



Partnering with Children: 'My Story'.

Location: Great Start, Taita.

Theme: Leading in and Leaderful.

Kids say the darnedest things. Quite often disarmingly frank, Great Start Taita has found that the mouths of babes can lead to local improvements that are relevant and effective. Not only that, having children involved throughout the project's life teaches both them and the adults involved a thing or two about what it is to lead.

When 11 year old Kaisa Fa'atui from Taita, Lower Hutt said to the local Mayor at a meeting in 2009 "You have a hard job. Is it frustrating when your councillors don't agree with you?" the room erupted in laughter. It was a spot on comment expressed sympathetically to an audience who were interested in listening to him.

Kaisa was one of 33 children, from three local Taita primary schools, who had spent the previous two terms thinking and talking about leadership as part of 'My Story'. 'My Story' is a project that encourages children to be active participants in their community, rather than the passive recipients of adult hopes and dreams. And, since 2008, children involved in 'My Story' had been major partners with the Council in the development of a park in Taita. The park was one of the issues they were discussing that day with Councillors, the Mayor and staff.

'My Story' emerged from research by social work students in 2007. As part of the research, 40 students from four schools in Taita/Pomare met to tell their stories and share their dreams for Taita/Pomare. They talked to each other, their families, their schools and the wider community. They told what they were most proud of, what they wanted to change, what their dreams were and what they thought could be done to make those dreams a reality. They took photos of the places they liked most and least in Taita. It was soon pretty clear that there was power in the stories and hope in the ideas. The stories helped define a community identity, its values and visions from the

children's perspectives – and they were practical and down to earth.

Amongst other things, the children were interested in making the playgrounds and parks more fun and safe. And most of the children wanted to continue being involved after the 'research' had been completed. So, from August 2008 and with Great Start's support, three primary schools and 33 students in Taita said yes to being involved in 'My Story'. The plan was to help provide a structured, ongoing way for children to connect with and contribute to their community and to pursue some of the dreams for Taita they had identified as being important in a leaderful way.

According to Joseph Raelin (2004), leaderful leadership is about learning to let go and being concurrent, collective, collaborative and compassionate. He elaborates to explain these four 'c's as below:

- The *concurrent* tenet of leaderful practice suggests that in any community, more than one leader can operate at the same time, so leaders willingly and naturally share power with others. Indeed, power can be increased by everyone working together as diverse experiences and knowledges contribute and are taken to action by many hands.
- Leaderful leadership is *collective*. Decisions are made by whoever has the relevant responsibility. Leadership may thus emerge from multiple members, especially when important needs arise, whether preparing for a strategic mission, creating meaning for the group, or proposing a change in direction. Although someone may initiate an activity, others become involved and share leadership with the initiator.
- Leaderful leadership is also *collaborative*. All community viewpoints are equally valid and each person brings a particular knowledge. Leaderful community members thus seek to engage in a public dialogue in which they willingly open their beliefs and values to the scrutiny of others. Their listening to others becomes rapt and their collaboration is fully involved. Collaborative leaders realize that everyone counts.
- Finally, leaderful managers are *compassionate*. By demonstrating compassion, one extends unadulterated commitment to preserving the dignity of others. Each member of the community is valued regardless of background or social standing, and all viewpoints are considered regardless of whether they conform to current thought processes. In practicing compassion, leaders take the stance of a learner who sees the adaptability of the community as dependent upon the contribution of others.

Working with the Council on a new park was acting on one of the wishes the children had identified in an earlier collaboration. With support from Great Start, the children had convinced Councillors at an earlier meeting that a park was essential for Taita. And all day in the Council they practised the leadership principles they had been developing through 'My Story'. These included: empathy, respect, care for each other, listening and taking an interest in people with different views – and expecting to take responsibility for themselves. The children also expected to be included in a valid manner alongside and within the systems of park-making during this day at Council and as they continued to be involved in the park design and development over and beyond the construction period.

This leaderful approach has built children's capacity and capability to be active participants in their

community at the same time as improving the ability of adults in various community positions to include children in the design and delivery of community improvements. In fact the park is an ongoing project that several children's groups in Taita have worked on: from surveying possible positions, collecting stories, planting trees and enjoying picnics there. And more child-led activities are planned. These include planning playground activities for older children and utilisation of the park by the wider community as well as discussion around name changes that may include past Maori leaders of the area.

'My Story' and the resulting support, activities and outcomes are a really practical example of local children contributing to a better connected community because the things they notice are also taken notice of. In Taita, children are thinking about what they see means and then they are being supported by adults to take actions to make a positive difference. This process is nurturing and developing local connections that were once considered unlikely, including more recent engagement with the local prison, college and art centre, all of whom are involved with the children in the design and creation of carvings which will soon adorn the entrance to the park.

Now, at any time of the day, the large wooden picnic table in the park serves as a magnet for local conversation, be it amongst grandparents, teenagers or toddlers (and often all of these groups). It is that community voice which is vital in leading the pathway ahead for the park and Taita. Taking a leaderful approach and enabling the inclusion of previously unheard voices, 'My Story', Great Start and Taita Park have unearthed a huge possibility for much more local leaderfulness – firmly including that from children - that will continue in different ways into the future....watch this space!

Key Learnings:

- Continue with a good idea, build on and enable the energy to move from one stage to the next in a leaderful way.
- Recognise that all community members have potential to be leaders. Some, like children, require others, adults, to simply pave a way or negotiate a space in adult systems for their leadership to grow.

Key Outcomes:

- Children's voices heard and children actively included in Council planning and delivery
- New park facilities that are well used in ways that are constantly evolving and being added to.
- Children more aware of and involved in their communities, and through their involvement are facilitating the increased involvement of others, both children and adults.

Key Contact:

Jeanette Higham, Jeanette.Higham@greatstart.org.nz , Phone (04) (567 5437)

Reference <http://www.leaderful.org/pdf/RaelinTD.pdf>

Story by Denise Bijoux, Leigh Strange and Sue Rei. **November 2011**

