

# Welcome to Mai World!

Kelsey Brown, Peter Foese and the Mai World Team

The current members of the Mai World team are Peter Foese, Kelsey Brown, Noel Woods, Laura Gingell, Eddy Davis Rae, Waimarie Mete, and Ruby Sands. The team is led by Peter Foese and Kelsey Brown, who joined the Office of the Children's Commissioner on the same day, and have been a team ever since. Together, they have built on and expanded the work of previous OCC staff members, including Donna Provoost, Awhina Buchanan, and Emma Hope. Since 2016, they have had an intentional focus of combining their unique skill sets to build a theory of practice that is grounded in Aotearoa. Every new team member that we have had join us has brought with them their unique worldview, whakapapa, experiences, and knowledge, which, combined with the contribution of every mokopuna that we have met along this journey, has added to the richness of Mai World, and makes it what it is.

**At the Office of the Children's Commissioner [OCC] we believe that the best way to ensure a good life for mokopuna is to listen to and value their voice in the things that matter. But we often hear that mokopuna don't feel like government listens to them or gives them a genuine say. This needs to change.**

This article will explore the evolution of how the OCC has enacted our obligations for enabling children's participation.

We will first explore the evolution of our approach from ad hoc engagements, to a formal Youth Advisory Group, to our current Mai World team, and growing participation hub.

We will then describe how our theory of practice has developed over the last 6 years, how it builds on a range of participation theory – both domestically and internationally and is demonstrated in the approaches that we took in some key projects along the way. The projects highlight the evolving nature of child participation over the course of the four-year period examined. For example, one general trend was the shift from a predominantly or exclusively child-focused approach in earlier projects to a more community

and whānau-focused approach in the latter projects. The wider policy and decision-making environment shifted during this time as well, with listening to children's voices becoming more accepted as important and/or necessary in policy development processes.

We will then share some practical resources that we have developed and use in our own projects, that we hope will be helpful to youth workers and others who are working to ensure mokopuna have their views considered in decision making.

We will conclude by outlining our moemoea for mokopuna participation as Mai World, and as practitioners in Aotearoa.

## Mokopuna have a right to be heard.

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) provides children and young people with the right to express a view, and to have their view given due weight in decisions that affect them. Enabling children's participation in decision making not only upholds their right to have a say and be heard, but also advances their welfare and best interests and leads to better decision-making overall.

However, a child's right to participate is rarely fully upheld in policy development and decisions made by the government, despite being recognised by international law through Article 12 of the UNCRC, Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and in New Zealand's domestic legislation, including in the Children's Commissioner's Act 2003 (soon to be repealed and replaced by the Oversight of Oranga Tamariki System and Children and Young People's Commission Bill), the Care of Children Act 2004, the Oranga Tamariki Act 1989 and the Education and Training Act 2020 (s5(6)(a)).

## Evolution of Children's participation at the OCC

As best practice and theory around child and youth participation has evolved, so too has the OCC's approach to engaging with mokopuna. This section explores how questions around the authenticity, effectiveness and inclusivity of youth participation are reflected on and responded to in the evolution of our practice.

Early Years: While the OCC has always been a strong advocate for mokopuna, our approach to hearing their

voices was ad hoc. UNCRC had only recently been ratified here in Aotearoa and the obligation to allow mokopuna perspectives to inform the activities of the Commissioner was less pronounced. As such, the Commissioner engaged with mokopuna sporadically but there was no mechanism through which these perspectives were actively sought and valued. This approach reflected a commonly held sentiment held within the youth and public sector of "meaning well" but highlighted the need for more robust approach to hearing the voices of mokopuna.

In 2012 the OCC established a Young Person's Advisory Group [YPAG] – a mechanism that is still widely used by youth organisations and local and national government. The YPAG enabled the OCC to engage regularly with mokopuna so our decisions and advocacy incorporated their current lived experience. It supported in-depth work on a limited number of topics but was not flexible enough to hear the perspectives of mokopuna on issues as they arose. The formal structure of YPAG, and the criteria required to take part limited participation from younger or more vulnerable children.

In 2014 the OCC reviewed how we engaged mokopuna and decided to disestablish the YPAG because of its limitations around inclusivity and accessibility. The Children and Young People's Voices Project (Voices Project) was established in 2015 as an easier and effective way to hear their views on a range of topics. The Voices Project involved partnering with schools (particularly schools in low socio-economic areas) to hear from mokopuna through online surveys. This allowed the office to hear from a wider range of mokopuna on a more flexible basis.

In 2017, the OCC established the Mai World team who were tasked with conducting face to face and community engagements alongside the school surveys. Mai World draws heavily on Te Ao Māori and Ngā Mātauranga o Te-Moana-Nui-A-Kiwa, the creation of Mai World firmly drew upon the needs and cultural norms of Pacific and Māori mokopuna to shape engagements and continues to evolve today.

## Our current Mai World approach

Our Mai World participation hub is the way that the Children's Commissioner upholds their statutory obligation to hear from children and young people.

**We listen to, engage with, and amplify the voices of mokopuna to share them with decision makers.**

Our team works with mokopuna from all around Aotearoa to understand what they think about a range of topics. We ensure mokopuna are supported to have their perspectives sought in the way that works for them. We then share their thoughts so they can guide government and community decision making. These voices also guide all of the work we do as an office.

The name Mai World emphasises the importance of children and young people's voices. It encapsulates what it means to be child centred by focusing on children and young people within their whānau, community, society, within their world.

The word 'my' in English identifies the subject in relation to what sits around it. The kupu 'mai' in Māori and in the Pacific world transcends language and is again, coloured by what sits around it - aroha mai (love towards me), whakarongo mai (listen to me), titiro mai (look at me), kōrero mai (speak to me) - just as worlds around mokopuna shape them. As can be seen by these phrases, the use of the word 'mai' makes a statement directional. This is true in the case of Mai World where the flow of knowledge is from the speaker to the listener, from the mokopuna who are speaking, to the adults in the room.

**When we support mokopuna to embrace their own world and tell us about it- we pass the power, from our world to theirs.**

## Community Partners

Mai World recognises mokopuna are the primary experts of their lives and lived experiences. However, whānau and the community of mokopuna are critical both for their well-being and their authentic participation within engagements. Youth workers, community organisations, and those who hold trusted relationships with mokopuna allow us to have confidence in our engagement processes for a number of reasons.

First, it is an acknowledgement of Te Ao Taiohi – the fact that mokopuna do not exist in isolation but that their identity is tied up in their whakapapa, their support networks and their whānau. Community partners help provide context for this ecosystem around mokopuna and serve as a reminder of our status as manuhiri in this space.

Second, community partners understanding of their mokopuna help to enable their authentic participation within our engagements. It is the body language, personalities and silent looks within our engagements that add nuance to what mokopuna explicitly say and these can often only be interpreted by those who know the mokopuna best. Mai World works with the village around the child and recognises this village as experts in these young people's lives.

Third, it is the community partners who provide ongoing support for the mokopuna when we leave. The nature of our roles mean we are only ever visitors in the lives of mokopuna and yet some of the conversations we have around issues such as wellbeing, racism and day to day can have lasting effects on the outlook of mokopuna. It is essential, therefore, that mokopuna have safe spaces and people with whom they can carry on the conversation or receive support from when necessary.

This article serves as both a resource but also a mihi to you as a trusted person for mokopuna in your own communities. It is you who enable them to have their say and ultimately allow whai wāhitanga to be realised.

## Practical resources

We have chosen to share some practical resources that we have developed and use in our own projects, that we hope will be helpful to youth workers and others who are working to ensure mokopuna have their views considered in decision making.

- ▶ **Resource 1:** Ethical considerations for hearing the voices of mokopuna within your own organisations.
- ▶ **Resource 2:** Consent form template to ensure mokopuna are providing informed consent to be involved in your engagements.
- ▶ **Resource 3:** Recording template to record the perspectives of mokopuna within your engagement programmes.

These resources are found on pages 102-105.

## Where to next?

We will conclude by outlining our moemoea for mokopuna participation as Mai World, and as practitioners in Aotearoa.

Our vision is a participation hub for Aotearoa to ensure that:

- children and young people are supported to have their perspectives sought in the way that works for them, listened to, and given due weight in all decisions that affect them
- organisations engaging with children and young people are supported to develop good practice, including appropriate ethical and consent considerations, fit-for-purpose methods of engagement (which consider children's development and diversity, including language and culture), and appropriate reporting of views
- resources and views gathered are shared among government agencies, academics, and community organisations
- decision-makers have access to, and give due consideration to, the views of children and young people.

The Hub would expand beyond our existing Mai World engagement to offer support, guidance, information, and training to others, so children and young people's voices are heard in a consistent and systematic way across government and the youth sector. The Mai World team would build our emerging capacity to engage Māori and Pacific children and young people in the language and customs of their ancestors, especially those who attend immersion schools and centres. Mai World would be able to undertake engagement on topics of interest and share those widely. In doing so it can also model good practice in action.

We want to support government agencies to access the voices and views of children to inform policy, programmes, and practice – whether this is providing support to officials, sharing voices already gathered, or sharing voices from engagement that we have undertaken. All engagement with children and young people can be done well and be ethical and meaningful for all involved.

## Conclusion

This article identifies the domestic legislation aimed at upholding the right of mokopuna to have their say, provides a timeline of the evolution of OCC approach to mokopuna engagement and outlines some considerations and resources for participation mahi within your own organisations. We ended with our vision for a participation hub within Aotearoa that promotes best practice across the sector. Youth development practitioners play a crucial role in ensuring that the views of the mokopuna they work with every day are heard in the decision making that affects them. We hope this article helps to both solidify a commitment to authentic whai wāhitanga and increase confidence within the sector to facilitate it ethically and effectively. If you want to hear more or get involved check out our website or send us an email at [voices@occ.org.nz](mailto:voices@occ.org.nz).

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*Kelsey Brown has whakapapa to Ngāti Mutunga, Scotland and Ireland, and grew up in sunny Ōtepoti. Kelsey has a LLB, BA and Post Grad Cert in Children's Issues, and is about to complete her Master of Laws on children's rights and participation in Aotearoa. Kelsey was an independent advocate at Puketāi, a state run care and protection residence, and volunteered for the Community Law Centre. Kelsey moved to Whanganui-a-Tara and worked in policy on issues affecting children and their whānau before joining the Children's Commissioner's Office. Kelsey, alongside Peter-Clinton Foaeese, has had a lead role in designing, carrying out and authoring all of the OCC's large scale engagement projects and reports, such as Education Matters to Me, What Makes a Good Life, and Te Kuku o Te Manawa. Kelsey carries the advice and opinions of all she's interacted with, and is a staunch advocate for having their views heard. Kelsey has recently returned from parental leave, where she spent the best year with her son.*

*Peter Foaeese From the villages of Faleula and Vailoa Faleata, Peter-Clinton Foaeese is a first generation Samoan kiwi, born and raised in Pito-one, Te Awakairangi, Whanganui-a-tara. Despite a decade's experience before then, he embraced his call from Jesus to be a youth worker in his late twenties. With God's help, he developed his mind to match his heart for young people and completed a Diploma in Youth Work and Bachelor in Youth Development. He has 15+ years' experience walking alongside mokopuna in multiple spaces including te ao Māori and te ao Pasifika, refugee and migrant settlement, mental health support, family violence sexual violence, environmental sustainability, disability advocacy, education initiatives and civics education. He thanks his parents for role-modelling servant leadership, and has been blessed tenfold as he journeyed with mokopuna and whanau through grass-roots community action, participating in diverse national activities across Aotearoa NZ, and supporting child and youth participatory action research across the world. He has been at the Office of the Children's Commission since 2016 serving in the Child and Youth Voices, Participation and Engagement team called Mai World.*

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