

The American Tale

A report on
Effective Resident Engagement and Leadership with a Special
Focus on Involving Youth in Changing their Communities.

An International Learning Exchange
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Written by the UK young people's delegation:

Jenny Cooke, Ema Eden, Karl Owen and Anne Gammon

Assisted by:

Nicky Porter and Liam Cairns

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- Centre for the Study of Social Policy
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Jenny Cooke
Ema Eden
Anne Gammon
Karl Owen

Introduction

This is our American Tale; This should take you through a two day study tour of different projects around the USA and the final conference in Washington DC, an inspirational trip and we wanted to share some of the amazing things we learnt and shared.

Four young people have written this report. Jenny Cooke is 18 and Karl Owen is 19 and both are from County Durham, where they work for Investing in Children. Ema Eden is 18 and from Portsmouth where she works for South Central Connexions. Ema, Jenny and Karl were all involved in the planning and running of the conference. Ann Gammon from Fareham is 18 and is involved in the National Youth Parliament.

The fifth member of the UK young people's delegation is Michael Bundock who is from Brighton and has worked with A National Voice.

International Initiative: The context.

When we were first invited to play a role in the design and delivery of an international study tour and conference, we saw a real opportunity to deliver some important messages about the contribution that young people can make to the public policy debate.

The title of the event: Effective Resident Engagement and Leadership with a Special Focus on Involving Youth in Changing Their Communities, held out a real challenge to us to put together evidence that would demonstrate that children and young people can be active and important partners in debating issues and seeking new solutions to old problems.

At the first meeting of the Planning Group in Amsterdam, it was clear that we were part of a bigger group of young people with a wide range of experience and knowledge. We had little doubt that working with the others, we could design and then deliver a conference that would be both challenging and instructive **and** make an important statement about the competence of children and young people themselves.

We believe that part of the challenge facing **all** children and young people is the way we are seen by the adult community. This view, what sociologists call the dominant discourse, consists of an often contradictory mixture of three powerful ideas:

- The vulnerable child, in need of care and protection;
- The dangerous/unruly child, in need of control; and
- The ignorant child, in need of instruction.

At best, this leads to policies and practice which seeks to do things **for** children and young people, or at worse to do things **to** us.

What is missing is a view of children and young people as competent citizens, with rights and abilities, who deserve to be treated as equals, and where policy and practice would seek to work **with** us.

This is best summed up in the words of Muscroft, commenting on the vision contained in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child:

“Children are seen as full human beings, right-holders who can play an active part in the enjoyment of their rights. They are not, as they have often been presented in the past, - mere dependents, the property of their parents. They are not people who only become full human beings when they become adults. They are in need of protection, but also have strengths. Every child is seen as important, no matter what its abilities, origin or gender. Their views and opinions are significant. They are not to be seen merely as victims, workers, young offenders, pupils or consumers, but as complex and fully rounded individuals.”

(Muscroft, 1999.)

We saw considerable similarities in the arguments developed by the International Initiative for Children Youth and Families and The Centre for the Study of Social Policy, in their approach to working in communities. They note that “ too often parents and residents are not given the opportunity to participate....or they are given marginal roles...and then left out of key decisions” (Resident Engagement and Leadership –an international toolkit. Annie E Casey Foundation 2004). The same applies to children and young people.

The Conference provided an opportunity not only for children and young people to argue their case, but to demonstrate, through the way that we performed various leadership roles within the conference, that children and young people are competent and able and can bring significant skills to the table.

The young people’s planning group also set some more specific objectives for the learning exchange. These were:

Learning exchange objectives

1. **Learning** – about what it is like to grow up in different nations and communities
2. **Dialogue** between young people and policymakers.
3. Contribute to the **leadership of young people** through the roles, strategies and opportunities of the Learning Exchange.
4. Explore **innovative and promising practices** for engaging young people in community decision making.
5. Go home with an **action plan** developed by each country.

This is our report on how things went. We think we broadly achieved what we set out to do. The reader can form her/his own conclusions.

Planning the learning exchange

Introduction to the young people's planning committee

Back in December 2003 we heard of the plan for a learning exchange and conference to be held in the US in November 2004. Rob Hutchinson (UK Board member of the International Initiative) informed us that the Board would like a young people's committee to plan the exchange. The previous bi-annual conference had only seen the arrival of one young person, at a conference which was discussing the issues facing communities and therefore, young people. This time, a group of young people were invited to form a planning committee to enable meaningful involvement by young people right from the start. We were asked to bring our ideas to the table.

Amsterdam, Feb 2004

The International Initiative Planning Committee's first meeting as a group was in Amsterdam in February 2004. Twelve young people gathered from four countries, Israel, the UK, the Netherlands and the US. The aim of this meeting was to introduce ourselves, explain some of the work we do back in our own countries, and explore how we would all contribute to the conference of the International Initiative later that year.

Everybody explained how they have all been involved in their communities. We saw it as important to identify the skills and experiences of individual members of the group, that would contribute to their involvement for the learning exchange. Here are a few examples of what people felt they could bring:

- Leadership
 - Understanding of equality
 - Teaching
 - How to communicate effectively
 - Bringing and using knowledge
 - Experience
 - Connection to the youth
 - Responsibility
 - Respect
 - Vision
 - Determination
 - Dedication
 - Humour
 - Knowing how to interact effectively
 - Creativity
 - Team work
 - S*** happens!- that we are more used to things
- not going our way so we don't get discouraged so easily.
- Learning
 - Open minded
 - Ideas
 - Efficiency
 - Evolution (We felt young people are far more comfortable with this concept than most adults.)
 - Experience with Youth Council or management boards
 - Guiding groups
 - Polls
 - Organizing
 - Imagination

Then we voted for the top five that we felt were most important.

These were accepted as our five principles for success - for us as a group, for us to be able achieve our objectives, but also for the use of people on the learning exchange to reach their goals.

The five principles to success:

- Responsibility
- Team work
- Ideas
- Communication
- Imagination

A toolbox for successful youth engagement.

We came up with several youth involvement strategies. This is what we called the toolbox. The toolbox contains ideas and models, drawn from the experience of different members of the planning group, designed to support youth engagement and make it worthwhile, empowering and effective.

- Building support systems.
- Collaborations; developing partnerships.
- Recruiting/ retaining youth participation.
- Follow ups; supporting youth organisations development
- Creating youth and adult relationships
- Youth at the heart (not tokenistic)
- Synchronisation of the youth and adult agenda's

It was then decided that we would facilitate workshops at the conference which explored these ideas in greater detail. Each National delegation chose two strategies. The UK delegation chose 'Youth at the heart' and 'Win- Win situations' (synchronizing adult and youth agenda's). Everyone agreed to do further work on these before the next meeting in London.

London, July 2004

Our second and final planning session was in London, UK from 2-4 July 2004. Each national team reported their progress since the Amsterdam meeting held in January 2004.

In discussion we agreed what we wanted the Learning Exchange to accomplish:

Learning exchange objectives

6. **Learning** – about what it is like to grow up in different nations and communities
7. **Dialogue** between young people and policymakers.
8. Contribute to the **leadership of young people** through the roles, strategies and opportunities of the Learning Exchange.
9. Explore **innovative and promising practices** for engaging young people in community decision making.
10. Go home with an **action plan** developed by each country.

The toolbox

We revisited the youth involvement strategies outlined in Amsterdam and shared examples from our different countries. It was obvious that we all had many examples of their use. We wanted the strategies to be debated and utilised at the conference. The strategies we were tasked with working on in our country delegations were:

Building support systems

This would include infrastructure, skills, tools, strategies, financial support to help young people do things their own way and give people choices.

Collaborations

Developing partnerships that will work when participants go home, also showing how youth can help develop new partnerships.

Creating youth and adult relationships based on mutual respect.

Recruiting and retaining youth beyond tokenism, through actions, not just talk.

Youth at the heart of strategies and organisations.

Synchronisation through win-win solutions, strategies and policies that take into consideration the views of young people and adults.

Conference design

We spent time developing an overall design for the seminar, so that the young people who attended were enabled to participate as fully as the adults . We wanted to include our youth involvement strategies. We agreed guidelines to present to the adults for the conference.

- Sessions should be no longer than 1.5 hours
- Sessions should have youth and adult co-facilitators
- Ten minute time limit for speeches
- Presentations should be interactive and use humour

The Planning Team left London with lots of work to do, but with lots of enthusiasm for the Learning Tour in November.

The Study Tour - 1st and 2nd November

Eight Study Tour sites had been identified by our American hosts. These were:

- Atlanta, Georgia
- Boston, Massachusetts
- Denver, Colorado
- Hartford, Connecticut
- Indianapolis, Indiana
- Oakland, California
- San Antonio, Texas
- San Diego, California

Jenny Cooke visited Denver, Karl Owen visited Indianapolis, Michael Bundock visited Boston, and Ema Eden and Anne Gammon visited Oakland. The following section contains some of our observations from our visits. (Some of the adult delegation from the UK also visited some of the study tour sites, and some of their reports are contained in Appendix 1)

Denver

The study tour in Denver, Colorado took place with the beautiful backdrop of the Rocky Mountains. Denver is a new and developing city. It is home to three universities, but as any cities has a high share of unemployment.

On the study tour there were three projects which we were going to look at this was the Metro Organisations for People (MOP), The Central Denver Community Court and Technical Assistance Resource Centre.

MOP had the mission of empowering people to strengthen and transform their communities through community organising and was unlike any project I had ever seen in the UK. The community organising process begins locally with churches, schools and youth and neighbourhood associations. MOP trains volunteer community leaders to empower to community to work together across race, class and language barriers towards common goals of a higher quality of life. I visited two MOP projects and sat in their meetings. The first meeting was one in a local High School. There was a group of students who were working together to try and improve various aspects off their school. They had introduced new designs to the toilet doors and a 'own a hall' project where different groups and teams within the school could use a hall as a means to communicate to its members. There was an adult from MOP who assisted the group but she did not run the group, the students did that. It seemed to work very well as the adult who ran the group was separate from the school so was able to advise the group independently. The young people also go a lot out of the group as they were in complete control of the work.

Technical Assistance (TA) is an opportunity for leaders working with Making Connections Denver to learn new things and develop or strengthen their skills to carry out activities that will accomplish the every ambitious goals and outcomes outlined by residents to improve the lives of families and children.

The Central Denver Community Court was in the Cole neighbourhood, which is one of the most deprived neighbourhoods in Denver. The community court aims to not only intervene in a child's life when a crime has occurred but also prevent future crime from being committed. This is accomplished through a comprehensive view of the child and their family's needs as well as through sentencing recommendations. The Community Court also understands the importance of early intervention and community members can 'walk in' to the court and having their needs addressed without having to any previous contact with the legal system. When I visited the court I met two young people had not been involved in the court previously but were preparing to take part in community work with the court as part of their High School activities.

Jenny Cooke

Indianapolis

Upon arrival Aaron one of the hosts of the study tour greeted me and helped me make my way to the hotel. After I unpacked I got asked to meet up with the rest of the group at the hotel reception to go out for a meal and get to know the other international guests better. The meal was nice, after it all of us went back to the hotel the Israeli group went to see how Halloween went as they didn't have it back home but as for me the jet lag took its toll and I made my way to bed.

On Monday morning we all went to a conference room and sat at a table where we talked about the purpose of the learning exchange and the study tour, we also discuss the learning objectives and weeks agenda.

After this meeting we went for a tour of making connections site of Martindale brightwood and southeast. This was quite interesting as we got to know the history and the back round of Indianapolis. We got an insight to the ethnic minority and the white communities we also got to see how different religions lived in a separate part of the community all together as though they were being closed off to the other religions.

After this we adjourned for lunch, which I might add, was all you can eat and was out of this world.

Once we had all finished our lunch we went to meet with the chairman of an organization called Urban League. In my opinion this trip was off the point - I thought we were there to learn about youth participation, the urban league chairman was talking nothing of youth only how they work with the ethnic minority.

When we finally moved on from this we went to an organization called (MCCOY) Marion County Commission on Youth. This organization was top of the ladder in my opinion the organization was a bit like the network fund we have here in county Durham but the way it differed was the young people got to decide if the project that the young people had proposed was worthy of the funding they were asking for. There was a group of approximately 16 young people who were on the committee and they interviewed the young people and the adults behind there request to see if

basically youth were at the heart of the project and it would benefit themselves and not the adults.

To conclude our long day we visited a community centre (Christamore House), which was basically made for young people to socialise in different rooms. But this was a community centre with a difference it had a big sports hall where they could play basketball or any other indoor activity. The group met up with the young people who visited the Christamore house on a regular basis and we talked about how this facility they had differed from the ones we had in our own countries. This was an excellent experience to meet other young Americans and discuss what they had in America and I didn't and vice versa.

On the Tuesday of our visit we travelled to an interactive summit- IPS bands and youth rally. This facility had only been up since February and was states of the art. The facility had all the latest gym equipment, boxing ring, computer room, 2 full size basketball courts, they also ran some training programs, so they could gain the knowledge on all of these aspects. It was not designed specifically for young people but young people were allowed to use the facility and it was very easy accessible as it was in a prime location for the young people.

After the summit we made our way to a high school (Ben Davis) to see how the American school system ran. This school was in no means similar to the one's in England. The school had everything you could possibly dream of e.g. garage, dance studio, 3 American football pitches you get the point this school was amazing and out of this world. The school had 3000 students but there was more than enough room. One thing I thought was good about the school is that the students made the lunch for other students while learning to be a chef.

After this fantastic experience I went to visit a polling place to see how the polls for the presidential election worked and how the votes got counted. This was a little boring for me, as I have not got much interest in politics but if it was a person who did have interest then I think this would have been a good experience.

At the end of the day we went to a election party where there was loads of 'important people' and I got to meet the mayor and have a little chat mainly about his job role in Indianapolis.

All in all I thoroughly enjoyed my trip to Indianapolis, if I was too revisit America I would definitely consider going back to Indianapolis and seeing more of the state.

Karl Owen

Oakland

Before the study tour started we arrived a few days early so that we could get over the jet lag from the 30 hour day of travelling. During this time we managed to involve ourselves with the culture of America and the cities of Oakland and San Francisco, especially taking notice and taking a part in the cultural activities, such as having an Ethiopian lunch, looking at the Chinese districts in Oakland and experiencing the largest Halloween parade in the world.

On the first day of the study tour we met up for breakfast with the other members of our group. These were: Sandra Chapin, the study tour host, Biader, a young person from Israel, Raghib, Biader's chaperone, Nicky Porter from Connexions in Portsmouth, Ema Eden, a young person involved with Connexions in Portsmouth and myself, Anne Gammon, a Connexions young person in Hampshire and a member of the youth parliament.

The first activity was the Black Panthers tour. The Black Panthers were a civil rights activist group, using any means possible to achieve their targets of black liberation. They had many community projects in Oakland including free health care and before school meals. We met with the co-founder of the movement, Bobby Seale. The experience was an interesting one in seeing how small community projects could lead to a world wide political movement. It was also notable how the influence had then died away.

The next activity was to tour Oakland with a graffiti artist (truly an artist) and see how they are using the art of graffiti murals and the hip-hop culture to engage youth who might otherwise be disaffected. The murals had all been commissioned by the owners of the property and were a fantastic vision for anyone to experience. They were bright and colourful and not as you imagine graffiti with the negative connotations attached to the word. It is something I plan to bring back to Fareham and investigate the possibilities of a similar project.

We met with two young people from YO! Magazine, a magazine circulated around the West Bay area of California. It was a large project which not only included a magazine packed full of art work, interesting, hard hitting stories but also a television programme, a radio network and much more. This was run solely by young people and was an inspiration to any budding young journalist. It looked and was so professional.

We also visited the town of Berkley and the famous Berkley CA University, and met the author of a book written about the history of Oakland and the Chinese community.

The study tour offered us an incite into the life of America, in particular the hard and troublesome life of the disadvantaged communities that Oakland is full of. It allowed us to see the true side of America we would not have seen from just going to the conference and certainly made me aware of far more issues around ethnicity and youth.

Anne Gammon

The International Seminar, 3rd – 5th November, Washington DC

An overview

150 people from 8 different nations (Chile, Ireland, Israel, Netherlands, Norway, UK, Ukraine, US) gathered together in Washington to debate how best to include young people in processes of resident engagement and leadership. Some of the delegates had spent the previous two days on the study tour. About 25% of the participants were young people.

From the very beginning there were hard hitting messages, put across in many art forms and styles. The first night there was an arts group from Washington DC performing poetry, raps and songs in a way of protest against several issues that affected the young people, from the war on Iraq to the state of their education systems and the places they live. This was the first of many similar style presentations showcasing extraordinary talent and thought provoking messages throughout the event.

The next morning were the traditional welcome speeches, but also a market place put together by the young people from some of the fifteen countries represented there (these countries including the UK, Chile, Ireland and Israel).

A 'Question Time' style event was held, about which more below. separately. Workshops were run by the young people from the Planning Team. An account of the UK on Youth at the Heart and Win- Win situations is provided below.

We had a few talks from different panels, two of these included hip-hop talks, where they gave an insight on how this culture can be used to engage the young people disaffected by other cultures in their communities.

The producer of a documentary about racism showed us her film and answered questions about it. This was an interesting piece with young people involved from over the world and put together on an island in Senegal, with lots of challenging issues about race especially from the South African young people.

The last evening was a climax of the talent and skill we had experienced throughout the rest of the week. It included beat boxing, body popping, rapping...and a contrasting performance from a member of the UK team.

Young people's presence at the conference

Young people had the opportunity at this conference to plan, participate and be actively involved which is something that displays changing attitudes from tokenistic consultation in the past. 10 years ago a conference like this would only have adult participants, they would discuss what they believe would be best to do for, or, what they need to do too young people. This is because it is assumed that young people have nothing to contribute, or don't have the skills, patience, articulacy, confidence or competence to contribute in a constructive way.

However what was shown in Washington was an incredible display of talent, passion expertise and imagination. **This made the conference inspirational.** Young people were involved in the whole conference, 12 young people helped plan the agenda- this meant that there were different elements throughout the conference. There were performances by many inspirational young people which painted the picture of what it is like being young, a market place, video, graphic recording and panel discussion “Question time.” This really helped with the feel of the conference and created creative ways for everyone to feel valued and included and able to comment and advise on issues that effect us all.

The conference was an insight into the lives of young people throughout the world and an eye-opener in showing how there are not that many differences, young people face similar problems in the Ukraine as they did in the USA and in Chile.

Young people were actively involved throughout the event, in the planning, organisation, running and hosting. It felt very inclusive and very inspiring messages came back around young people and when to include them...the answer we came to was a definite policy of young people being involved in every stage of the process.

Question Time

‘Question Time’ was designed to give the young people a chance to grill the adults on issues important to them and visa versa. The format was two separate panels one with five young people and one with five adults. The adult panel was made up of policy makers and the young people’s panel had young people who had been part of the planning committee and conference participants. Both panels sat at the same time and were asked questions that had been submitted earlier that day, after the question had been asked and answered by some members of the panel the topic was opened to a discussion with the rest of the delegates. Although the format worked well, there were too many people on each panel which meant that the discussion did not flow as well as it might. Some interesting topics were discussed including America’s role in the UN and why they have not ratified the Rights of the Child. There was also a fascinating discussion about the strengths and weaknesses of the ‘youth council’ ‘youth parliament’ approach.

What came across most strongly was that the adults didn’t have a monopoly on wisdom, and the responses of the young people’s panel were as coherent and relevant as those from the adult panel, but also often delivered with an extra level of passion and commitment.

The UK Workshop

The UK workshop looked at why it was important to keep young people at the heart of the work, and the advantages of always looking for win-win situations. All of the UK young people were involved in delivering the workshop. The following material was used.

Keeping young people at the heart.

Definition of “Young People at the heart”:

It is important when wanting to engage young people into communities, projects and companies that they are kept “at the heart” This is to ensure they feel valued and to also make the work being done relevant to the target audience.

Youth at the heart, is involving young people throughout. This has become a very positive process and benefits both the young people and adults.

Young people have a voice and feel valued when this is listen to and acted upon from people in authority. Having youth at the heart develops a sense of ownership and responsibility, young people are then far more likely to stay involved and be positive about the work that is being done. Having young people involved does mean that it makes it less intimidating for other young people to become involved. The way in which young people can be put at the heart is by giving young people power and responsibility. This can be done in a number of ways, by having young people influencing decisions that are made, employing young people to help with inclusion work, involving young people in important decisions that up until recently have been reserved for adults! For example young people being on interview panels for staff.

The benefits to adults is that they can be part of a service, policy or foundation that puts youth at the heart. It helps make it the best it can be as it delivers what young people want. It demonstrates working as a partnership, using the community and young people as a partnership, by working together you can draw on all strengths regardless of age which does not happen at the moment.

It is important to highlight if organisations, governments, or projects want young people to be involved and use there opinions then this must be set up from the beginning not added on at to end to tick a box to say young people have been consulted. Young people must be at the heart of the decision- making including the first steps to ensure that it is truly about the youth and not just to look good. These steps must be for young people and not just tokenistic. Assuming that your companies, government, service or community have young people at the heart already just because young people are involved somewhere, is a common mistake to make. Its actually about creating space to listen and act on what young people really want, and being prepared to take that risk as it is a revolutionary concept if it is done well.

Creating a win-win Situation – A Case Study.

Two communities – two approaches – two outcomes: a case study.

In 2002, in a small community in the north of England, anxieties were raised about the behaviour of young people in the town. They were depicted as acting furtively, and of finding places out of sight of adults in the community. The young people would congregate in these places, often carrying carrier bags, believed by some adults to be full of drink and drugs. The local newspaper labelled it the ‘Carrier Bag Culture’.

A crisis meeting was called, involving the local council, law enforcement agencies and concerned adults. Various strategies were discussed, such as increasing the visibility of Police patrols, stopping and searching young people, confiscating drink and drugs, etc. However one agency, *Investing in Children*, suggested that, before anything was done, an opportunity should be created for the young people to tell their side of the story.

This was agreed, and in a very short period of time, an alternative picture of the community began to emerge, one in which some adults were displaying excessive degrees of intolerance to the presence of young people in the community, causing the young people to try to stay out of sight. Stories of drink and drugs were greatly exaggerated, and the young people described a community which provided few facilities for them.

The young people's account was listened to with respect, and one of the local politicians in particular committed to working with the young people to achieve change. This work continues to this day. A variety of new resources have been introduced (negotiated access to the community centre, a youth bus, etc) and the politician and the young people continue to meet regularly to discuss issues. The young people feel much more included and the anxieties of the adults seems to have reduced. A win – win situation.

A year later, few miles to the north, in another small community, a similar debate was taking place about the behaviour of young people. But this time there was no attempt to create opportunities for dialogue. Instead, the local law enforcement agency applied to the court to impose an 'Anti-social behaviour Order'. This allows the police to detain any young person under the age of sixteen who is on the street in a defined area after 9.00pm – in effect, a curfew.

There is no evidence as yet about whether this course of action has had whatever impact that was desired, as the order is still current. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that it has not improved the relationship between young people and adults. Indeed, young people have been able to subvert the action by the simple step of moving across the boundary of the area defined in the order, where the curfew does not apply.

The workshop was well attended, and the case studies provoked much interesting debate.

Conclusions/Reflections

One of the most important lessons learned in my opinion was how apparent the problems with listening to young people were across all countries. Young people growing up in urban USA and those young people living in Israel or the Ukraine all faced difficulties gaining enough respect from the adults to be listened to. It was encouraging to find out that you weren't 'alone' and realising there was similar problems meant it was easier to come up with similar solutions.

Since our return, we have spent time reflecting on what we learned from our experiences in America. Here are some of our conclusions:

Making Connections

The 'Making Connections' projects which we visited provided valuable lessons about how a 'community development' model can be applied to the debate about how young people can have their voices heard most effectively.

'Making Connections' works with some of the most deprived and oppressed communities in the US, to support residents within these communities to achieve sustainable improvements in the quality of their lives. 'Making Connections' does not seek to impose solutions on residents, but to support residents to find their own solutions.

For example, the guiding principles of 'Making Connections' - Denver are:

- **We believe in the promotion of human dignity.**
Communities will promote human dignity and respect, protect basic human rights and prevent exploitation of its members.
- **We believe in equalization of power.**
Residents will accumulate and express collective, inclusive and responsible power for the improvement of their families and communities.
- **We believe in transformed organizations and institutions.**
Residents will affect transformative and sustainable change in community organizations, public and private institutions, and their communities.
(Resident Engagement and Leadership – an international toolkit. The Annie E. Casey Foundation. 2004)

There are clear similarities here in the struggle to assert the right of children and young people to be heard, and to have a say in decisions which effect them. Change the word 'resident' to 'children and young people' and these principles could be usefully applied to organisations which are seeking to promote the human rights of children and young people.

The tactics, as well as the principles, are also transferable, and there is much to be learned around how, for example, to build effective partnerships, develop leadership capacity, use knowledge (particularly data and outcome information) most powerfully.

Key principles for empowering children and young people

Our experience of working together, of working with our colleagues on the Planning Group, and the wide range of partners we met on the Learning Exchange, have brought us to the point where we feel able to describe, not only some important 'tools' which can be used in promoting the human rights of children and young people, but also some important principles which ought, in our opinion, to inform work in this area:

- **Attention needs to be paid to creating opportunities for children and young people to say what they want to say.**
This is not the same as creating opportunities for children and young people to answer questions created by adults (to be consulted), but acknowledges that children and young people will have independent, and valid views about what needs to be considered – it acknowledges their right to have access to the agenda.
- **Children and young people's knowledge of their lived lives must be valued.**
Often a hierarchy of knowledge is applied, with priority (and therefore resources) being allocated on the basis of the 'knowledge' and priorities of adult decision-makers, with children and young people's 'knowledge' often ascribed a lower status. For example, in the debate about the running of schools, academic attainment and comparative performance (which tends to be of primary concern to the adults) is often described as an important issue, whilst young peoples' concerns about the state of school toilets, for example, is often portrayed as frivolous.
- **Projects must work in ways that are accessible and inclusive.**
Rather than design approaches which fit in to the adult political mind frame (e.g. youth forums, school councils, youth parliaments), and which often demand skills and attitudes which effectively exclude some young people, creative approaches should be adopted which allow and encourage opportunities for different groups of young people to be imaginative and create their own approaches.
- **The work must be focused on achieving change.**
The primary purpose of any initiative in this area must be to support children and young people to achieve change which is meaningful to them. 'Taking part' or 'being consulted' is not an end in itself, and if it does not lead to change, the chances are that the process has been tokenistic.
- **The work should challenge the popular view of children and young people as lacking in knowledge, ability or experience.**
The main reason why children and young people are not regularly and routinely involved in decisions that effect them is the underlying assumption that they lack the knowledge and will have nothing to say, or that they lack the competence, and will be unwilling to take part in the debate. Opportunities need to be created (like the International Learning Exchange, but also on a much more local, day-to-day basis) where young people can challenge and transform this assumption, by demonstrating their knowledge and competence.

Recommendations

- *The International Initiative should hold a follow-up conference – where are we now? A young people’s committee should be set up, with the task of ensuring that the learning from differing countries is shared between then and now.*
- *The UK Government should host a national conference focusing on involving young people within the UK using the international initiative as an example.*
- *UK Government should take steps to ensure that governance arrangements for major institutions which affect the lives of young people, are reviewed to include and involve young people in governance.*
- *The tool kit and the five principles outlined in this report are used to achieve the above.*
- *The affect of the above is regularly monitored to insure it is not just tokenistic.*

Appendix 1

Brief summaries of the other study-tour sites visited by the UK team.

Study Tour Site: Hartford, Connecticut.

The study tour was hosted by Ana-Maria Garcia and her colleagues from Making Connections in Hartford. The hospitality, kindness and thoughtfulness provided by Ana-Maria and her team was impeccable, and led to a thoroughly enjoyable visit.

It was also a hugely informative visit, and this brief report attempts to identify the key issues.

Hartford is one of the poorest cities in the US but located in the wealthiest state in the Union – Connecticut. In 1999, almost 30% of families in the city were living below the poverty line, and in some areas as many as 42% of families are in poverty (Liu and Garcia, Annie E Casey, 2003). Making Connections works in the poorest communities.

We saw example after example that clearly demonstrated the essence of the ‘making connections’ approach. I would sum this up as providing support and resources to people in the communities to empower them to shape the agenda and determine their own solutions. It is a respectful approach, that understands and acknowledges the rights and potential of people living in the most difficult circumstances to be powerful advocates and change-agents on their own behalf. The philosophy is based on ***Children do well when their families are strong and families do well when they live in supportive neighbourhoods***

We heard from the Community Partnership about their ‘Time dollar’ self-help scheme, a system of skills bartering that provides a community currency which everyone can use. We heard from young people who had worked through the Partnership to facilitate a ‘youth summit’ at which heavy-duty issues such as violent crime, substance abuse and HIV/AIDS were addressed in a direct manner. We met a group of young people who had used their rapidly-developing media skills to campaign for the closure of a local youth prison. We met members of a community project which was humanising the child-protection system, and creating opportunities for more creative solutions to family tensions.

All of this work was being supported by workers who clearly respected the expertise of local residents, and were working imaginatively to ‘make connections’ and harness resources in new and innovative ways.

We had one session with the local philanthropic society which was particularly challenging. The members of the society described the work they do persuading local businesses to contribute funds to support community projects. Liam’s contention that this was a proper and legitimate role for the state, and that philanthropy, apart from being potentially unreliable, also throws up some ethical dilemmas (is it alright to take money from any industry?) provoked a lively debate, and one that clearly showed up some of the cultural/political differences between the US and the UK.

Coming from a voluntary organisation Ros was overwhelmed to learn that over \$26 million is raised each year in Hartford. The discussion about who shapes public policy and who pays for services was indeed thought provoking.

We had a useful discussion on the importance of building relations with the media and ensuring young people and residents gain confidence to give their own messages and help overcome the negative images so often projected by the media.

By way of contrast, our hosts also arranged for us to tour the campus of Yale University, an Ivy League institution attended by the upper classes of American society, including in the past such luminaries as George W Bush. The starkness of the contrast between the poverty of the lives of the inhabitants of Frog Hollow and the privileged existence of the Yale student population was a powerful demonstration of the extent of the gap between the two Americas.

Liam Cairns and Ros Cassey