



Commissioner for Children and Young People  
Western Australia

Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA)

**'Educating for Innovation' seminar**

Delivered Friday 4 March, 2011

Good afternoon. Thank you Amy, I too also acknowledge the Noongar people as the traditional owners of this country.

Welcome, and thank you all for coming here today.

I am delighted to be hosting this seminar with our seminar partners the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts and Edith Cowan University, and in partnership with the Perth International Arts Festival.

I would like to thank Rio Tinto for their support, and to extend a warm welcome to Anna Cutler, our keynote speaker, who has travelled from the UK to be with us today. Having visited the Tate Modern and the Tate Britain on many occasions, I am really looking forward to Anna's presentation.

Many of you will be familiar with the considerable evidence demonstrating the value of arts learning experiences for children and young people.

The Lincoln Institute for the Arts in Education<sup>1</sup> in the US says that the evidence for arts based learning is compelling. Their findings add to the substantial body of work showing how the arts contribute to children and young people's achievement and success with enduring and long term benefits.

Knowing the benefits the arts can bring to the lives of children and young people, I welcomed the opportunity to co-host today's seminar on *using the arts to build innovation capacity in children and young people*.

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<sup>1</sup> *Critical Evidence; how the Arts Benefit Student Achievement*

This afternoon you will hear local and international perspectives on using the arts. The program will also highlight Western Australian examples of using arts with children and young people that are innovative and inspiring.

This is the second year I have sponsored an event in the Perth International Arts Festival, in recognition of the opportunities the arts offer children and young people to express themselves, develop life skills and showcase their talents.

PIAF also provides opportunities for children and young people who don't usually access arts events to see amazing, challenging and sometimes unusual performances – to give them a sense of what's possible.

I would like to acknowledge – in particular – Perth Festival's director Shelagh Magadza's willingness to bring children into the centre of the Festival.

As Commissioner for Children and Young People it is my role to enhance the wellbeing of the half a million citizens under the age of 18 who live in Western Australia.

This is no small mandate and a goal that can only be achieved in partnership with others. Hence the importance of events such as today's seminar, which aims to foster understanding through the exchange of ideas and facilitate partnerships towards shared goals.

The role of Commissioner was established under the Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006.

The Commissioner's role is to influence and promote the wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia, by ensuring policies, programs, services and laws take into account their needs. This involves being an advocate for children and young people under the age of 18, and representing their needs in the community and to government.

A key focus of my role as Commissioner – and set out in the legislation which governs my statutory responsibilities – is to promote the participation of children and young people.

Since becoming Commissioner in 2007 I have travelled extensively across Western Australia. Everywhere I go, the message is the same: children and young people tell me they want to contribute to their communities. They tell me they have important things to say, that they have good ideas and should be regarded as active citizens.

The arts provide children and young people with unique and multiple ways of exploring, expressing, communicating and understanding their own and others ideas and feelings.

This year's Talking Couches project at PIAF which I have sponsored is one example of how the arts can be used to give a voice to the experiences and aspirations of children and young people.

Talking Couches which features five themed couches created by 12 to 17 year olds from Perth's southern suburbs. The couches were designed by three groups of young people – a group of young people from Sudan, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe, most of whom were refugees; a group of

Aboriginal students from Melville Senior High school; and young people from Youth Reach South in Cockburn – all of whom worked with artist Lewis Horne.

The couches have been designed with a built-in audio system that tells the stories of the young people who designed them. Their stories are unique, personal, funny and thoughtful.

Talking Couches is a wonderful example of innovative and lateral thinking, with the couches showing us that using the arts can be much more than a painting class.

You can see that the participants have transformed the couches from unwanted and unloved pieces of furniture into works of art that people want to take a look at, sit on and listen to. In doing so, the process has seen the young people sharing their thoughts, ideas and experiences with an audience who would not otherwise hear from them.

The Vampire and Bunny couches tell us stories about the experience of settling in Australia, and the differences between life in Africa and Australia. One story tells us about being in Sudan during the referendum for independence. The Basketball couch shares the excitement of playing basketball and playing in a football grand final.

Talking Couches also involved “hands on” practical lessons – with the Sudanese girls telling me one of the best things they enjoyed doing was working with the materials and learning to use power tools to make and design their couch.

Festival-goers can sit on and hear the stories of the young people at different locations around Perth.

We know that children and young people can be creative, energetic, original and imaginative. We should not, however, under-estimate how children and young people can think innovatively about the issues and services they use or are directly affected by.

The challenge to us is to provide experiences and opportunities for children and young people that harness their creativity and innovation capacity. And, importantly, to recognise that their ways of looking at and understanding the world have value and can be relevant for us all.

I want to share the experience of the iBUILD project, which my office undertook in partnership with the Curtin University School of Architecture last year. The project brought together fourth year Architecture students and a group of children and young people in a workshop designed to give them a say about how the spaces and places in their communities can be improved.

Schools, houses, shops, walkways, railways, parks, recreational and community centres are all part of our built environment. I have identified this an area of policy focus given the built environment has a significant impact on children and young people's development, their quality of life and their experience and enjoyment of the world.

The iBuild project started with a workshop, during which Architecture students worked with their "clients" – the children and young people – to develop their ideas for the built environment. The Architecture students then took these ideas away to further develop concepts and create an

iBuild display. The project culminated in a display hosted by the Royal Institute of Architects during Architecture Week.

As you can see from the images, the concepts being generated are exciting, creative, fun and expressive. They are ideas designed by and for children and young people, and they have none of the constraints you might find when adults are asked to think about and design spaces for children and young people.

One of the participants, a 6 year old boy, designed his ideal park as a giant, metal skeleton – with the thigh bones as slides, the ribs as a maze to explore, and after climbing up stairs you went through the ear before sliding down a giant tongue. It is truly innovative!

As well as giving children and young people the opportunity to create and design spaces that directly appeal to them – the project sought to give Architecture students “hands on” experience in participatory processes that are child-centred and child-friendly. These are skills I hope they will take with them and make use of when they move into architecture practice.

After the iBuild exhibition, we asked the Architecture students to reflect on their experiences. An invaluable point was made by one student – she said that *“through iBuild, I discovered that children have an entirely different way of thinking, and through them we have the ability to redefine our methods of design, opening new doors.”* Another student was honest in saying - *“This is an amazing learning experience for me... I never expected to learn so much from kids, 7 year old kids!”*

The kids and their parents also told us about their experience of iBuild, with the mother of one young boy saying that, as a parent, how fantastic it was to see her son have a chance to share in something where he was

completely in his element. Building, inventing and constructing is his passion, and the project provided a unique opportunity for him to explore and delight in this interest.

One of the guiding principles of the Commissioner for Children and Young People Act and, therefore part of my role as Commissioner is to “ensure that the contributions made by children and young people to the community should be recognised for their value and merit.”

By involving children and young people and creating opportunities for them to participate, we also recognise and value their contributions. This includes believing in what children and young people can imagine and create – and trusting them as innovators.

Geoff Metcalf, Principal of Roseworth Primary School is going to talk more this afternoon about his experience of using arts programs in a school setting. We worked last year with Geoff and his students, sponsoring the visit to Perth by Toronto based company Mammalian Diving Reflex for two PIAF productions - Haircuts by Children and the Children’s Choice Awards.

Haircuts involved Year 4 students offering free haircuts to the public after a few hours training from professional hair stylists. This is a light hearted, fun but challenging example of using the arts to shift the balance of power, and ask adults to trust children. It was interesting that many adults, when I told them about the project, were amazed and shocked that I would let kids cut my hair.



The Children's Choice Awards put children at the centre of the festival as Festival VIPs and judges. The 9 – 11 year olds had red-carpet treatment at PIAF events, and then critiqued the shows on a blog and created inspiring award categories. Some of the awards were The Show that Made Me Dance the Most, the Singer with the Best Pitch, and the Most Shiny Dress.

The award for Best Role Model was presented to Antony and the Johnsons – many of you will know Antony – because, in the words of the students – *"he followed his dreams and other people might want to be just like him in the future. He loves music, and you can tell by the way he plays the piano."* The children presented trophies to the winners at a Children's Choice Awards event held at His Majesty's Theatre.

We know there is strong evidence that the arts contributes to children and young people's wellbeing. Research shows that the arts are an effective and proven means to help children and young people express themselves, as well as develop socially and academically.

Over the last year I have heard from 1,800 children and young people on wellbeing – with nearly one-thousand children and young people taking part in research I commissioned on what wellbeing means to them, and more recently more than 700 children and young people as part of my Inquiry into Mental Health and Wellbeing.

When talking about themselves and their future, children and young people have unique insight into what needs to be done to improve their own wellbeing. The arts gives us all an opportunity to support and enhance children and young people's wellbeing, and in doing so, build the

foundations for happy, healthy futures for Western Australia's young citizens.

Thank you.

I hope you enjoy this afternoon's seminar.