

Engaging young people at festivals and fairs

AN EXAMPLE OF ENGAGEMENT WITH PACIFIC CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE AT POLYFEST
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The Children's Commissioner promotes the participation of children and young people in decisions that affect them. When done well, it upholds their right to have a say and be heard, it advances the best interests of children and young people and produces better decision-making overall. We endeavour to model best practice for engaging children and young people, as well as encouraging other organisations to do the same. Find more case studies on our website www.occ.org.nz

Introduction

We wanted to hear from Pacific children and young people about their cultural identity. With an opportunity to participate in the annual Polyfest event in Auckland, we decided to use this festival to test a number of engagement methods, and hear from as many young people as possible about their views.

ABOUT POLYFEST

Polyfest is the largest and most celebrated Pacific festival in the world, held in Auckland every year. After 42 years, it has grown to involve 61 schools, 214 groups and 9,000 students who perform on six stages over four days.

There are stages for Māori, Niue, Samoan, Tongan and Cook Island cultures as well as a diversity stage which celebrates Fijian, Tokelau, Chinese, Indian and Korean cultures. The festival opens at 7am and goes through till 6pm, with cultural and food stalls open throughout the event.

This environment and atmosphere attracts over 90,000 spectators who are mostly the family of the participants who have practiced for months to represent their culture and the culture of others.

About the Office of the Children's Commissioner

The 1.1 million children and young people under 18 make up 24% of New Zealand. The Children's Commissioner Judge Andrew Becroft and his office advocate for their interests, ensure their rights are upheld, and help them have a say on matters that affect them.

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OUR FESTIVAL ENGAGEMENT

Attending Polyfest gave our team a unique opportunity to connect with children and young people, as well as their family members, and the schools and organisations supporting young people in the community. We expected that young people attending Polyfest would be already primed to talk about their cultural identity.

We designed our engagement around activities that would give young people the best way to express their views, and be inclusive of people from diverse backgrounds and life experiences. We had an exhibitor tent at Polyfest in collaboration with the Ministry of Youth Development, and during the 2 days in February 2016, our team was able to interact with over 600 children and young people.

Method

Our engagement on culture was designed to focus on the views of Pacific children and young people in an environment where they were comfortable having those conversations.

We had the benefit of the Office of the Children's Commissioner [OCC] staff members who specialise in child and youth engagement designing and leading the engagement. The staff member that led the face to face engagement at Polyfest has strong connections with the Samoan community, and speaks fluent Samoan. This was a key factor in making the young people and community stakeholders comfortable in engaging at the stall.

We considered the nature of the event and how we could attract children and young people to our tent and interest them in participating in any engagement activities. We wanted to test a number of methods that were fast, easy, suit a range of ages (from primary school aged up to 18 year olds), and fit with the environment. The stall was set up with a number of activities designed to support the young people to express their views as well as discuss their thoughts and ideas with a member of the team.

ACTIVITIES

More than 600 children young people visited the stall over the two days that the we were present at Polyfest. Many participated in the activities that were available in the stall, while others chose to use the 'hang-out' space. Young people who completed one of the activities were rewarded with a 'Kai Token' valued at \$2 each. These could be used at food stalls to purchase some food or a beverage.

- *Information stall* — 200 young people stopped by the stall to look at the information provided and to ask about the Office of the Children's Commissioner. The stall itself was set up to attract young people's attention with banners, bean bags, and colorful participation activities.

The banner drew many young people as they were curious about what it meant, whilst others were drawn by the lollies or 'Kai Token' advertised on the table. They engaged in conversation over the table and took some information with them.

The relaxed atmosphere also encouraged the children and young people to spend longer in the stall. The event was busy, with thousands of people, and the young people really liked having a space in the shade where they could get a break from all of the festivities.

- *Voting polls*—225 young people participated in voting polls by using coloured sticker dots on A3 posters to show that they agreed with a statement. Ten statements across four topic areas were placed on the posters, and when a young person agreed with the statement they would place a sticker-dot. As the young people completed the activity, a member of the team engaged them in conversation around the statements.
- *Postcards* — 27 young people completed a Postcard. These contained questions and we provided felt pens for young people to complete them and leave with the team. Questions were similar to the statements used in the voting poll and prompted young people to provide their opinions and ideas through written answers.
- *Hang-out space*— 139 young people participated in group conversations within the 'hang-out' space designed by our team. Within the space were five bean bags, a charging station for phones, lollies and chocolates, water, music, giant Connect Four, giant Jenga, and a member of our team.

The majority of group conversations consisted of 5-10 young people from a school looking for a space to just relax in the shade and take a break from the festival. While they were less interested in the other activities (generally seeing them as too much work) they were happy to sit and converse about the issues and statements while playing a game or lying on a bean bag.

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- *Survey* —110 young people completed an online survey answering questions about their culture, their views on the voting age, and whether learning te reo Māori should be a compulsory subject at school . Two iPads were available for young people to complete the surveys and a member of the team was present to assist. We also took paper versions of the survey in case the internet connection dropped out or young people preferred to use pen and paper.

Outcomes

The Ministry of Youth Development collaborated with us so we could have a stall at Polyfest and interact with over 600 young people. The majority of children and young people we engaged with were of Pacific cultures, with the second largest group being Māori. There was a huge number of cultures represented. The young people ranged in age from 10 to 18 years old and were students at local intermediate and secondary schools.

We were pleased that so many young people were open to discussing their culture and community. We believe this was due to the festival being a positive and safe space that celebrated their identity and voice, as well as our engagement design methods.

ENGAGEMENT WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

The intended outcomes of the engagement were:

- to provide young people with an opportunity to share their views and feelings about their culture/s;
- to learn more about how young Pacific People view their cultures and other current affairs;
- to support the Office of the Children's Commissioner to deliver culturally competent advice on a range of policy topics.

We achieved these outcomes, and incorporated what we heard through this engagement, in our *Mai World* culture report. Read the report *Child and youth voices on their positive connections to culture in Aotearoa* at:

www.occ.org.nz/publications/reports/child-and-youth-voices-culture/



COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

While the primary intention of attending Polyfest was engaging with children and young people, this event also provided other benefits. The opportunity to engage with other stakeholders provided rich context about the lived experience of Pacific children and young people, and established important connections for future engagement.

While these connections with the youth and community organisations were serendipitous, they provided some excellent contacts and opportunities.

Influence of the engagement

Hearing children and young people's views on a range of topics ensures our office provides advice to stakeholders/organisations that is culturally relevant and child-centred. It also increases the Office's ability to work in New Zealand's uniquely diverse cultural settings -in this instance, with a particular emphasis on Pacific Peoples.

From this event, we have increased confidence in attending festivals or fairs and using this as an environment to engage with the children and young people attending.

Planning in advance and considering the interests and needs of the young people meant that:

- We designed a space that interested young people, and encouraged them to stop at the stall.
- There was a mix of activities to appeal to a range of ages and participation levels.
- We provided something for the young people to show they were valued – a genuine listening ear, a place to relax, to charge their phone, lollies and water, and Kai Tokens.
- Most engagement activities were fast, easy and fun.

While we tested a number of engagement methods, in future events, we would focus on a smaller number of activities, and have more staff in attendance.



We also learnt that the festival or fair environment provided opportunities for other engagement and relationship building with children and young people's families, their schools, and youth and community organisations, and we will take a more purposeful approach to this in future events.

Finally, having a team member well-connected and comfortable in the community will add to success of the engagement at any event.

The Children's Commissioner seeks the voices of children and young people through **Mai World: Child and Youth Voices**.

Mai World takes a child-centred approach to hearing children and young people in order to understand their world.

More information: www.occ.org.nz/4youth/maiworld/