

Beyond listening: translating research into practice

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Abstract

What happens when listening to children's perspectives becomes enshrined in legislation? This paper will be based on case studies of local authorities' responses to recent legislation to listen to young children's perspectives. The Childcare Act 2006 places a duty on local authorities in England to take into account children's views of the services they receive. Case studies will be drawn from a development project, the Young Children's Voices Network co-ordinated by the National Children's Bureau. The network is designed with a local and national focus. The aim is to support local groups of practitioners to incorporate young children's views and experiences into everyday practice whilst at the same time drawing general themes to the attention of policy makers. Examples of the process of gathering children's perspectives will be given. The paper will discuss the theoretical, ethical and methodological challenges encountered in attempting to act on children's perspectives in this way.

Key words

Children's participation; listening; children's perspectives; children's workforce

Introduction

There has been a growing international research and practice interest in the issue of listening to young children over the past decade (for example Smith, Duncan and Marshall, 2005; Clark, Moss and Kjørholt, 2005). This has been followed by a recent change in legislation in England and Wales, the Childcare Act 2006, which places a duty on local authorities to take into account children's views of the services they receive. This gives a renewed impetus to early childhood institutions among others to re-examine how listening to children is embedded in their practice. The Young Children's Voices Network co-ordinated by the National Children's Bureau. The network is designed with a local and national focus. The aim is to support local groups of practitioners to incorporate young children's views and experiences into everyday practice whilst at the same time drawing general themes to the attention of policy makers. Examples of the process of gathering children's perspectives will be given. The paper will discuss the challenges encountered in attempting to re-examine practice and to point to possible theoretical and methodological approaches to support these changes.

Theoretical contexts

There are several theoretical discussions which have contributed to an emphasis on listening to children and young people, including children under six years old. Moss, Clark and Kjørholt (2005) set out a series of sometimes overlapping discourses which have contributed to this debate: the

discourse of 'voice' and participation; the emergence of the sociology of childhood and economic changes leading to a prioritisation of customer or consumer views. Added to these factors has been political discourse in which children and adults can be viewed as citizens and where early childhood institutions can be viewed as a possible foci for democratic practice:

'..institutions for education, including early childhood education, have the *possibility* to be places for the production of new knowledge.....and that democracy is important for determining how the benefits of that new knowledge are distributed.' (Moss, 2007: 4).

Moss discusses how young children as well as adults can be part of the meaning making necessary to create this new knowledge.

Policy context

Policy interest in listening to children in the UK has been somewhat slow to respond to the drive for change heralded by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. One recent development has been the introduction of the Child Care Act 2006 which places a duty on local authorities in England to take into account children's views of the services they receive. The duty came into force under the Child Care Act 2006 came into force in April 2008:

'For the first time in statute, Local Authorities must also have regard to the views of young children aged from birth to 5 in discharging their duties in relation to early childhood services (s.3(5)). This will give effect to Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that children have the right to give their views on matters that affect them, and that these views are given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.' (McAuliffe, Linsey and Fowler, 2006).

The Early Years Foundation Stage, a revised curriculum for birth – 5s also comes into force across early years services in England in September 2008, re-emphasising the duty to listen through guidance to practitioners; It includes a section on listening to young children and sustain shared thinking, endorsing participation not just in terms of the rights of the child but also in terms of child development evidenced by EPPE research and in relation to Every Child Matters Outcomes.

The emphasis in the policy changes discussed so far have pointed to listening to children. However, these changes have come into force alongside the implementation of a raft of other initiatives in the early childhood field which have extended the debate around listening to children to include listening to adults as well. The Sure Start programme, neighbourhood nurseries and more recently the introduction of Children's Centres have led to an expansion in multi-agency working in children's services. This is not a new phenomenon but the scale of the changes has heightened the importance of communication among different professional groups working with children and the need for establishing shared understandings of children and childhood.

This following section focuses on two examples of attempts to embed listening to young children at a strategic and a local level. These pilot case studies are set within the context of a national network established to support listening to young children. The case studies draw on interviews with key personnel, study visits and documentary material including policies and project reports.

A national network

Young Children’s Voices Network (YCVN) is funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families and co-ordinated by the National Children’s Bureau. The network is designed with a local and national focus. The aim is to support local groups of practitioners to incorporate young children’s views and experiences into everyday practice whilst at the same time drawing general themes to the attention of policy makers.

The Early Childhood Unit’s has been committed to the listening agenda for many years. In 2002, an in-depth study into the methods used in settings to consult with young children was undertaken and informed the ‘Listening as a Way of Life project, a precursor to YCVN. A National Advisory Group was formed, comprising of colleagues in the sector with a specific interest and expertise in the participation of young children in policy and service design and delivery. This group have continued to meet quarterly with the YCVN project manager, to inform the project over the following phases of development (see figure one).

Phase 1	2006 - 2007	YCVN Steering group first quarterly meetings. 2 Local Authorities (LAs) recruited -intensive piloting & evaluation. Development of training and support.
Phase 2	2007 - 2008	A further 16 LAs recruited - representation across each of the 9 government regions of England. Rollout of training and consultancy to pilots.
Phase 3	2008 - 2009	A further 2 LAs recruited. 2 National Networking events. Evaluation and development of training & guidance. Preparation for national roll out to remaining 130 Las.
Phase 4	2009-2011	Expansion to remaining 130 Las. Continuation of national networking events. Continuation of good practice guidance as case studies are provided by participating Las.

Figure 1: Phases of development of the Young Children’s Voices Network

The core process, which each local authority undergoes as part of the pilot programme is shown in the table below:

Step 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet with national YCVN project manager and discuss options for network structure • Appoint local lead for network • Ongoing contact with national YCVN project manager: updating on local progress, receiving YCVN newsletter, attending national networking events and participation in YCVN evaluation
Step 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set up local network and recruit practitioners
Step 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take up YCVN free training offer for practitioners and plan future workforce development
Step 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Run network programme and collect examples of good practice • Find ways to feed young children's views into local policy through strategic leads across authority

Case study one: listening at a local level

This case study has been chosen in this pilot investigation as an example of how a listening network has been established at a local level. The case study is based on a children's centre in South London who were among the first five areas to join the national Young Children's Voices Network. The case study was chosen as one of the more established networks who had begun to articulate their work on listening. It illustrates how listening to young children can move from being a taken for granted aspect of early childhood practice to the 'leitmotif' or defining characteristic which symbolises and holds together other aspects of the work with children and families.

Origins of listening

What were the local factors which were the roots of the increased interest in listening to young children? The factors can be grouped around four main headings: inclusion, managing change, pedagogy and research and citizenship.

Inclusion

The Head of the Centre identified the desire to improve inclusion as a major reason for making the work on listening to young children more explicit. There were several elements to this emphasis on inclusion. Firstly she was concerned that all children and families in the centre including those from a range of different ethnic backgrounds were included fully in the life of the centre:

'I know that at the centre there had been an equal opportunities issue that we wanted to follow up with the staff in terms of training and development. One of the ways I was pointed to look at that was [with] someone in the Ethnic Minority Achievement team in the borough.' Head of the Centre

Secondly, the emphasis on inclusion linked to children in the centre with a range of special educational needs including those with communication needs or who experienced barriers to good communication. One method for listening which had been explored were personal passports (see

Driskoll and Rudge, 2005). Thirdly, the desire for more inclusive practice had been promoted by the introduction of children under two years old to the centre.

Managing change

The expansion of the centre to include provision for children under one years' old to five was part of a major expansion of the provision which provided a further impetus for promoting a listening culture.

'The centre had changed from a really small nursery school to this huge centre with 60 odd, at one point 70 odd staff and trying to communicate effectively with that number of people never mind the number of families coming in and out of the centre you wanted to reach out to you can't take that for granted. You have to be clearer about it. So one of the driving forces for me was about the staff, it was about the community and the children to try and make sure that everyone felt listened to and valued and then of course if you are able to be doing that you are going to be meeting needs rather than just what you think it might be about.' Head of the Centre.

Listening to children was viewed by the Head as part of a listening culture which included practitioners and families. Listening was identified as a necessary leadership ingredient in order to manage the transition between a small contained nursery school and a large group of services with a diverse range of professional perspectives.

Pedagogy and research

A further impetus to promoting listening to children arose from engaging with recent research. Firstly this involved research into children's brain development and thinking skills (for example Nutbrown, 2006). This reinforced the centre's concern to discover and promote children's shared and individual interests. This had been supported by involvement with an arts project working with local artists who were investigating how young children think. Secondly the centre had engaged with research on listening to young children (for example Clark and Moss, 2001; Clark and Moss, 2005) followed by attending training and engaging with resource materials on ways of listening to young children (Lancaster, 2003).

Citizenship

The Head articulated how promoting citizenship was another impetus for a more explicit approach to listening within the centre. Linking listening to citizenship firmly placed the emphasis on promoting a listening culture which included both adults and children: 'It is not just a case of Every Child Matters but Every Person Matters'. This included children, parents and practitioners.

There appeared to be a moment in time when the different agendas of inclusion, managing change, pedagogy and research and citizenship each pointed to a renewed emphasis on listening. The Head commented on one training session:

'Everything seemed to link at one point , light bulbs going off in my head the whole time! I was working with staff on the EPPE project in terms of INSET and training. I remember at the

start of one INSET pulling it all together for the staff saying we have done this and this and this and it is opening up those doors and making us think in that way.'

Examples of practice

There were many examples given of different techniques which had helped to embed the ideas of a listening culture. The Head and practitioners identified among others the use of 'photobooks' or 'photowalk' books of photographs taken by the three and four year olds.

'Photobooks have helped us make connections between home and school as well as also with the observations of the children- the link between taking photographs, talking to the parents and what staff have observed. You just feel it is bringing you a more true picture of the child other than concepts which you might think are there.' Head of the Centre.

Older children took their own photographs whereas photobooks were assembled for younger children to document key moments.

The centre re-evaluated their use of observations and moved towards a more consistent use of narrative observations. These detailed written episodes created further opportunities for practitioners to tune in and listen to children as well as being a source for reflection with parents.

Practitioner interactions with children were also identified as an area of practice which had changed as a result of a renewed emphasis on listening. There was detailed attention given to how practitioners worded their questions to children as well as to the types of questions asked. This has led to the following question being a major focus of the annual centre improvement plan:

'Do the questions we ask children make a difference to how they learn?'

Practitioner interactions remained of central importance to listening to the older and younger children. A practitioner with responsibility for the youngest children in the centre commented:

'When there is no language listening to the different sounds and actions makes the difference.'

A greater attention to children's interests and priorities led to a wider use of small world role play with children. Giving children more time to have access to this type of play was a further strand of taking listening to children seriously.

The changes to practice were rooted in attitudinal change. The Head made the following reflection:

'And the listening culture if that is sitting in your heart then it is a very useful way of highlighting that because those interactions with the children involve lots of listening and tuning in then you are going to be much better at it rather than 'oh we are going to do this today..'

Barriers

The main barrier or challenge to embedding a culture of listening was identified by the Head of the children's centre as time or perhaps more accurately practitioner perceptions about time. One element of the extra time needed related to the documentation process: time to process children's photographs, for example, and to produce books of their photographs. However there was a more fundamental question relating to time and practitioner's attitudes to embedding listening. If practitioners viewed listening to young children as an everyday core activity, underpinning their work then 'listening' was not seen as an extra activity. However, if practitioners regarded the work on listening as yet another initiative then it could be seen as a further burden on an already full day.

This underlined practitioner misunderstandings as one of the largest barriers to developing this work on listening and highlighted the need for leadership skills to manage changing attitudes. This was particularly the case in view of the large practitioner team as the Head commented: ' Being a large staff means does everyone have a shared understanding of what this is about? '

This process had been hindered by a series of leadership changes including a reduction in the size of the senior practitioner team working at the centre. Differences of views on listening to young children were another challenge to overcome in establishing a local network with external agencies.

There were a number of practical barriers which hindered the day to day listening activities including skills relating to information technology (IT). Printers, for example, proved to be a time-consuming and sometimes frustrating element of recording the children's interests through the photobooks.

Support

It proved important in this case study example to reinforce the emphasis on listening in plans and policies. The work on listening was anchored in the annual 'centre improvement plan' which gave the work status, signalling this as a core activity rather than an added extra. This management priority was supported by the policy interest in listening such as referred to earlier.

The Head identified the role of both the national and local networks in sustaining the emphasis on listening. One of the elements of support provided by the national network was training for practitioners which explored the values behind listening as well as practical ways of acting on listening with children of different ages.

Individuals were important in supporting the listening culture including the role of a consultant, which will be discussed later. The enthusiasm and insights provided by the Head (who was a deputy Head in the centre at the start of the initiative) seemed to make a vital contribution to the initiative, supported by, among others, the Inclusion co-ordinator at the centre level and the Ethnic Minority Achievement Officer from the local authority.

Thus it was a combination of policies, plans and people which contributed to the sustained approach in this case study.

Case study two: listening at a local authority level

The second case study has been chosen as an example of establishing a listening network at strategic level. The case study presents a Children's Trust approach across one local authority with a high level of deprivation, based in North East England.

Origins of listening

The authority joined the national pilot Young Children's Voices Network in July 2007, following a participation audit across all services for 0-19s, which identified Early Years Services as an area for improvement.

There had not previously been identified an explicit culture of listening within early years settings as highlighted in the audit and services initially expressed scepticism about the project. On the basis of this finding, the Children's Trust successfully secured funding from the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) to establish a network and deliver a programme of training for practitioners working with young children across all services; including a range of childcare settings, childminders, schools, health, social care and public services.

Examples of practice

A significant success of this particular pilot is the '*leap of faith*' described by the Project Manager; which moved practitioners from a starting point of limited understanding of participation and scepticism of what it will mean for settings, to becoming a confident and skilled group positively embedding listening into their daily practice:

The training of staff has been a key catalyst in this attitudinal shift as well as informing what the network does. The programme of training provided practitioners with a variety of practical toolkits, resources and guidance on why and how to listen as well as activity based sessions on the use of music, personal dolls, singing and photobooks.

"After six months the impact of the network and training programme on culture and practice was visible with a significant growth in the confidence of practitioners in their ability to deliver effective practice and a clear passion for making young voices matter!" Project Manager

A Children's Trust brings together different a diverse range of children's services. The network encouraged peer- led learning among practitioners which could capitalise on this diversity. This was particularly successful in the sharing of ideas and practice by the Children with Disabilities Services with mainstream services. The specialist team contributed their expertise in listening to the range of ways children express themselves non- verbally. This helped practitioners to consider ways in which they could listen to babies in particular, and all children through observation of body language and non-verbal sounds. The project manager also highlighted the impact of having an early years artist educator within the group who was able to inspire creative thinking among practitioners – for example, generating ideas of how to transform adult focused communication passports into interactive games that children can more readily engage with and which include their thoughts and feelings.

The project manager has worked with the network to produce a strategic document - an Early Years Involvement Action Plan. This sets out the aims and objectives of the network and the commitment of the authority to the listening agenda. It promotes the importance of listening within the UK political framework and illustrates examples of good practice locally from each of the organisations represented in the network. This provides a strong message for the whole authority and its services and celebrates practitioners' contribution to growing a culture of listening to young voices.

Practitioners from the network are also developing Child's Eye View resources which are promotional literature about their own services, developed with children's captions and photos they have taken, designed for children to look at as well as parents. The network aims to encourage all services to reconsider how information is presented about services so that a young child's perspective is visible and central to all communication.

Barriers

Negative feeling resulting from the participation audit was initially a barrier faced by the Children's Trust due to a general misunderstanding of what is meant by 'listening': Some settings felt that they already had a good practice of listening and felt de-moralised by the audit: 'Of course we listen to children because that's what we do!' Some practitioners felt they regularly listened to young children but were not aware of how it related to a participation process. Listening can be seen as one step in a cycle of listening, recording, reflecting, taking action and feeding back. This was the case here where practitioners valued listening but did not always record, act or feedback on what young children communicated to them.

'We are much better at gathering young children's views. We now need to focus on how we use this information to make a difference'. Network member, Surestart Centre

Primary schools are a notable gap in the membership of the Network. This initially stemmed from schools not taking part in the audit, and the view that the network duplicated the role of Primary School Cluster Groups. Initial attempts to link the Cluster Groups to the Pilot Programme were unsuccessful due to schools viewing the network as a short-term project that was more relevant to childcare rather than formal education. Schools are now beginning to take interest in the network. This has been achieved through strengthening links with School Advisors and the promotion of the Primary School Council Toolkits through the Primary Cluster Groups.

The project manager has also identified other in network membership; targeted services working with asylum seekers/ refugees, gypsy travellers and black minority ethnic children. The challenge is to show services how the listening agenda is relevant to all services working with young children not just childcare providers.

Support

The CWDC funding enabled the Children's Trust to establish and deliver an intensive network programme; which included a development day plus a number of experts facilitating training sessions throughout the course. Due to the commitment of its members the network will continue without CWDC funding, with members taking turns to host meetings at their own settings and supported by a small amount of Children's Trust funding.

Networking opportunities and resources provided by the Early Childhood Unit through the Young Children's Voices Network project were also identified as a key support in developing the network.

'The opportunity to feed into national research and practice development has been an inspiration that continues to motivate and enthuse local network members'. Project manager

Discussion

This exploratory pilot study has raised several issues concerning embedding a culture of listening both locally and at a strategic level. Two questions will be discussed here which relate to leadership and collaboration and to reflection.

Who 'holds' a listening project?

This first issue relates to the role of individuals involved in promoting listening. Both of the case studies demonstrated the importance of leadership. Both the Head of the Children's Centre and the Project Manager in the local authority showed enthusiasm and persistence in managing the process of change. This was not a short term commitment but a sustained interest over years not weeks.

However the task appears daunting if not shared. The Head in case study one referred several times to the phrase 'holding' the project. At times she was the one to 'hold' the ideas and momentum whereas at other times she refers to the role of a consultant.

'I started this project in April 06 so that is quite a long time ago and I was Deputy at the time and very enthusiastic so we will do the listening project and just do this INSET day and it was very exciting and then went round a few weeks later and lets see what is happening and the practitioners said: 'What was that?'. And for me it was classic. Leadership isn't about saying this is really good it is much more than that. Two and a half years later and still its on going so that holding is something which is part of that, always holding it.'

'J. from the local authority had a budget which was very helpful. It helped fund the project starting off with a big INSET day and brought in A. to be the consultant because I think he saw that we needed someone to 'hold the project'. .even for me as the project went on she was a useful benchmark to think 'Oh the consultant is coming in, have I got my stuff ready, what have we done?'

This raises the question of whether embedding a listening culture may require the support of an external facilitator or prompter to help practitioners to reflect on both their ways of working but in particular the underpinning values which they call upon. This can be a priority where multi-agency

teams are brought together (for example, Chandler, 2006; Benson, 2006; Clark, 2008). One possible way forward may be to investigate the role of 'pedagogista' as demonstrated in the pre-schools of Reggio Emilia. Rinaldi discusses part of a pedagogista's role is to act as mediators 'with responsibility for the relationship between the inside and outside world' (2006: 167).

Further assistance in sustaining or 'holding' a listening culture may come from collaborations with other professionals including artists. Both case studies referred to how working with artists had made important contributions to exploring different ways of approaching listening to young children.

What priority can be given to considering attitudes as well as activities which encourage a listening culture?

Despite the focus of the two case studies being at different organisational levels both pointed to the importance of space to reflect on attitudes as well as to explore different approaches. One possibility that the next stage of this project will explore is the role of local and a national network in supporting and sustaining this reflection. This links with a study carried out by Kirby and colleagues on participatory practice with children and young people in the UK (Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin, and Sinclair (2003). This government-funded study investigated 150 organisations in the voluntary and statutory sectors and identified 29 case studies. This study adapted a theoretical framework by Pasteur (2001) which was originally employed to examine organisational change within the field of International Development. Pasteur identified four stages in the process of developing a learning organisation: 'unfreeze', 'catalyse', 'internalise' and 'institutionalise' (quoted in Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin, and Sinclair (2003: 59). The first part of the process, 'to unfreeze', is described as involving the following components:

'The first challenge for established organisations wanting (or required) to become more participatory is to unfreeze existing attitudes, procedures and styles of working.' (2003:60).

The term 'unfreeze' suggests a breaking of previous attitudes. However, it may be more a case of creating space to reflect on existing attitudes and practices, to revisit them but not necessarily to reject. This reinforces the role of those who can act as mediators to guide practitioners through this process.

Opportunities to reflect on attitudes and values may also be part of viewing children and adults as citizens which was discussed earlier. If listening is seen as a democratic practice then the emphasis can be placed on establishing relationships underpinned by shared values and respect rather than on programmes which concentrate on techniques and technology. This does not preclude such activities being part of the process as seen in the case studies in their use of 'photobooks' for example. However embedding a culture requires more than new repertoire, the existing landscape or environment may need to be reconsidered or made visible. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2006) describe how this 'making visible' can be part of an approach to looking at quality:

'The language of 'meaning making'speaks of evaluation as a democratic process of interpretation, a process that involves making practice visible and thus subject to reflection, dialogue and argumentation...' (cited in Moss, 2007: 14).

Conclusion

A continuing policy interest in listening to children raises questions as to how organisations at a local and strategic level can embed such a practice. The exact form which 'listening' takes will depend on the existing theoretical and methodological approaches which are in place. The case studies discussed in this paper pointed to different origins for their impetus for a renewed interest in listening to children, of which the policy interest was one factor. Each case study identified external and internal factors which have supported their work on listening to children, of which the role of individual 'mediators' has been discussed in more depth. Barriers or challenges to embedding a culture of listening point to the importance of providing time and space for reflecting on existing values and practice. This can be part of an opening out of discussion about what it means to be an early childhood institution at a local level or a group of children's services at a strategic level. 'Listening' can be part of democratic practice which respects the views and experiences of adults and children within organisations. This can lead to ongoing, sometimes subtle and often complex transformations in which relationships are at the heart:

As the Head in case study one describes:

'This idea of a listening culture....we don't give a sheet to say you have to do it like this. It is a developing relationship. It continues to develop with everyone we work with.'

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