



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia

Using the arts to engage and activate children and young people seminar

Opening address

Date: 10/02/10



Thank you Olman Wallay for your Welcome to Country.

I would also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today.

Good afternoon.

I am Michelle Scott, Commissioner for Children and Young People.

It is wonderful to see so many of you here today to enjoy what I have no doubt will be a dynamic and informative exchange of views on using the arts to engage and activate children and young people.

My office was overwhelmed by the response to this seminar. We actually had to cap the number of attendees because of the level of interest.

We have representatives here today from government departments, community organisations from the arts and social sectors, local councils, museums, libraries and universities.

Welcome to you all.

And considering the wide-ranging body of evidence that exists on the benefits of young people engaging in the arts, not only for the individual but society as a whole, I find this interest enormously encouraging.

The interest in this seminar also reflects a growing acknowledgement of the importance of facilitating children and young people's active participation as citizens in society.

And, in many ways, the arts sector is leading the way in Australia.

Just one example is the concerted efforts of prestigious galleries such as Brisbane's Gallery of Modern Art, The National Gallery of Victoria, The National Gallery in Canberra and the Art Gallery of WA to create interactive exhibitions for children.

Last year, I worked with the Western Australian Museum and Millennium Kids, on an exhibit in Albany where young people chose the displays they wanted to see in the museum.

It seemed only logical then, that as Commissioner for Children and Young People, I should be exploring more partnerships within the arts sector.

This year, for the first time, I am supporting two children's events in the Perth International Arts Festival — Haircuts by Children and the Children's Choice Awards brought to Perth by Toronto-based company Mammalian Diving Reflex.

I would like to take this opportunity to welcome Natalie De Vito and Eva Verity from Mammalian here today – and, indeed, to Perth – and thank them for taking time out of their hectic schedule to share their experiences with us.

I first heard about Mammalian Diving Reflex a couple of years ago and was impressed by how they use the arts to empower children and challenge adults to explore the level of trust they hold in young people.

Happily, Perth Festival Artistic Director Shelagh Magadza shared my enthusiasm and Mammalian accepted the festival's invitation to come to Perth this year.

I would like to acknowledge PIAF's support for these festival events and this seminar, and I am pleased that PIAF program manager Katherine Dorrington could be here today.

As a result of PIAF's support, children will have a major profile in this year's arts festival, and I am confident this will only grow in the future.

Someone said to me last night that these events are the highlight for her of this year's festival.

The two productions – Haircuts by Children and the Children's Choice Awards – are wonderful examples of the arts facilitating children's participation in what is too often considered the "adult" world.

Haircuts promotes children as competent and creative members of society and challenges adults to put their trust in them by having their hair cut by kids.

The Children's Choice Awards establishes a children's jury whose members are given the opportunity to express their opinions about the best aspects of the festival.

The perpetuation of the idea of an "adult world" stifles young people's voices and renders children invisible.

It is underpinned by a belief that children are not capable of making informed decisions or having a knowledgeable point of view.

This limits us as a society because we miss out on unique perspectives informed by a young person's thoughts and experiences.

It is standard practice for marketing executives to invest in consultation with children and young people when creating products directed at that market.

So when we are building communities, creating services and formulating policies that impact on children and young people, it makes perfect sense that we too encourage their active participation in these processes.

Equally as important, by not actively seeking children's voices we are denying them their right as citizens to be heard.

Giving a voice to children and young people is one of the core functions of my position as Commissioner for Children and Young People.

A key focus of my role as Commissioner – and set out in the legislation which governs my statutory responsibilities – is to promote the participation of children and young people.

Last year, my staff produced a set of Participation Guidelines to encourage and assist agencies to consult with children and young people.

We have found that the arts are proving to be an invaluable tool in facilitating children and young people's participation in community building.

International and local research over many years tells us that the arts are an effective and proven means to help children and young people express themselves, as well as develop socially and academically.

Research also suggests engagement with the arts lays the foundation for greater participation in civic life as adults.

In your packs, you will find a research overview compiled by the Department of Culture and the Arts highlighting significant research outcomes about the benefits of arts in education and for young people generally.

Over the past two years I have travelled throughout the State and spoken with hundreds of children.

Everywhere I go, the message is the same: children and young people tell me they want to contribute to their communities, give their ideas and be regarded as active citizens.

They want to be visible, they want to be heard and, most importantly, they want to be listened to.

I will mention just a couple of examples.

My staff had great success working with Film Bites, represented on the panel today by Hallie McKeig – welcome Hallie – to consult with children and young people on a guide we produced on how they can lodge complaints.

The use of film and role play provided a fun way for kids to explore the topic and voice their opinions.

The Perth Transport Authority asked kids to come up with artwork for its poster campaigns to combat anti-social behaviour and keep young people safe around train stations.

The results were far more relevant to their target group than the existing campaign.

Finally, the City of Subiaco used an arts-based enquiry method to consult with children from five to 13 about their views on what would make a child-friendly city in its strategic planning process.

Our panel members today include:

- Hallie;
- Lex Randolph from Disability in the Arts/Disadvantage in the Arts;
- Phil Beckett from Hyper Festival;
- Sofie Lines from YCulture; and
- Danni McGrath from Propel Youth Arts

will share their experiences of local participation projects – welcome to you all.

After the presentations I'm looking forward to a robust conversation about how we can better engage young people through the arts, and share experiences of what works and what doesn't.

This will be ably steered by our panel facilitator Colin Walker, Director Cultural Development and Strategic Programs at the Department of Culture and the Arts. Welcome Colin.

Of course, a successful arts-based consultation hinges on a strong partnership between the facilitating group and those who are seeking the information.

I hope you all take advantage of the networking opportunities available to you here today and take note of this "Our Space" venue that we are meeting in.

As you can see, children and young people were heavily involved in its design.

This area is available free of charge to government and non-government groups working with children and young people.

I'd now like to invite Natalie De Vito and Eva Verity from Mammalian Diving Reflex to share their experiences.

Thank you.