Every child thrives, belongs achieves

Children's Voices on the Green Paper

A submission on the Green Paper for Vulnerable Children from primary school children in Years 7 and 8.

As told to staff from the Office of the Children's Commissioner during October and November 2011.

Manaakitia a tatou tamariki
Children's Commissioner

Key Messages

This submission synthesises the views of children in Years 7 and 8 from four primary schools throughout New Zealand. These children are well placed to contribute sensible, insightful comments about their lives and about the issues raised Green Paper. This submission is made on behalf of the children who participated in the research.

A prevailing theme throughout the report can be distilled into one key message about a good childhood:

> *A good childhood means having a loving family and whānau; a good childhood is about feeling safe where you live and feeling cared for, respected and valued for who you are, and what you think and say. A good childhood is about being treated fairly which means listening to children's views.*

We believe this submission makes a valuable contribution to the Green Paper process and, as well as highlighting children's voices, provides evidence that children can actively and meaningfully participate in political processes. We would like to thank the children who participated in this submission for their enthusiasm and their insights.

Executive Summary

Parents and families should listen to us …

Overall, children want their parents to be involved in their lives, much of which is school-based for children. They also want parents to help them learn to be adults but at the same time, they want to be recognised as active family members with a point of view and ideas of their own. This means adults need to listen and respect their views as they mature.

Schools are important places for children and adults to be together

Children participating in this research appeared to enjoy school for the learning opportunities and, equally, because of the social and cultural opportunities. Asking children, and listening to children's views; being fair and sharing knowledge were all important facets of school life. The last words are left to a child:

> *We have a cool teacher and we have lots of cool things and lots of fun days like going on a trip*.

Communities should acknowledge children's emerging capacities and competencies

The questions about community involvement and expectations generated data which showed there are not enough extra curricula, publically available activities for children, particularly after school and during the holidays. A teacher in one school noted:

> *The kids here love school – they may not admit it – but they love coming here because we provide lots of things for them to do. The holidays are really hard for them because their parents are at work …*

Getting to know children, listening to children and attending to what they said were important themes in this section. Basic needs for affordable, accessible health care, clothing and education were seen as important, as were safe, clean and healthy child-friendly environments. Providing some special services for children such as counsellors or youth workers was one suggestion made by some participants. Strong opinions were expressed:

> *We are girls and we like to talk. We like boys. A lot! Adults need to be understanding about how we act and who we are!!! We are not young adults yet – we are kids and we don't need adult problems. We still need to rely on our parents and we don't always know what we think.*

Adults working with children should develop respectful relationships, based on respect for children's rights to be informed, consulted and heard

Data commenting on child-centred practices in the workforce clearly stated that children wanted respectful relationships with adults who acknowledged and valued their contributions. Listening, asking, and respecting children's perspectives mattered to the children and they made sensible and useful comments about how adults who work with children might do so effectively.

For example, respect for their personal circumstances was important and even though all children wanted adult support and help, they wanted this to be ethical and professional. Space, time and places for children to both ask for and receive help in child-appropriate and culturally appropriate ways were important factors to be aware of for adults working with children. Action, rather than words, mattered, and adults need to 'do something' if children disclose concerns about their safety and wellbeing.

The role of Government in children's lives

The children who participated in this research were very aware of the problems their parents face and how these impact on their childhoods. Poverty, child abuse, family dysfunction, unemployment were all discussion points initiated by children as part of this research. The role of government and the impact of government decisions were understood by most of the children participating in this research. They were able to form a point of view about financial decisions, such as the minimum wage and benefits, and how they perceived these impacting on their lives (notably in how they were resourced for education) and on their parents' lives. Time for parents to be with children was an issue for some – this was because of parental employment patterns and/or complex custody arrangements.

Overall, children felt it was important to consult and inform them about political decisions (let us fill in the census) and they believed they were in a good position to contribute meaningfully (let us vote), albeit in age appropriate ways, to such democratic processes.

Introduction

The Green Paper is aiming to improve the quality of life for children, particularly those children who are disadvantaged by circumstances beyond their control. This means children's views are crucial.

In order to promote children's participation in the submission process, staff from the Office visited three Decile 1 primary schools and one Decile 6 intermediate school with a special class. There was a mix of rural, urban, Pasifika and Maori children represented. Two classes were predominantly Pasifika, and another class followed kaupapa Māori education, reflecting their school roll demographic which was over 95 percent Māori.

Together with teachers or teacher aides in the schools, staff worked with the children for between one and half to two hours seeking their views on the four sections of the Green Paper.

Children were invited to take part in one or all of the following activities:

- Participate in a group discussion facilitated by advisors from the Office;
- Participate in small focus group discussions facilitated by advisors from the Office;
- Fill in an on-line questionnaire; and,
- Fill out a handout questionnaire;

Ethical consent for consulting with the children was sought. At the beginning of each session, all groups were informed about the process for the consultation and given a choice about whether or not to participate. The advisors explained that the children's responses would be anonymous. The Office ensured that children knew where to find support if they needed to.

The views expressed in this submission are those of the children who took part in the consultation process and are not necessarily the views of the Office. These views have been summarised by Dr Sarah Te One, Principal Advisor, Education, at the Office, who led the consultation. A full copy of the research report will be available from the Office on request.

General Questions

General questions about what makes a good childhood and "what do children need" were used as a warm-up to generate further discussion about the Green Paper in all four schools. These questions were always asked as part of a large-group brainstorm, recorded by the Office staff. Some children chose to write their responses on sticky post-it notes.

This section of the submission presents the children's perspectives on what makes a good childhood, what children need, what can go wrong, what 'being fair' means and, finally, how adults can make sure that all children get what they need. Because many of the responses to some questions were similar, these have been condensed into one section.

What makes a good childhood? Good friends and whanau!

> *I am a heart. I live in your body. I love you and treat you well if you look after me. Respect me. I respect you. I'll give you life if you treat [me] well. I'll keep pumping as long as you want me too.*

Responses to the question "what makes a good childhood" were overwhelmingly clear and fell into three broad categories: family, friends and the environment. "Family"; "whanau"; "a good family"; "good cousins" "a happy family"; were repeatedly used to articulate what made childhood good:

> *Having time with your family and friends; time with families; holidays with family; special things with family – they are always working; family reunions (maybe); chatting with mates and family.*

For many children, a good childhood depended on "love" and "having lots of love from your family". Some responses referred to "a good environment"; or, "a loving environment", or, in one case, "a peaceful environment".

The next most mentioned element in a good childhood was friends. "Hanging out with family and friends" summed up the majority of responses in this section but there were some qualifying comments: "loving friends"; "great friends"; and "happy friends". For many, pets and animals also contributed to a good childhood. Responses could be summed up as:

> *A good home environment, pets, friends and family and older cousins and parents.*

As well as family, friends and the environment, the importance of encouragement and support were strong themes throughout this data set (the word "encouragement" featured most frequently). A group of comments included statements such as "a good relationship with your parents"; "people you can love and trust"; "people you can talk to when times are bad", "a place to express your emotions safely" indicating that the importance of good relationships mattered to children: "having a good relationship with your parents"; "parent counselling" and "being happy". Perhaps the poignant words of one child evoke his idea about a good childhood: "No drama".

Words like "happiness"; "being happy"; and just "happy" recurred throughout this section and could be associated with things like "having fun". These ideas were reinforced with comments such as "doing stuff together". This seemed to be related to both family and friends. There were also a group of comments about the importance of food, clothing, and a house, a home, good care and good health. Treats rated highly: "Candy; chocolate, iceblocks; ice cream; eating lots of chocolate"; and "going to the chocolate factory". Sport too was favoured as important for children to experience but advice about support was also proffered such as "don't pressure kids into things they don't want to do". This applied to other parental/adult suggestions as well.

Other responses in this section noted the role of education and sport as contributing positively to their well-being. Further qualities mentioned were the importance of "people encouraging you"; "when you get spoilt"; and, "celebrating birthdays". On the other side, however, there were some comments indicating negative experiences:

"no neglect"; "no violence"; and, "no abuse". Feeling heard, or listened to and "getting attention"; "checking up on us" featured as part of a group of comments about children's experiences alongside comments like "we need a relocation programme" and "fun, safe houses". Yet another set of comments reflected the importance of feeling respected: "respectful; kindness; peacefulness" and, "respect us". A selection of comments advising adults about a good childhood follows:

> *By giving us lessons; having fun; good families; good friends; education*
>
> *[We need] education; love for family; fun; support; great friends and family; if you want a happy childhood you need great education and great family*
>
> *Good child; behaviour; attitude; fun; education; family; friends; role models; music; humour; support; food; water; health.*

Still another grouping referred to safety and the role of adults to protect children from harm. Some children wanted more police, "a safe neighbourhood"; "more places to play"; "stuff to do after school like parks and places to go"; "experience new things". The importance of listening to children, valuing their opinion, and giving them choices constituted a different set of comments. To conclude this section can be left to the words of the children:

> *[A good childhood means] good education; good health; good family; having a nice family. [Children need] people who care about them, and who never give up [on them]. We should be allowed to take risks. Trust us. Have confidence in us. Look at our bright side and make a good future.*

How important is being fair? Real important!

Children are well-placed to comment on "what being fair" means to them. As children, their status is usually low; they are often not consulted or informed adequately about things that concern them; and, they are very often treated as a collective group – labelled and judged – which can be disrespectful to a child's individuality. Children are expected to operate as group members from a very young age and the age group we consulted with were experienced in group processes, good and bad, as they had been at school for seven or eight years.

The major theme in this section confirmed research to illustrate how difficult it can be to implement children's participation rights in practice. To be fair, adults in families, communities, schools and other work places which engage in working with children have a responsibility to listen and respect children's views.

Socio cultural and ecological theories of development are clear that children (and adults) learn by participating in everyday activities alongside more experienced others. Logically, therefore, children learn about democratic principles, such as fairness, as they interact with others at school, and in their neighbourhoods. The data generated by this question indicated a sophisticated understanding of what 'fairness' meant in theory and in practice. For some, being fair meant caring and if you are being fair "you care" or "you feel cared for". For others, fairness equated to sharing, "getting your share" or sharing with others." One reply was "sharing is caring". Notions of reciprocity are evident in the following comment: "if you do something, then get something back".

Being treated equally was a recurring discussion point, sometimes reached by discussing experiences of unfair treatment ("not stealing from them") or bias; "if your parents favour your older or younger siblings"; "not being blamed for things I didn't do" and this required adults to be:

Sensible – not giving different people different deals because you like them.

Some comments indicated awareness "that some things in life aren't fair, like you have to go to school", and one respondent noted that being fair involved "compromising". "Being treated the same way", "treating everyone the same" were very common answers, qualified by a few with statements like:

Treat people how you want to be treated; and,

Fairness means being treated how you wish to be treated and respect others.

Honesty and truthfulness appeared linked to children's constructs of fairness as reflected in the comment below:

Thinking about your actions; opinions; kind; honest; nice; fairly treated; sharing; truthful; responsible; nice treatment.

To be fair required space ("gives you space to think about what you want") and time. Importantly, there were many comments about giving children a chance to voice their opinions. "Being able to have your say" was fundamental to children's concepts about fairness and there were a significant number of comments along the lines of "giving children a chance", or more specifically, "having a chance to speak for yourself". Listening to children was linked to respect for children's views – "be respected" and acting on these to "make your opinion count". Respect and acknowledgement equated to fairness and demonstrated that the adults concerned cared about what children thought. One group expressed fairness as:

Thinking about your actions; opinions; kind; honest; nice; fairly treated; sharing; truthful; responsible; nice treatment.

Kindness, caring, truthfulness and time and place to express their views was "encouraging" and "made life easier". Ultimately, being fair meant:

That people respect the choices that kids make.

"Anything can go wrong – be ready"

The participants in this research identified numerous things that could disrupt a childhood. These ranged from "not getting my allowance" to "natural and man-made disasters" and "losing a family member". Some events were obviously more serious than others and the very brief data gathering methods used in this research do not reveal the background context of the comments at all. The researchers ensured that children were kept safe at all times, and there was no pressure to participate in any of the activities.

Several commentators mentioned parents arguing and others spoke, briefly, about family violence. Physical discipline, "a smack" or "a hiding", was highlighted by some participants. Not surprisingly, bullying featured highly amongst the comments about what could go wrong in childhood. In fact, most respondents mentioned "bullying by people". Several children listed a range of issues that could go wrong: "being abused"; and, "being a street kid" but these statements did not necessarily reflect the participants circumstances. These issues are listed below:

Violence; bullies; stealing; smoking; violent language; gangs; alcohol

No support; drinking then driving; abusive; bullying

Not having a caring family

Abuse; living on the streets; smoking and drugs; gangs; drinking alcohol; stealing

Smoking; drinking alcohol

Poker; rehab; gambling

Others comments referred to homelessness, "no heat"; "water running down our walls" "running out of money"; and, "no money", "taking the electricity away"; "get nothing"; "bad food"; "unhealthy food" and there was a series of comments about "burnt food" or "burning your food". Being poor meant things could go wrong.

Another set of comments could be termed broadly as neglect: "your parents say they are busy"; "people not listening to you"; "not being there for each other and not caring for anyone or anything" and in some situations represented emotional hurt like "breaking up with friends" and "being told off for what you think". Overall, the lists of what could go wrong were comprehensive. One group, where gangs were very present in the community, came up with the following:

Not fair; robbery; guns; bad friends or role models; stealing; teasing; swearing; street kids; racists; gangs, bullies; alcohol; smoking.

In conclusion, a good childhood is about having a loving family and whanau; a good childhood is about feeling safe where you live and feeling cared for, respected and valued for who you are, and what you think and say. A good childhood is about being treated fairly which means listening to children's views.

The role of parents and family: "Love us, care for us, always be there for us."

Not surprisingly, given the age of the participants (between 11 and 13 years old), parents and family were very present in their lives. The following sections generated the most data. The first question, "how do you think parents and families should help kids thrive, belong and achieve?" provoked intense discussion and interest. The word "thrive" needed some explanation and was usually described as "being well" or "growing up healthy and strong". Clear themes of encouragement, "give us love", "give us help when we need it", and support ("be supportive with whatever their child needs") emerged in this section. Many responses were often prefaced with comments such as "be nicer, caring supportive, have a good relationship with you

and trust". The number of times words and phrases such as encouragement appeared indicated how important parents believing in their children was to them.

Typical comments about the role of parents appear below.

> *Encourage them to do their best; help them with whatever they need; tell them that they do belong so they have someone to believe*
>
> *Tell us that they're going to be there for us and make us realise that we are always LOVED.*

Such encouragement engendered confidence but there was an expectation that parents had a role to play here as the comments reveal like "demonstrate; show me how to get to that stage"; and, "teach us values, love us"; "help them with their chores and homework or anything else they need help with".

> *Encourage us to do their best; help them with whatever we need; tell us that we do belong so we have someone to believe.*
>
> *Encourage us to make goals and achieve them; help us; tell us when we do well; be supportive.*

Such support extended into more specific expectations such as "Help us with homework" and "help with learning and school work" and "Help us with our chores and homework or anything else we need help with" were common responses.

Couched within this was a second theme which positioned children as learners and their parents as teachers, mentors, guides, with a responsibility to set clear, but fair boundaries and expectations; and to provide an environment which was conducive to children's well being "teach us the right things for our future" "teach us how to behave"; "how to talk to people" and "love us, care for us, teach us new values". The comments captured this:

> *Teach us what's out there in the open world, care for us, and create a better future for us if kids aren't happy, and;*
>
> *Helping us at home and giving us the right strategies.*

Parental support to participate in the community was also important to children, but this should be a joint, shared experience. Parents should:

> *Encourage us to get out and be social and have an open mind about things in life, and come to parent-teacher interviews and sports games.*

Some responses were directly needs- based and the following comment suggested that for children to thrive, belong and achieve, parents had to "feed us well and feed us until we're full; give us lots and lots of water; give us the right needs"; and make sure "the kids can get a good education and pay for their stuff". Perhaps comments like these were related to other comments like "Don't neglect us, care for us, give us things, free space, don't make us feel unwanted" and "listen to us, our opinions".

Not surprisingly, children contributed their expertise on how parents could raise them to be well-adjusted contributing New Zealand citizens.

How can grownups help kids? Encourage us to do our best

Reponses to this section which asked "how can grown-ups help kids" had a notable emphasis on listening to children encouragingly: "Encourage us; talk to us; always be there for us; value our opinions; listen to them"; "ask the kids how they feel …" and "listen to what we have to say". Comments about the importance of listening were set alongside numerous comments like "let us do what we want"; "not judging us and letting us have our say" but some children understood that freedom to do what one wanted was not necessarily workable or desirable: "do what the kids want, but not all the time."

> *Parents can help by listening to what we need help with and do what they can to help.*

There was a general awareness that adult participation in the work force helped kids as comments like "By working really hard" suggested and the children understood the connection between paid work and their personal circumstances. "Grown-ups can find them a house, give them money, new clothes and food"; "by giving them a good education"; by looking after them in everything".

Adults as role models and guides was a recurring theme such as "helping them with homework, paying for school and college"; "talking to them about what they did when they were struggling" and "teaching them what they learnt when they were young". Learning to behave well and respectfully featured here, alongside comments about protecting children from harm and "keeping them away from danger". One respondent thought that adults should "listen and speak up for all kids".

Advice about how to treat children was also offered: "If we ask for help, don't do it for us, but just give us hints" sat alongside requests that parents treat children in the family equally and "treat us the right way and not by smacking us all the time". Talking, being nice, helping with problems and spoiling us were also suggested for ways in which grown-ups could help children with one clear request for child advocates who could potentially protect children.

What do parents do now? They let me be who I am

What do parents do now was the lead question for this section and responses ranged from "not much" or "not enough to make a difference" to "whatever they can". Some responses were very revealing like "my honest opinion? They abuse me just to get what they want" and "yell, scream, swear, name call, hit and be faggots (Dad). Not mummy, mum is nice and caring and I can tell her anything". Some participants were part of a programme because their home life was unsettled and posed a risk to their well-being. These children had access to daily counselling and clearly valued the support they received.

Many children noted that they felt listened to, and loved, encouraged by their parents and "they give me good experiences and good kai". "They let me be who I am". Emotional support and practical support were all mentioned: and respect for their views: "they listen to our side of the story", and allow them some independence –

"they let us go out at the weekends and talk to friends but not telling us we have to". Many of the comments noted the material things parents provided for them like food, a house, a home, "healthy lunches, good supplies" and "they work for money for our family"; "they have made their own jobs and look after us"; "work or go to university"; "work for us": "work for me" and "they work, pay bills."

> *They help and support me with a good education, food, water and shelter.*

Parental guidance was mentioned as indicated by comments such as "discipline us" which was not always a negative connotation; "they stay at home and teach me right from wrong"; "they spoil me and feed me good"; "they teach me values and let me watch TV". Being spoilt appeared frequently in this section. While many of the comments indicated an awareness of the power and control some parents can exert over their children ("they just tell you to do it and don't even hint" and "yell, scream swear fight and control") there were many others which recognised how parents supported them.

> *They care for us and love us so we would have a good future. And they support us in school.*

Overall, the comments in this section were very mixed with some children contributing very honest written and verbal responses about their negative experiences in their families where, as one child put it "[grown-ups should] be mature". Other responses reflected the points made earlier in the section and indicate that many of the children had parents who loved and cared for them, who encouraged and helped them, and who listened to them.

What could parents do differently? Be good parents

Answers in this section were also quite varied and ranged from requests to be more involved and spend time with children (do something with us; participate in our children's games) to "not always being wherever you go so you can go to different places". Quite a few respondents either wrote or said "nothing". Once more, the theme of listening to children was reiterated very clearly: "change so they listen to us more"; and "listen to us, respect us, like us". The implications of listening were recognised by some participants as dubiously beneficial with unintended impacts as the following comment implies: "talk to us, help us but don't be annoying" and "listen to me, but not all the time", or "ask me something helpful". Overall however, there was a definite request for adults to "change so they listen to us more" alongside requests for more responsibility, more trust, and "a chance to prove ourselves".

Clearly some participants in this research had experienced disrupted, violent home environments and their requests/comments ranged from practical suggestions, for example "they should not smash us"; "feed me more"; "look after us so good that no one can get close to me (strangers)" which were possibly indicators of abuse or neglect to more philosophical insightful comments such as "we can teach them [the grown-ups] a lot of knowledge" and "accept me and my bro for who we are".

Children want to understand the adult world and comments such as "Listen more to what we have to say and help us learn the true meaning of what makes a good person"; "more opportunities to go outside and just be kids – more choices"; and "if

they have a go the first time, then the child will know", reinforce the point that children are emerging as adults and are entitled to appropriate parental/familial guidance. Children also wanted parents to "teach us important stuff we need to know and "teach us the important things in life" and also to recognise what was important for them to feel supported. Relationships with their parents meant a degree of reciprocity. Parents wanted "good respect" from children but some felt this was not mutual and consequently felt unsupported even though they "tried hard":

> *They don't come to my choir performances, netball, interviews, and don't encourage me to do kapa haka, Polygroup or cricket.*

They should listen to us …

Overall, children want their parents to be involved in their lives, much of which is school-based for children. They also want parents to help them learn to be adults but at the same time, being recognised as active participants in families depended on adults listening and respecting their views as they mature.

[School] helps us learn

The following sections represent children's views about schools, teachers and the role teachers and principals could play in improving children's well-being, sense of belonging and achievement. There were commonalities across all four sites that reflected the concerns about costs of education and bullying. Children, in general, liked school and their comments about schools and teachers were very constructive.

How do you think schools help children learn to be good people? Because teachers teach you …

Children responded readily to the question "how do you think schools help children learn to be good people?" The majority of answers followed a values-based theme where respect, manners and tolerance were evident: "they teach us different and good values"; "it helps because they can teach you manners and other subjects you want to know"; "by learning how to respect others and help each other"; "by teaching us why it is [important]; to respect others". Tolerance and cooperation were mentioned by several children. More examples of how children thought schools help children learn to become good people follow:

> *By making us work with others closely so we understand others better;*
>
> *Teach us manners and help us socialise with other people in and out of class;*
>
> *Teach us what's right from wrong; knowing what to do that will make us feel good.*

An emphasis on manners and rules formed a clear theme and teachers were expected to "be a role model, leading by example for little kids"; "be a good role model, be nice, be honest"; "lead by example, show us what to do, use manners". Some responses indicated the need for mutual responsibility for "learning to be a good person" – "its your choice about whether to be good or bad" and "I believe that school doesn't help them – the kids help themselves". Attitude mattered. Mutual responsibility for instilling respect for one another had to be reflected in the

relationships between teachers and children and for some children this required more than a surface understanding of their personal circumstances:

> *"[teachers should] not yell at us. When they yell, they frustrate us because they might not know what's going on. They need to be respectful. They need to know what's happening in our lives."*

On the other hand, there were more responses which acknowledged that, as well as being role models teachers could "help sort out our problems in a good way when they make us realise what happens when we take the wrong/bad path" and "they help us when they think we are struggling" and that teachers were valued for their "common sense"; "they know stuff" and, "they encourage us to have an open mind".

Schools were perceived as providing opportunities that would enhance children's lives: "I think school help children to be good people because of the rules they set, e.g., no swearing, no fighting", and teaching children "what's right from wrong; knowing what to do that will make them feel good". Many of the responses referred to school-wide programmes about ways to behave towards one another and ways to respect and look after the environment.

Another theme reflects the link children made between education future success and school work like maths, writing and even tests were understood as being beneficial in the long term. Schools could help children to "grow up and be a mature kid and to succeed in this world"; or to ensure that "When they grow up they will have a good education". One respondent wrote "[schools] help us become civilised"

An education, encouragement, manners and respect for others values as well as understanding right from wrong were clear messages to emerge in this section.

What do they do well? "They are good at teaching us what we need to know"

Children were very clear that their teachers, for the most part, did a good job teaching them, and teaching well. The responses to "what did schools do well?" were very uniform as the following selection illustrates. Schools "teach you to do things"; "learn us good, different subjects and give good advice to prove in this world"; "feed us with knowledge" and "educate us"; "teach us new things"; and "teach us what we need to know". Schools "educate us". The most common responses were "teach us new things"; and "teach really well" and "they teach new things everyday and recap on any stuff that needs to be learnt". Importantly, many children commented that schools were good at having fun, although, as the next section notes, not nearly enough fun. However, children did note school could be fun and activities such as sports days, time to be with their friends and use computers and "they let us play games" and "read" were examples of what made schools enjoyable places to be.

Quite a few participants commented on the value of schooling across a range of domains. For example, encouraging persistence when things get difficult "they encourage us kids at learning in different ways"; "not letting us ditch school"; and "they care for you at all times". Contradicting a comment in the previous section, one group of students wrote "[the school] is not only involved in our education but in our personal lives as well" by "teaching us skills and strategies" and "teaching us what's

the danger of being alone in the world and to treat everyone the way you want to be treated". "They [name of the school counsellor] teach us to listen and behaviour management".

Schools were credited with preparing children well for the future, "They teach good skills for when we get older"; "they make children ready for adult years" "they teach you lots of stuff to get ready for the next school" as well as "teaching good skills to little kids and big kids". Schools "show you different types of skills and 'learn' you more". Schools taught children rules and manners and "learning about other people"; "the safety of the school, "educating us in the right direction" and "school is good at showing manners".

Some children rated their school according to the resources available to them:

We have nice classrooms and good PE gear.

We have lots of money spent on us; and,

We have PE uniforms and cool computers.

There were very few negative responses although the question did inquire about what schools did well ("nothing") but suggestions for doing things differently and the section on "what makes a good teacher" did reveal some negative aspects about schools. However, the majority of children enjoyed school and the opportunities being at school afforded them.

What do you think they could do differently? Help me learn at my pace.

"Help me learn at my pace" was one suggestion made as to how schools could do things differently. This was reiterated in several ways by other respondents who not only asked "help me learn"; they also wanted "more time on stuff" ; "more time to finish their work" and for teachers to "spend more time with students one-to-one". Some specific suggestions were directed to teacher behaviour and the context of large, busy classes: "smaller classes so the teachers can focus on one person without having to shout at misbehaviours"; "teacher could give us kids their own space when we are troubled and give us more options"; and, "teachers could understand how depression affects school work".

Not surprisingly there were numerous comments about teachers growling or being angry which affected children deeply as either unjust or as undermining - "teachers should believe in us". One group of girls had this to say:

Each class should have a male and a female teacher. Guys don't know what we do. They shouldn't yell at us – be supportive. They shouldn't yell at the whole class when it's just one person – don't punish the whole class for just one person but stop singling people out and don't assume things.

Understanding how children learn was a theme:

We always learn more from each other than the adults. My friend explains it to me, stuff I can't understand – the teachers need to break it down, it's too sophisticated.

"Not sort of mean and the child explain their understanding" and "let children have a say" were offered as advice to improve schools. Related to this were requests for

teachers to be "funnier, friendlier, nicer" "to explain better and make learning funner (sic)"; "change how they teach – maybe more funnier and get teachers that are like us". One group suggested that schools should "let us senior students do what we want to do and do different activities everyday". Further, children offered ideas about what to teach "give children ways of helping them through rough patches like bullying by an outsider"; "how to look after ourselves while by ourselves" sat alongside comments like "new knowledge"; "new arguments"; "feed us with lots of knowledge" and "teach us things we haven't learnt or don't know about"

A significant number of responses concerned what schools provided. These fell into two categories – resources and maintaining a safe school environment – and food. In two sites, gangs were an issue and so requests for "electric identification gate for safety" and "keeping the school clean"; "getting new gear and fixing the classroom" and, "a new not-broken playground" were understandable. Other children wrote about "new equipment so we can have fun with it"; or "get laptops so we can search new things to learn". Food, free food, "feed us free lunch" were common responses. The loss of the breakfast club was mentioned by some. There was one reference to the cost of learning or schools.

Requests for "more free time"; "more freedom"; "more playtime"; "no detentions"; "less homework" and "no homework" were scattered throughout this data set. The following quote sums up the tenor of these types of comments:

> *About uniform - ask us! Make it more comfy and make [the shorts and skirts] longer. Make longer morning tea and lunchtime. There should be a time in class when we can just talk"*

Finally, there were several positive comments which endorsed schools and indicated that schools were good places for children to be:

> *What could schools do differently? Nothing because I absolutely love it; and,*
>
> *Nothing because the school has a lot of things and they help us a lot.*

What makes a good teacher? A good teacher is kind and listens to you.

Children are very rarely consulted about their teachers' performance, or even about what makes a good teacher. The reasons for this are uncertain but could reflect adult concerns about the efficacy and value of children's comments which may potentially threaten their authority. Given that all children attend school, their expertise, if appropriately bounded and sought, could usefully inform child-centred practices. The data generated here was predominantly positive and criticism was generally constructive.

Several qualities were identified as important characteristics for teachers. Almost all the comments recommended "a teacher who cares and understands how you feel"; or "a teacher that helps us" and teachers who are "kind and fun loving". Some thought good teachers would recognise "potential and give us confidence and love us and recognise specialness". Many comments reiterated the need for mutual respect: "respect the kids so that kids will learn how to respect", but also a person who was

respected and because of that "had our respect and obedience". Good teachers are, therefore, empathic;

> *Kind, and care about me and help me; notice if I am having trouble with my work and then helps and one who works at my speed.*

The ability to maintain respectful relationships was considered important and so a good teacher should be "someone you can open up to at times and someone who can help you when you need it". Good teachers:

> *Talk to you and discuss if you're having trouble doing something.*

Teachers should be people who can "get on with the kids and listen to them", and "one with a childish [maybe child-centred] sense of humour" who listens. Given that children spend up to 12 years in compulsory education, having fun learning was a thread through the comments. Children wanted teachers who were "funny and not strict"; teachers with a sense of humour who were "honest, fun and reliable".

Knowledge, skills and attitudes were dispositions the children identified. Kind, loving, caring and understanding with a commitment to fairness are evident in the above. "Being brainy and trying new things"; "they have a lot of knowledge"; "they know all the information and how to be a good teacher" or someone who "teaches us good subjects" and quite simply, "someone who knows what they are talking about"; "they tell you the important things in life". In the words of one child, a good teacher is "a role model with great skills".

Unfortunately, some comments in this section related to negative experiences children had had, or were having, with teachers: "A good teacher will growl us for the right reasons" indicates that perhaps teachers 'growled' children mistakenly, in their collective view. Good teachers will "not abuse us, but love us instead"; "someone that's not mean and grumpy"; and they won't "shout at you when you don't get the answer right". One group wrote:

> *[A good teacher is] someone you can talk to, who is not mean and doesn't yell 'cause they don't know what happens outside school; one that doesn't tell you off a lot but is like [name of counsellor]. Yeah, be someone kind of nice like [name of counsellor].*

However, this was balanced by comment indicating that good teachers are also fair, who will "treat children how they want to be treated"; "someone that listens"; a good teacher "cares about our education and listens to us"; and is "fair, like our teacher". Being fair was important and particularly "being fair to all children in the classroom"; A good teacher is:

> *Nice, listens, values your opinion, and understands you. A good teacher is someone who listens, answers questions and explains things properly.*

What do you think teachers and principals should do if they are worried about a child? Have a korero with their parents.

The final section about schools asked children what teachers or principals should do if they were worried about children. Apart from one or two suggestions like "give us

longer school holidays", the suggestions made were extremely grounded. One body of responses recommended teachers and principals "should talk to us"; "ask us what's going on" but "make us feel welcome"; "feed us, make us laugh"

> *They should talk to us privately about it and help us. Ask the child questions (that aren't personal). But they should tell us privately what they are worried about.*

The very open-ended nature of the question drew varied responses. For example, some interpreted the question as a concern about school work and so answered with suggestions like "give us everything we need for our learning" or "give us time to learn". Others recommended that, if concerned, contact the police or "get a social worker and they can take care of the child"; or "send them to a counsellor". One child commented "I would never tell my teacher or principal anything, I would go straight to a counsellor". One response was "take the child to the medical room and wait until the ambulance gets here". In some cases, the solutions to concerns about a child could be solved by "sending [the child] home.

Most responses recommended teachers and principals contact parents:

> *Talk to the child or parents; come up with answers and let people explain their point of view (parents, child, and teachers*).

Parent-teacher meetings and "talk to the parents if there is a problem at home". "Call their mum" and "have a korero with the parents": "discuss issues with parents" indicated the importance of communicating with families and the fundamental importance of schools as communities which include the children and their parents as well as teachers.

Do you think it is OK for them to talk to someone who can help?

The overwhelming answer to this question was a resounding "Yes". Some responses indicated that talking to experts was helpful "because problems can fade away" and experts "have more knowledge so it can be easier for them to solve the problem"; and "because they can really help you get through different stuff" and "yes, because they are talking to someone who can actually help". Comments such as "yes, cause that child would get nowhere without help; Yes, because they know what to do and say";and, "yes because they can help organise a better life for you and your environment" recognises the value of expertise. A sense of relief is evident in the comment below:

> *Yes, because when you tell somebody you feel like a weight has been lifted off your shoulders or the air has felt lighter.*

Even though all the respondents apart from one ("not really") supported teachers or principals talking to someone who might be able to help, there were some qualifiers such as "yes, but with the permission of the kid or parent"; or, "only if it were quite concerning", and two considered responses:

> *Yes, but they should talk to the child and parents about it – it should be voluntary; the child should have to do for something like a week and then be able to choose whether to continue; and,*

Depends what its about; if it was something at home – OK to talk cause you get help; talk to parents; talk to child/young person first – check it out

Children's rights to be informed and consulted are apparent in the above comments. Maintaining and respecting their privacy matters as well, as the following comments reveal:

Yes, but I wouldn't want them to tell the teacher back what I say

Yes, as long as they are the only ones who they tell

Yes, but with permission of the kid or parent.

Conclusion: We have a cool teacher and have lots of cool things

Schools are complex communities where children and adults co-exist as teachers and/or learners. Concluding this chapter it is clear that children understand they are 'evolving in capacity" and that they want guidance, and loving support from adults who are in a position to both identify when children might be struggling with school or at home, and who can access expertise to alleviate the situation for children. Children participating in this research appeared to enjoy school for the learning opportunities and, equally, because of the social and cultural opportunities. Asking children, and listening to children's views; being fair and sharing knowledge were all important facets of school life. The last words are left to a child:

We have a cool teacher and we have lots of cool things and lots of fun days like going on a trip.

A nice place to live: Children's views on community

Introduction

This section of the submission reports on children's perspectives of community which ranged from identifying public services, such as libraries and museums to natural resources and attractions specifically designed for children, like playgrounds and pools, and privately operated commercial businesses such as Paint Ball, and Go Kart facilities.

What is there for kids in your community? "A school for learning … a harbour to get some kai"

The responses to the question "what is there for kids in your community?" revealed a very broad spectrum of activities that can be grouped in three ways. First, there were public facilities, such as school, kohanga, college, the marae, church, pools, parks, skate parks, playgrounds, museums (history) and for one site, the post office was mentioned. In some cases, these public facilities were restricted by membership fees but nonetheless they were considered community resources. "Clubs"; "games (netball, basketball)"; "sports clubs"; "rugby" and "waka ama"; "soccer"; "rowing" featured in this category. Another group of participants referred to "the Learning

Centre" and "the university". Even though access to these was restricted, children considered these to be community-based resources.

Second, there were clear references to the natural environment and the opportunities this offered some children. For those in a rural area or with ready access to beaches or bush, the list was long: "a beach"; "horse riding"; "riding four wheelers on the beach"; "motorbikes"; "fields"; "an ocean". Clearly for some of these activities, children either owned a bike or horse, or had access to one. Fishing, diving and kai moana were regular activities for some children. Roaming on the farms and access to animals and garden (the nursery) featured as something for kids in the community.

A third set of responses characterised the urban school sites where, as well as pools, parks, schools etc, the participants mentioned businesses such as "movies"; "diaries"; "the mall"; "cafes"; "the fry bread (stall)"; "the garage"; "the second hand shop"; "mini golf"; "laser tag"; "rock climbing". The list was comprehensive as the following quote illustrates:

> *We've got parks, sports grounds, a swimming complex, villages with lots of shops like pharmacies, doctors, and schools leave the gates open at the weekends, huge fields, roads to scooter down and different things on at the school that everyone can go to.*

A final grouping referred to community-based events such as *"white Sunday"; "the Christmas Parade"; "camp"; "the New Year's regatta"; "whale boat racing".*

Finally, some responses did not refer to specific events, or places, but instead spoke of the opportunities these afforded them to "hang" or be with their friends. The social effects of community resources, like parks, were appreciated by the children who spoke about using them to meet family, be with family, "sharing and caring"; "love" and "gossiping" as things they enjoyed. Eating was once again a social event valued by the children: gathering kai moana and ika were commonly mentioned in answer to "what is there for kids in your community". Being with family or friends *and* fishing or gathering sea food were part of the community experience for some children.

What is there for kids to do in your community? "Hang out with friends"

Apart from the obvious, like "go to school", there were a variety of things for children to do in the communities where the research sites were based. Many of the responses repeated those reported on above but there was a difference between rural and urban sites, for example "looking after lambs" as opposed to "techno-pop". Responses like "helping family"; "help your community; support each other in your community"; "meetings, hui"; "work"; and "cook" indicated an awareness of the adult world where there were mutual expectations that children contribute to family and community life. There were also enjoyable community-based activities such as "having a feast"; "celebrations"; "going to church" and "partying" although this could be exclusively for kids.

Rest and recreation featured highly in this section with "sleep" being one of the most repeated words. Others mentioned things like "Facebook" and "texting" and "gossiping" as pastimes they engaged in which may indicate a confusion about the

question, because these are personal, individual, usually one-on-one activities however perhaps the respondents regarded them as community based?

On the other hand, a group of questions connected children clearly with community activities. Things like "do karate and other sports"; "holiday programmes"; "drama"; "music"; "dancing"; "culture programmes"; crafts such as "woodwork"; "sewing"; and, "material making – puppets, cushions"

By far the most usual responses however were social, sometimes based around a structured activity, but also informal, free play was valued. Children reported hanging out with friends, playing, riding motor bikes, dancing, and discos and generally just taking time to "chill out".

One group wrote:

> *Our grove has heaps of children and we go down to a little park and do heaps of games. The river is quite close and you can go there with your mates.*

A mix of structured activities and the natural environment occupied children in their communities, either as entertainment or recreation, as part of family outings and cultural obligations (like attending church or meetings). Other examples of participation in the community were informal, unstructured opportunities to be with other children, utilising parks, rivers or beaches as places to play.

What do you think there should be out there in communities for children? Have like fun holiday groups

There were not enough activities provided for children in the community after school and during the holidays. The majority of the suggestions from children focused on community-provided recreational, "fun thingamajigs" like "fun holiday groups", "holiday activities"; "holiday programmes". Fun was a theme connecting possible activities such as "plays; drama; songs"; "discos", "contests and competitions".

However among the recreational ideas there were more sombre and serious suggestions. There was one request for a dental clinic and some heartfelt requests for family support, money and food. Below is a verbatim entry on the survey monkey tool revealing an array of suggestions for community services children thought should be available to them:

> *[We need] places you feel safe and you are not going to get attacked. It's really dodgy round our school, there are gangs – some of them are good gangs … Mr Whippy used to come up the road and that was good.*
>
> *More takeaways like KFC and Burger Kings*
>
> *A building for us that is safe and not vandalised; a water slide; a theme park; places for parties; a community hall and community counsellor and a youth counsellor like a girl or a guy about 15 to 18 and then maybe an older one too and then have a little room and then go in there and just talk to them. They need to be in your community and someone you know that you can talk to. Primary kids can talk to someone at intermediate and then intermediate kids can talk to the college kids.*

We need a homework person you can go to anytime to help you when you need it.

How do you think adults in the community should help children? Be good to us and say "hi"

Children were clear about how people in the community should help kids, and given the propensity in the media for children to be represented as threats to adult authority and security, the messages from this section repute the perceptions in the public domain. By far the most common responses concerned attitudes: "Be good to us"; "ask us nicely what we would like" and "treat us how you would like to be treated". Children thought adults in the community had a responsibility to provide "what we need for a good life" or "a life". Education featured highly: "school", "home school"; and "pay for school"; "for Māori, kohanga", "a good kindergarten". Adults who encourage educational aspirations were also considered important: "give us education"; "go to college"; "get us to college and university". One commentator suggested adults should "teach us about good things we haven't done before" perhaps indicating a thirst for new knowledge but certainly reflecting curiosity, a disposition considered essential for successful learning.

A needs-based theme was evident in this section: "Buy food and water"; "give us shelter, blankets, pillows bedding"; "give us clothes, shoes and socks". This theme was summed up by comments like "give us what we need to have a good life" and ensure children are:

Healthy, have enough money, a good environment, someone to look after them, a family.

Comments like this suggest that these children were experiencing a degree of hardship. Not all comments were bleak and requests for "discos and street parties" expressed a desire for children and adults to have fun together.

Another theme concerned provision of facilities: "build a new playground for the school" because the current one was continually vandalised; "more apartments (urban area)" in the context of overcrowded housing; and "build flats for younger people [rural area] because young adults had to move to the cities for education, training and work." The messages were simple: "Ask us what's wrong" and "help us". One child expressed it as follows:

Say "Hi" and help kids if they are lost or they fall off their scooter"

Get to know us

The final question in this set asked "what do you think grown-ups in the community should know about what kids like to do, about being helpful to kids". There was a wide variety of responses that fell into three broad themes. First, children wanted adults to understand their need for their own space and "they should know that we like to hang with friends, be able to be alone, have our own space". Many participants responded with single words like "Love"; "laugh" "freedom". Time to "play and home and with friends" "to phone and text"; to "be with family and play family games".

A second related theme was "getting to know children by listening and inviting opportunities for engagement: "I would like them to ask and listen to what we have to

say"; "kids have to tell big people what they like to do and the big people, like parents, have to do what kids want [sort of]". The latter comment indicates a sophisticated awareness of negotiated positioning between the child and grown-up 'big people' worlds but still expressed a desire to be informed.

A third theme concerned both services provided for children, either their availability or accessibility. Health, being healthy, access to health care, doctors, hospitals and affordable medicines were commonly mentioned in virtually every data set. Exactly why is uncertain, but in the rural setting the availability and cost of transport to the nearest medical centre was an issue. Sports facilities were also mentioned and children wanted adults to provide more sports facilities, more organised games but also, children wanted knowledgeable adults to be involved with them:

> *They should know about sports games. We love sports but we need the gear – we should be able to borrow the gear. We have tennis courts but they don't put up the nets.*

Many adults believe children playing sport is a good thing but enabling that by providing 'gear' was confounded by a lack of trust and a belief, no doubt founded on experience, that gear would be damaged if there was not a responsible adult around to supervise. Because, in these children's experience, adults were usually unavailable, they, the children, missed out. A final set of comments reflected a concern for the natural environment "like a clean ocean and beach".

A Workforce for Children

Introduction

Improving the workforce for children whose circumstances make them vulnerable to poor social, cultural, economic, educational, and health outcomes is a key message in the Green Paper. Because a significant proportion of children's lives are conducted in the public sphere in early childhood services, in primary, intermediate and secondary schools, we believe that they are well placed to inform the Green Paper's intention to improve the workforce for children; to better connect children who are vulnerable to adverse social conditions to appropriate services; and, given they are the recipients of services, their ideas about how to improve these have direct relevance.

A number of clear messages emerged from the data:

- Children were adamant that adults should both listen and ask them about matters that concerned them.

- Adults working with children should understand that they are children and so, to effectively work with children, adults need to respect them as children. Participants mentioned how they are told off for "acting like children" or "being childish". In their view, this was an adult judgement that undervalued them as children. Kindness, patience and understanding featured as qualities children

believed were essential for professionals working with and for children. Similarly, being trustworthy, maintaining confidentiality and having a positive attitude to children were regarded as important qualities, as was professional expertise: "they should know what they're doing".

- While some children understood the value of seeking advice from other adults who were not family, this was a contested notion and children across all four school sites presented the trusted view: "I would feel cared for", and a more suspect approach such as "I would want to know who they are and I would want to know why".

- When it came to the question of who should help children, the answers were overwhelmingly in favour of family, followed closely by friends. A recurring theme throughout these responses centralised the importance of whanau in children's lives. Interestingly, none of the participants saw their rights as undermining parental authority, and while all participants wanted a voice, they did not regard this as incompatible with healthy inter generational relationships.

The next sections present the children's responses to the workforce questions.

"Listen to our thoughts"

The Green Paper raises the issue of a workforce for children based on common principles, standards, assessment frameworks and training. While the children who participated in this small scale, qualitative project were not expected to comment on standards and assessments, the question, "What do you think grown-ups who work with children need to know?", the children's responses provided some core values and principles which would not be out of place in professional bodies' codes of ethics or even in aspects of professional training.

The theme of listening and its associated arts such as talking were common responses: For grown-ups to work effectively with children "they need to know what happened" and to know whether or not children are "happy with their life". To understand "what happened" children suggested that adults should possess "talking skills", in this context meaning an ability to explain matters in terms that children understand. The children in this research were well used to be talked to. They felt there were fewer opportunities for their views to be heard. Adults working with children therefore need to "know how to listen"; "listen to our thoughts". To be effective in helping children is predicated on good listening but further to this, children thought adults should know "our cultural background; our personal problems"; "what we feel"; "what we like to do"; "know what we are doing"; "know our needs"; "our situations"; "know how I feel and understand what the problem is about" and "how to run our lives". These comments imply a personal relationship in which elements of reciprocal exchange of information is important. Understanding the full picture was important to the children.

Other comments did relate to training issues. For example some children thought that adults who worked with children should "know children's rights" and understand "how children learn" and in one comment, "be talented". One child wrote quite

simply, adults who help kids "should know what they are doing", exerting a strong view that, perhaps, not all those holding positions where they are expected to help children are able to deliver. Another wrote "know our medical history" and another expanded:

> *They need to know stuff; what your blood type is, and what makes you feel that way and how to solve problems.*

One comment thought it important that "different environments connect", reflecting a theme in the Green Paper for more collaboration between service providers to ensure appropriate help is available, particularly for children who are at risk. This comment was tempered by another request that "adults stop talking to strangers", a comment reflecting some children's experiences of breaches of trust between adults in help roles.

There were a group of comments that identified some desirable characteristics for adults who chose to work with children: have "positive attitudes"; "be supportive; be encouraging; have an "open mind, brain, heart"; be social; be nice; be honest; be trustworthy; "persistence – don't give up on us"; and "tolerance". In a sense, these are like pleas to remind us that they are children. Perhaps the most significant comment was adults who work with children "need to like and adore kids".

"Ask us"

"If grown-ups are worried about kids what do you think they should do?" was the next lead question. It seems obvious that if there are concerns about a child, that child would be consulted in some way. The overwhelming response to this question was to ask the child and then help them. These two themes re-emerged continually in the data for this question: "Ask us"; "Talk to us"; 'help us"; "listen to us"; "ask if they are OK, talk with them about it, get a counsellor, talk to them and then ask them what they want help with".

This theme was further elaborated with statements like "take good care of them"; "make them feel welcome"; "love". This question also prompted responses like "talk to parents"; "explain to parents what you are worried about"; "contact parents, call their parents"; "have a meeting with the parents". Some children were more specific about who outside the family should be contacted: "they should call for help from policemen and their family". Comments such as these were explained in the context of gangs. Children also recognise the value of talking to others: "talk to another person"; talk to a professional, e.g. a counsellor. Get help!"; "get a special person and that person can talk". Aspects of this question became muddled with how grown-ups should talk with children reaffirming children's desire to be treated respectfully, "keep it confidential from other kids and other people, but if its serious, you have to tell"; Tone and relationships skills were important and children wrote that sensitive interactions required adults to behave "nicely" and "with kindness". For some, food was an important part of the help process and so comments like "feed us" were a feature. Perhaps the most significant comment in response to this question was:

> *Do something. Don't just leave it. Don't ignore it.*

How should adults talk to kids? "Like they care" and "with love"

The question of "how adults should talk to kids?" generated the largest number of responses indicating perhaps that children do not always feel listened to, and that the language of adults is not always accessible to children. One of the first points made reflected the importance of respectful, reciprocal relationships which recognises that childhood is a stage of life and that while children have rights, to expect them to behave and communicate like adults is inappropriate. For example, children frequently mentioned respect: Talk to us "respectfully"; "politely"; "nicely"; "with kindness"; and, "with love". Repeated variations on the theme of respect and politeness, "in a polite voice" and "in a nice way" were often explained as "don't shout at us"; "don't be angry" and talk to us "like you care and not loudly"; "calmly", and "sensibly". Simple solutions were suggested such as "Ask us how we are" and "get to know us, build a relationship with us"; "be friendly, be loving" and even, "settle down" when you talk to children. Not surprisingly, children observed that adults interacted with them in ways that would be unacceptable to other adults in the same context, broadening the gap between children and adults. Other responses suggested that a positive attitude was important and one child thought adults should "have a lot of fun" when talking to children rather than pressuring them to interact was mentioned in the context of observing adult styles of communication with children.

A further point made in the data set related to difficulties children experienced in understanding adult communications. The children's advice was for adults to

> *"describe their words with words children understand" and talk to children in "a way we understand" and be "easy to understand".*

"How would you feel if grown-ups who were worried about you (not your mum or dad) asked someone who they thought could help?" "Weird. Why wouldn't they ask me?"

The responses fell into two categories. One was anger that they might not be party to discussions about them and their circumstances indicating perhaps some understanding of their rights to be informed and consulted and the other was gratitude and appreciation.

Not surprisingly, children, like adults, can feel a sense of betrayal if they believe their personal circumstances are being discussed without their involvement or even agreement. Comments like "I'd be embarrassed"; "I'd feel ashamed"; "I'd feel unwanted"; and "I'd feel sad"; and "they may think bad thoughts about us" reflected concerns that adults might not represent children fairly or accurately. Others expressed outrage: "it would make us mad when they didn't tell us"; "I would get angry"; "if they didn't tell me, I would be angry"; "I would get strict [assertive] and be offended"; and simply, "I would be offended". There was a sense of bafflement as well as the following comments suggest: "why wouldn't they ask me?" and, "weird. Why wouldn't they ask me?" and "how could people help [if they don't ask me]?" and, "they are standing up for me [without asking]?" Concerns about misinterpretations were expressed as well: "Ask us first and see if we can deal with it" which led to comments reflecting the importance of children's participation in decisions that concern them: "they should run it past us"; and "settle down and talk to us!"

On the other hand, a minority commented that they would "feel cared for"; "appreciated" and one wrote "Maybe they love us" or "feel sympathy for us" and "they would support you". Other recorded discussions illustrated how children resolved their position on this question, creating grounds for adults to talk to others about children they were concerned about: "It would be OK, at least they care enough to do something"; "sympathy for you"; I would feel "weird at the start, I would need to understand why [they would talk to others]."

One child summarised the group discussion as follows:

> *It depends if they liked us or not. If they used not nice words, we would be sad. You might be happy if they were going to help you. That's OK, but if it wasn't nice, then we would be angry; if it was to help us out, we would be happy, but if it was about stuff we didn't know about, then we would be angry or neutral.*

How would you like to get help from grown-ups? "Do they remember how it is to be young?"

The recurring theme in this section, in response to the question "How would you like to get help from grown-ups?" was "they should listen to [us]". Being heard, being consulted and informed were evidently important to the children, but some clear messages about how were sensibly articulated. For example, the statement above, "do they remember how it is to be young" heralded some in-depth discussion about being a child and adjusting information accordingly, a point noted earlier. Requests from children were clear: talk to us "in a way that we understand you"; "check in frequently"; "remember we are not adults". Suggestions for how children like to be were influenced by the social climate in which shared values were aspired to: "respect us, our decisions, and our choices"; "value our opinion" and "treat us as equals". One insight suggested that adults "ask how we would like to be helped or even if we want to be helped". This is an interesting point – are adults helping or interfering?

> *[Help me] when I want it, not when they come over and start telling me what to do their way.*

On whose terms are adults helping the child, a point which establishes further some interesting questions about choices. Can children really choose whether or not they receive help and in what ways this help is provided? These differences, and respect for them are evident in the following: "We can ask if we can have a talk, but if they say no, then we can ask when they are not in a busy time" indicating an awareness of the differences between the child's and adult's reality. A particularly notable discussion took place about whether or not help, in its various forms, was readily available: adults can "go and find out solutions and come back [and tell you later] but they don't need to if they know straight away". Practical help was also recommended and one group summed up their discussion:

> *Have them help you with stuff you don't know about. They can show you stuff you don't know about. They can teach you to ride a bike – instead of telling you just show you …*

Children respected the differences between adults and themselves but these differences were not necessarily mutually acknowledged by the adults in their worlds. To effectively work with children requires an understanding of appropriate language and that children are emerging as capable, competent agents in their own right who resent being talked down to and want to be helped but on their terms.

Who should help you? "Someone who will listen"

Very rarely are children asked who should help them, let alone how they should provide that help, so the question "who should help you?" required some facilitation because it appeared to cross hierarchical boundaries between the adult and child worlds. Not surprisingly, the first response to this question was "parents" or "family". These responses were closely followed by "friends, boyfriend, girl friend, best friend", and "partner".

Children expected that the type of relationship they had with others would determine who should help. One comment noted "teacher, if they like you and if you like them" emphasising the importance of mutual respect, but also indicating that an element of professional expertise might be useful. Some participants named a therapist or a counsellor as sources of help. A common experience with someone could also be a rationale for sound advice or help: "someone who might have been through something similar". Underpinning these responses were overt agreement amongst all participants that helpful adults should listen to children. "People who will listen" or "Someone who will listen to your opinion" and "who will respect you and not [be] a big mouth" mattered deeply to children possibly reflecting previous experiences where perhaps their views were not heard or not respected as confidential:

> *[The people who should help you should be] people you trust; your teachers (not all of them because they don't like you or you don't trust them); teachers you like; parents; your principal; family and friends.*

A particularly empathetic commentator observed that if you asked for help, that person should assume responsibility to help: "Everyone should help the people who need it". One child simply answered "Someone who will help".

Respectful relationships based on respect for children's rights

The comments solicited on child-centred practices in the workforce clearly stated that children wanted respectful relationships which acknowledged and valued their contributions. Listening, asking, and respecting children's perspectives mattered to the children and they made sensible and useful comments about how adults who work with children might do so effectively. Respect for their personal circumstances was important and even though all the children wanted adult support and help, they wanted this to be ethical and professional. Space, time and places for children to both ask for and receive help were features in the data.

The role of Government: Sharing responsibility:

Introduction

The role of government was topical in the school settings possibly because during the time when the research was conducted, the election was imminent and evidence of bill boards and hoardings were impossible to avoid. Children were aware of the key players (John Key was mentioned by all participants, although not all were sure about his role), and the concept of children as citizens with a future role in elections was generally regarded as something to look forward to, as the government was regarded as a source of power and control with the ability to make decisions that impacted on children's lives. Identifying themselves as New Zealand/Aotearoa citizens was a source of pride for many, particularly in the aftermath of the Rugby World Cup 2011 win.

The children participating in this exercise observed differences between peoples, their standards of living, and their opportunities. For some, their current circumstances were regarded as unfair and more than a few wanted John Key and Paula Bennett to "come and live in our 'hood for a while and see how they go". Most children were excited that their words would be presented to Government as part of the Green Paper process.

How can the Government be fair to all kids? Let kids have a say

Questions about the role of government were conducted in small groups with the Advisors acting as scribes or imputing data on the survey monkey tool. This was because the children perceived these questions to be difficult and requiring specialist knowledge. The first question was "if the Government was being fair to all kids, what does that mean?" There were two general themes to the responses. First, include children's views; and second, children offered some policy advice for benefits, and for social services dealing with children whose circumstances made them extremely vulnerable.

There was a real desire for the Government to make things fair for all children and the best place to begin, according to this group of participants was "ask us first and let us be involved in the decisions about kids and families"; "let kids have a say but let adults have a say as well"; "don't restrict children" and "spend more money on kids and for kids". Solutions mooted were to regard "everyone as equal, everybody earn the same amount and treat everybody the same".

One group went into some detail recording how they felt Government should be fair to kids:

> *They should take down the prices of school, like 'tech fees'. Some people can't afford the fees – we have four kids in our family and we can't afford them and that means we can't go.*
>
> *The Government should spend more money on good stuff in the community; more fun stuff.*

CYF take kids away and give them to another family where they get more abuse. The Government should make decisions more carefully. They should make kids safer and they need to make sure they have got it right.

They need to listen to kids or get more people to listen to kids. They should have an opinion post or a suggestion box at schools so they know what kids think. They need to have better lines of communication. They need to come to us.

How should the Government help kids? More focus on what kids need

The children were remarkably aware of the current issues facing them, their families and the Government. "Increase benefits"; "raise the minimum wage"; "remove GST on food"; and, "reduce unemployment" featured among the answers to the question of how government should help families and children. "Pay rises" and "more money to benefits"; "raise the pension, the minimum wage" were not uncommon responses. Many of the participants were children of beneficiaries and were privy to adult concerns about money and budgeting. Stories of sole parents having to make decisions about which bills to pay were shared along side other examples of how their parents or caregivers misspent or abused benefits: "it shouldn't be our worry, but it is" one child told us. How to help? "Let kids vote"; "have more focus on what kids need". More intimate accounts revealed fear and a desire for safe homes:

They need to come to us; they need to give us stuff to make us feel like safe and happy – like people who understand us; people we can talk to; safe places we can go where scary adults can't find us; we need to be able to talk freely; we need to be able to talk to someone without it going to the police or CYF.

Some children recommended that the Government "change the rules and help out people who are having problems". Others offered practical solutions such as "lower the price of good (healthy) food"; "lower the price of petrol"; "have more public transport" and "more bike paths".

Make it fair

Children had a wide range of suggestions in response to the question of how Government should support them to thrive, belong and achieve, starting with a reiteration to "include kids" and to "listen to kids" by letting them "have a say". "Giving children a choice" was a common response. "Fun games that help you learn information about stuff you want to know about" related to educational aspirations and responsibilities with a request to Government to "hear both sides of the story" presumably referring to adult's' and children's views. For example some suggestions referred to education and ranged from "have shorter school hours" to:

… come and support our school, make better programmes and courses for kids. Give [schools] the resources to do really good things, like more challenging courses, and get outside more.

One child suggested that the Government "let kids do the census"; "make it so parents can spend more time with families"; "pay less taxes 'cause you can only just support yourself"; "increase the DPB". One group discussed the wage and salary gap between rich and poor, and wanted more equitable wages and suggested that the top-end salaries be lowered. This coincided with media articles on salaries for

top executives in the public and private sector which may have influenced the responses but, at the same time, evidenced children's interest and understanding of topical issues in the public domain. Increasing the cost of cigarettes was a popular strategy but this was coupled with a request for support to give up smoking. Making hospitals "more friendly and more colourful" was another request.

How do you think the Government should help families and children? Not as many hours for the grown-ups to work

Children really want time with their parents and families and a theme running through responses to the question "how do you think the government should help families and children?" related to the impact of the labour market conditions experienced by some:

> *Night shift means I can't see my mum and Dad gets home late. [We need] reliable trains. It means less time with family; higher minimum wage - $17.00 and help parents to find jobs that they have experience for and then make sure that income keeps up with experience or time.*

Following on from this comment was a request for "not so many hours to work". In three of the four sites there were comments on the minimum wage rate, some with specific recommendations like "make the minimum wage $20.00". Work was seen as desirable: "let kids have jobs" as well as "let kids have benefits". While some suggestions appeared more 'pie in the sky', like "free phones as at a certain age (like 12)" and "when they leave school, they get a free car", the context in which these comments emerged were directly related the circumstances of these children's lives. Their parents needed a phone to find out about work opportunities. In at least two schools, transport, or the cost and availability of public transport were a major consideration.

One school was threatened with closure which meant a three hour round bus trip for the children on a windy, difficult road. The prospect of this upset the children because they valued the role their school held in their community. Children pointed out that their classrooms and playing fields would be empty which they regarded as wasteful. Plus, the bus was expensive. For example, to attend a medical appointment required children to take a full day off school and these children were aware that for their parent to find work incurred a transport cost. Children were aware of the financial constraints of being on a benefit. The following statement was contributed by a group of children concerned about how benefits were used:

> *They should bring food or give [parents] a basic fund and then a little bit more money [a bonus] but not for cigarettes. If they don't spend it on food and they spend it on cigarettes, then they shouldn't get the little bit more [the bonus]. Then perhaps you might get people managing their money sensibly. If the family are going to spend money on drugs, then the Government should bring you [children] food. The Government should monitor extra money for benefits and reward families who spend it sensibly. For people on benefits, keep prices, like for food and milk and uniforms down.*

Many in-depth comments related to education, notably some secondary school requirements which assume families will be able to provide these:

Don't expect all families to have computers – you can't afford internet or paper so have a free internet café that you can use. Not everyone can afford an iPad or a computer, so if it is important, we should get them and they should update them. The Government need to make sure that all kids get a fair chance. They should have the same opportunities to learn, like rich kids get scholarships, not all the poor kids. We need to make sure everyone gets an equal chance. If you are on a benefit, the price of university should be lowered. [There should be] equal opportunities for education.

And:

Give low decile year 7s and 8s laptops;

Once a child has finished primary school, they get a free iPad or tablet for high school.

These comments indicate that perhaps children from low decile schools felt disadvantaged by their lack of access to technology at home. All the schools we visited had computers available for school work but expectations that homework or extension work could be supported at home were unrealistic for this particular cohort of participants, all of whom were either from a low decile school, and/or in complex care arrangements.

Summary

The children who participated in this research were very aware of the problems their parents face and how these impact on their childhoods. The role of government and the impact of government decisions were understood by most of the children participating in this research. They were able to form a point of view about financial decisions, such as the minimum wage and benefits, particularly as they perceived these impacting on their lives, particularly in how they were resourced for education, and on their parents' lives. Time for parents to be with children was an issue for some – this was because of parental employment patterns and/or complex custody arrangements. Overall, children felt it was important to consult and inform them about political decisions and they believed they were in a good position to contribute meaningfully, albeit in age appropriate ways, to such democratic processes.