



Commissioner for Children and Young People  
Western Australia

**Speech by John Sheedy, Artistic Director [Barking Gecko Theatre Company](#)**

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WE never actually set out to GET stats - rather to get stories and to LISTEN - what happened is that after we had made our journey we realised that there were similar patterns in the answers regardless of the really vast difference in circumstances of each group we visited. Once we looked at what we had we only put the numbers together to see where the stories emerged BUT then the numbers also became interesting as stories themselves.

We decided early on that we wanted to hear from the young people themselves and so in doing that we needed to be able to hear their thoughts. We decided early on to ask a series of questions - some of them were in the group scenario (ie favourite ice cream flavour; best phone plan; favourite fast food outlet; what they wanted to do when they left school? etc..) and then others were in a one-on-one situation, some of which were filmed (if permission was granted) and in those situations we could delve into some more serious talk about life and choices.

The most important thing that we did, and we know that now, was GO TO THEM, we visited schools of vastly different socio-economic areas, public schools, private schools - and we also accessed young people in drop-in centres, on indigenous work programmes, in drama clubs and out of the way youth centres, even skate parks.

We conducted all our questions FACE TO FACE because we were looking to write their stories, but what we found in doing that was that in being FACE TO FACE and not just offering a questionnaire the form of communication cut through the them/us barrier and the question/answer form filling. What it seemed to do was say WE WANT TO LISTEN TO YOU and they told us their real truth.

We interviewed over 500 young WA people which had a 100 per cent response rate - usually a 10 per cent of sample collection rate is statistically significant and is the expected outcome of a post out questionnaire.

What we found sobering and indeed are in such gratitude to the recipients for - was that they were profoundly honest. That doesn't mean it was always easy. We had groups of young men that were hard to engage, young people in the Wheatbelt who were at first eyeing us as the big smoke arty-farty types, young teens who knew how to shoot a roo, young pregnant women, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Chinese, Lebanese, white and Indigenous Australian young people who once they started to trust and talk, really DID have something to say.

Suzie Miller wrote it all, we both video recorded it all - then had it transcribed when we returned to Perth. Suzie then took it to Sydney with her and crunched numbers -

as artists we had asked them seemingly (and in reality) quite a variety of questions, some fun eccentric ones mixed in with questions about mental health or sexuality. Somehow this allowed the dynamic to remain intense yet real.

After we had crunched numbers Suzie also perused the stats that are available to all Western Australians about their youth - figures on alcohol and drug use, mental health experiences, details that were just numbers and graphs, that were not as anecdotal yet fascinating in the ways they correlated at times and others where there was a dearth of info that we had in quite large numbers.

I think what became really interesting for us as artists listening to our youth was that they had so much to say - once the silence stopped and the talking began, we felt fully trusted and found the group dynamic warming up so that they were starting to share experiences with each other that they had not realised they had all experienced alone.

Furthermore, while the rule was that teachers were not present - there was the odd popular drama teacher asked to stay - and I remember the emotional experience of one teacher when her group of year 12 drama students talked about the times they had felt hopeless, had 'hurt' themselves, or could open up about bullying and aloneness.

The honesty with which the young people admitted to having been bullied AND been perpetrators at other times, the hands that flew up when they were asked if there was anyone close to them or in their family circle who was gay, the experience of racism and sexism and the huge stories of cyberspace as a constant in their lives.