 'useable knowledge' for planning practitioners with regard to reporting community preferences.

Victoria

For the Victorian project, there were three major outcomes: children were verbally, visually and kinaesthetically articulate about the places where they live; foundations were created for the development of a Young Ambassador's leadership group; and the value of the research methodology was confirmed. These places comprised the neighbourhood around children's schools, residential streets, commercial areas, and parklands. Their observations and opinions encompassed aesthetics, urban form and function, as well as children's experience of places. Due to constraints with regard to the length of this paper, the outcomes will be illustrated using a small subset of the data collected. This data comprises researcher observations and the views of primary school children about their parkland area.

Outcomes from walking tour

Children's engagement with their environment changed upon entering the parkland area. They relaxed, spoke in excited voices, and laughed more. They spread out to explore their surrounds individually or in small groups. In the open spaces, the children ran and did other activities such as cartwheels. Children used a variety of features as park furniture such as benches, the edge of the fountain, and side of the skate bowl to lie down, or sit. When children were asked how they felt in the park, their responses indicated calmness and happiness. For example:

> "…makes me happy"

> "I like Lake Tom Thumb because it's natural and quiet, I like the wild life, I sometimes go there with my Grandpa and Mum, it's peaceful".

The quantitative data from the photo elicitation reflected researcher observations and children's thoughts. The majority of children indicated they liked the park or liked the park very much (>89%), lakes (61%), and skatepark (69%). Only one-quarter to one-third of children visited the park, lakes, and skatepark often or very often, with slightly higher proportions of children reporting they visited the playgrounds (41%). About one-third to one-half of children felt safe or very safe in the park, lakes, skatepark and playgrounds. About one-quarter of children felt neither safe nor unsafe in the park, lakes and playgrounds. The majority of children felt unsafe or very unsafe at the skatepark (57%). Issues of safety were related to time of day, and for the skatepark, other park users. For example:

"I use this walking track to go bike riding with Dad in the day. I wouldn't come here at night time"

"I go to the skate park sometimes, I just slide down the ball it's fun, I sometimes go by myself and I feel good there, except when there are boys there because they swear and smoke".

However, it is important to note that discussions between children indicated they had differing views as well as problem-solving approaches to concerns as the following quotations illustrate:

"I don't feel safe there, I'm worried that I might run and slip into the water"

"I think we need a fence around the lake so kids can't fall in"

"I wouldn't like a fence because it would stop the wildlife from getting in and out"

Outcomes from discussion about children's participation in planning and urban design

Early in the project, a session was run with Years 5 and 6 children from the local primary school about how they use and would like to be able to use a local open space, Lake Neangar. Present at this session was the project team in addition to council representatives from children and youth programs and planning and design.

The children were asked "What happens if young people *aren't* asked when the council is doing things like making a plan for parks and playgrounds?"

Children's responses demonstrated a broad perspective and valuable insights about the differences between adult and children in terms of views and behaviour:

"Adults don't see the things we do".

"Adults have forgotten and don't know how to have fun".

"Adults don't spend enough time outside"; and, "Adults don't walk around enough".

Students were also asked "If there was one thing you could change about Lake Neangar what would what it be?". Children provided a variety of responses that were easily categorised into planning and urban design themes used by professionals. The nature of children's observations and suggestions could be easily transformed into 'useable knowledge' in planning and urban design policy, construction and maintenance as illustrated below:

Infrastructure and amenity:
- the toilets – they are smelly and dark;
- food stands, or somewhere nearby to buy food;
- more chairs and tables (made of metal not wood because of splinters);
- more BBQs and with shelter over them; more picnic shelters for when it rains.

Skatepark:

- o a better skate park and one for young children and one for older (younger kids don't feel safe there; too much 'bad language' by the older kids in the existing one);
- o more cement in the skate park bowl (it fills up with water every time it rains).

Play opportunities:
- o tunnels to play in;
- o more things to climb; more things to swing on;
- o somewhere to roll down hills;
- o more shade and grass to play in;
- o more places to build cubbies, especially in the trees (want *big* trees for this);
- o safe climbing trees;
- o more kick about space for footy;
- o ropes and monkey bars for climbing.

Children were also asked if they could think of a place, or an example, of the change they would like to see happen at Lake Neangar. Children's responses indicated that they have numerous experiences of different places and spaces they can remember and refer to with regard to planning and urban design processes. They mentioned skate parks in Melbourne, parks in Kerang, the lush tropical environment of Darwin, and an underground playground in Queensland.

Outcomes from urban design workshop

Two months later, a second workshop was held with a smaller group of eight Year 6 students from the same school. Present at this workshop were members of the project team and two landscape architects from the local council. The children were asked to draw or write about their ideal park on A3 sheets of paper. They were then asked to swap their drawings with another child and on post-it notes write two questions for the child whose drawing it was. This activity generated the children's own questions and also encouraged the child being asked the question to explain and expand on the things that they had drawn or written.

The children were then asked to write down a question that they would ask other children if they were from the local Council, and were wanting to find out from children and young people about what they like to do in parks and what changes might they like to see happen at Lake Neangar. A particularly insightful question was: "Where would you most like to be in the park and what would feel safe for you and the people/kids who would want to use it?"

It was clear from what they drew, wrote and said that they want exciting experiences, experiences that allow them to test their physical boundaries, and things that incorporate an element of surprise. Their ideas included such experiences as: going down "really high" slides; spinning things that "spin really fast"; flying foxes that "go really fast and over water"; climbing nets where you can climb "really high" up; and roll down "really steep" hills. Children want to be able to go fast, climb high, spin around, and not fall off, but better still, have the thrill of *nearly* falling off. Children also suggested elements such as slides that twist and turn and that change speed as you go down; or mazes made of hedges where you can 'get lost' but not really lost.

While children desired exciting experiences, safety was also a consideration. A number of the children expressed concerns about the safety of children younger than themselves, possibly because they have younger siblings. They talked about the need for fences to keep them in or out of playgrounds, depending on the situation. One boy suggested using the height barrier that is used on rides to exclude young children. Another child suggested using the type of gate that is used to prevent entry of young children to swimming pools. The local skate park is clearly a contested space. Primary aged children have fears about their rights of access and their vulnerability to the swearing and other such behaviours of older children.

Children were asked to identify features of poorly designed towns as well as design features they would like in their ideal town. Their responses reflect many of the matters adults

suggested needed improving in a local township strategy from 2003. Children's answers for features in poorly designed towns included:

- o Dirty toilets
- o Rubbish
- o Cars emitting exhaust fumes
- o Bumpy paths that people can fall over on
- o Trashed houses
- o Lack of safe crossings
- o Trees cut down
- o People on drugs
- o Poor insulation in houses which can cause fires

Many feasible recommendations for the park, lake, skatepark and playground areas emerged from children's discussions and drawings, and their suggestions were easily grouped into key urban design themes. Recommendations included: better transport access to the park and recreational paths along the lake; desire for food and other refreshments on site; desire for contact with wildlife and nature, desire for different play spaces for different age groups of children (older and younger); additional facilities; and improved aesthetics such as improved landscaping. Specifically, children suggested the following:

- o a sports stadium;
- o a bigger football ground;
- o an outdoor pool;
- o an island in the lake connected to the mainland by a bridge;
- o a hollow tree with a door for hiding in;
- o tree houses;
- o a playground for bigger kids with a climbing wall and a big trampoline;
- o two skate parks - one for beginners and younger children, one for older children;
- o more wildlife;
- o more shops.

These results, similar to those of the Coffs Harbour example, indicate that children are willing and able to contribute to planning and urban design discussions. Children's observations, use of space, and suggestions demonstrate that they are competent participants in planning and urban design practice.

DISCUSSION

The projects provided an opportunity for council staff, teaching staff within the schools, design professionals, researchers, and children to communicate about planning and urban planning issues. Through project communication, opportunities for, and processes of social learning were created and experienced. In particular, learnings centred on participatory planning practice, children's competence in planning and design initiatives, and tensions between children's participation and rational research and planning practice. These processes varied across the research sites in relation to Council commitment, support from schools, and professional skills for working with children. The major differences between these projects could be attributed to the approaches taken when working with the children,

In Coffs Harbour, much time was initially dedicated to communicating with, and negotiating with Council to support the development of the children's leadership group. Coffs Harbour Council's initial lack of engagement in the project changed when its own "Vision 2030" consultations in 2009/10 highlighted the need for ongoing consultation with Coffs Harbour's youth. The Young Ambassador's proposal provided a vehicle for placing children as active citizens and participants within Council's planning and design processes. Thus as time progressed, children's engagement moved from invisibility toward adult initiated shared discussions and child initiated and directed in relation to Hart's (1997) ladder of participation.

In contrast, the City of Greater Bendigo, which was Australia's first Child Friendly City, provided strong support for the project in terms of initiating the project Council staff interest and participation as part of the research team, and inclusion of children's views in the design brief for the development site in the outer suburb location. This situated Council within the

following domains of the ladder: children consulted and informed and adult initiated-shared decisions with children. Within the project, the research team concentrated on adult initiated shared decisions with children, and were also confined to this level of participation due to time constraints. However, child–initiated decisions with adults were experienced during the walking tours, with children's physical freedom and activity changing the dynamic of power. Council is currently considering how to develop a sustainable Young Ambassadors leadership group based on the Coffs Harbour and overseas experience.

Within school environments the ease of project implementation was facilitated where there was substantial engagement by the school executive with the project, and in particular, by one or two of the school staff who 'championed' the research, and assisted with the flow of communication between the school and the research team. These staff aided children's involvement through their energy, encouragement and guidance over classroom dynamics and school timetables. Staff have indicated support for the further development of a Young Ambassador's leadership group in Bendigo.

Within a rationalist paradigm of planning, these projects were able to establish legitimacy of children's claims through knowledge and skills development about planning and urban design principles, participation in planning processes through a submission in relation to a Council plan in Coffs Harbour and the inclusion of children's views in a consultant's design brief in Bendigo. Additionally, the mixed-method approach of the Bendigo project provided council with mutually supportive quantitative, qualitative and visual data. Working with children highlighted that they are rational in their use, thoughts, and visions for their living environments. Communicative practice (Healey, 1997; Forester 1999) in terms of jointly determining processes and outcomes were fundamental to the project.

On a cautionary note James (2007: 265) warns that a research approach that includes children's own voices should not assume that they speak for all children, and should acknowledge the differences among children.

> The voices of children that we include in our texts …must be recognised as crafted; "authenticity" must be interrogated, not assumed'. Further, she states that children's voices must 'be regarded as standpoints, places from which any analysis sets out, rather than definitive descriptions of empirical phenomena embodied in the words that children speak (James, 2007: 269).

Additionally, rationalist planning processes imposed constraints on the projects. There were time pressures on teaching staff at participating schools with regard to balancing their teaching responsibilities, and both teachers and researchers' desire to promote children's citizenship were constrained within the parameters of council timelines. The utilitarian nature of 'useable knowledge' (Haas, 2004) for policy development created ethical tensions between supporting children's skill development and competence in planning and urban design activities, encouraging children's participation and citizenships, and doing so within an over-riding objective of obtaining children's views on council projects.

These tensions will be addressed in ongoing work and research in these communities and through the researchers' deep beliefs in the importance of children's engagement, participation and citizenship. It is hoped that future research will incorporate more time for children to be involved in the design of the research tools, for example developing the skills to create their own surveys to communicate their ideas about their environments and urban planning and design processes.

CONCLUSION

Children's participation in activities leading to the formation of the Young Ambassadors leadership group in Coffs Harbour, and children's participation in the Bendigo research activities established the ability of children to learn and become skilled in matters related to planning and urban design. They provided valuable observations and insights about their environments, and creative suggestions to planning and urban design problems. Driskell's (2002) claims that children are capable participants were well supported by the outcomes of

the two projects. The evidence contests adult conceptions that children are too unrealistic, unknowledgeable and immature to engage effectively in planning urban design decision-making.

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