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To cite this article: Alison Clark (2005) Listening to and involving young children: a review of research and practice, *Early Child Development and Care*, 175:6, 489-505, DOI: [10.1080/03004430500131288](https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430500131288)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430500131288>



Published online: 16 Aug 2006.



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Listening to and involving young children: a review of research and practice

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This paper sets out an international review of literature and practice concerning listening to and consulting with young children in early childhood institutions. Most of the existing literature on children's participation has focused on children over five years old; however, a small number of studies have been undertaken with young children. Beginning with an examination of understandings of listening, the paper describes methodologies for gathering young children's perspectives, including traditional research methods and participatory approaches. Key themes will be described which have emerged from studies undertaken to date. Illustrative case studies undertaken as part of the review are used to support the limited published material in this field. The paper raises issues for policy, research and practice concerning the implications of listening to young children.

Keywords: *Listening; Consultation; Participation; Children's experiences; Children's perspectives*

Introduction

Young children may be viewed in different ways according to the 'lenses' adults use to see children and childhood. Professional training and theoretical allegiances favour particular views of the child or childhood. Young children may, for example, be seen as vulnerable and in need or as active and competent. Two current lenses for looking at young children have emerged from the children's rights discourse and the sociology of childhood. The first of these supported by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has promoted the view of children, including young children as rights holders. The emergence of the academic field of the sociology of childhood emphasizes children 'as beings not becomings' (Qvortrup *et al.*, 1994,

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p. 2). Research and practice which takes seriously children's perspectives on their everyday lives has become an important element of childhood studies (for example, Mayall, 2002).

This paper addresses these two interests in children's rights and perspectives with reference to an international review of literature and practice carried out by the author and colleagues (Clark, McQuail & Moss, 2003) concerning listening to and consulting with young children. The focus was on young children's views and experiences of early childhood provision across a range of statutory and voluntary settings. 'Young children' was taken to mean children under five years old. This emphasis was dictated by the funders, the Department for Education and Skills in England and, as such, literature and practice concerning young children's involvement in other services such as health, social services or the legal profession are beyond the scope of this review.

There were three components to the review: a literature review, six case studies of innovative practice and an invited seminar with policy makers, academics and practitioners. The literature review focused on published articles, reports and materials for practitioners on current practice involving listening to and consulting with young children, covering those countries where English language literature was available. This was supplemented by two overseas reviews from Denmark and the Netherlands, two countries which published material suggested have important contributions to make to debates around listening to children. A review was included of a particular policy initiative in England; childcare audits. These annual reviews of childcare provision included limited information on consultations with children. These findings are, however, not included in this overview.

The case studies were chosen to illustrate innovative approaches to everyday listening and to consultations with young children. Five case studies were English and the sixth focused on a Danish nursery. Further international examples would have been desirable but were not possible within the confines of this seven-month project.¹

Beginning with an examination of understandings of listening, the paper describes methodologies for gathering young children's perspectives, including traditional research methods and participatory approaches. Key themes will be described which have emerged from studies undertaken to date. Examples from the case studies will be used to support the limited published material in this field. The paper ends by raising issues for policy, research and practice concerning the implications of listening to young children.

Definitions of listening

Interest in the field of children's participation has led to a complex use of terms and understandings (for example, McNeish, 1999; Morrow, 2000; Cutler, 2002; Clark, Moss, Kjörholt, forthcoming). The authors of the review decided to use the terms 'listening' and 'consultation' to refer to developments in this field and identified the two themes of everyday listening and one-off consultations. The following definitions were adopted. Listening is understood to be

- an active process of communication involving hearing, interpreting and constructing meanings
- not limited to the spoken word
- a necessary stage in participation in (a) daily routines as well as in (b) wider decision-making processes.

This definition of listening begins with the understanding that listening is an active rather than a passive process. This exchange is not about extracting information from children in a one-way event but is a dynamic process which involves children and adults discussing meanings. Listening is traditionally thought of as being limited to verbal exchanges. However it is important to stretch this definition to include the many different verbal and non-verbal ways young children chose to communicate. Malaguzzi, the former director of the pre-schools in Reggio Emilia in Northern Italy, emphasized this diversity of expression in his phrase ‘the hundred languages of children’ (Edwards, Gandini & Foreman, 1998). Malaguzzi also challenges adults to discover ‘the hundred ways of listening’.

Listening is a necessary stage in participation. The two terms are interlinked. Participation is the process of becoming actively involved and implies a sharing of power (Miller, 1997). Hill, Davis, Prout and Tisdall (2004) offer a useful definition here: ‘participation means the direct involvement of children in decision-making about matters that affect their lives, whether individually or collectively. This may be at the initiative of decision-makers or of children and their representatives’ (p. 83). This participation for young children can occur in two ways: involvement in daily decision-making processes around routines as well as involvement in wider decision-making processes. A child may, for example, be involved in choice about a snack or an activity or at a wider, organizational level she may be involved in choosing her key worker.

The terms ‘listening’ and ‘participation’ are sometimes used interchangeably with ‘consultation’. Borland and colleagues describe consultation as ‘ways of seeking the views of children as a guide to action’ (Borland *et al.*, 2001) but as Hill *et al.* (2004) caution, the agenda for consultation is normally driven by decision-makers rather than the children themselves.

The review pursues the two themes of *everyday listening* undertaken by those who regularly work with young children to enable engagement in routines and activities together with *one-off consultation* about a particular issue, event or opportunity. This twin focus may allow both children’s and adults’ agendas to emerge.

Methodologies for listening

How do you listen to the views and experiences of young children? Hesitancy about how to answer this question has perhaps been one of the reasons for fewer research studies being carried out into young children’s perspectives. Before addressing the question of techniques, the review examined what conditions support listening to young children. Reflections on the view of the child or childhood, which this paper

opened with, are important here. A view of the competent, active child will provide a positive starting point for listening to young children. This will be enhanced by attention to the best time of day, the timespan needed and the appropriate person to carry out the task (Baxter, 1993; Tolfree & Woodhead, 1999). The physical environment is also important (Stuart *et al.*, 2001). Several studies emphasize that activities should be varied and enjoyable, and recognize the different ways children may choose to express themselves (Miller, 1997; Cousins, 1999; Clark & Moss, 2001; Clark, 2004). There is the need to be clear about the purpose of the exercise and the extent to which children's views can be incorporated, and to take seriously the task of feeding back outcomes to children (Miller, 1997; Clark, 2004).

Following this summary of the conditions of listening, the review identified a range of methods which have been employed by researchers, practitioners and consultants to understand young children's perspectives on early childhood provision. These are divided into the following categories: observation, interviews, questionnaires, structured activities and multisensory approaches.

Observation

There is a strong tradition of observation within early years education as a tool for understanding young children's abilities, needs and interests (Smidt, 2002). Observation becomes increasingly important, the younger the age of children involved (Elfer & Selleck, 1999). Participant observation is one of the types of observation which is of particular relevance to studying the lives of young children (Leavitt, 1995; Warming forthcoming). This is a qualitative approach 'which gives importance to the interpretation of actions and the contexts in which they occur' (Greig & Taylor, 1999, p. 81). It involves a familiar person spending extended periods of time in a setting observing and recording the interactions of children and adults. Observation can inform other methods including participatory methods which in turn enable children to play a more direct role in the interpretation of their actions (Clark & Moss, 2001).

Interviews

Interviews are among the most popular tool used for gathering the views of older children and adults. Some concerns have been expressed as to their appropriateness as a tool for listening to young children. Children may try to 'second guess' what adults hope they will say. This may be a particular 'risk' in an educational context if children are used to the teacher knowing the answer (Garbarino *et al.*, cited in Gollop, 2000). Another difficulty is that young children being questioned may become monosyllabic (Tizard & Hughes, 1984). Gollop (2000) notes for some cultural groups, it is not appropriate for children to be interviewed on their own. Langsted (1994) suggests the need for particular inventiveness and ingenuity in devising interviews for children. He took part in a Scandinavian project in which children were interviewed about their daily life at home and at early childhood centres. Interviewers observed the children and then took them on a sightseeing trip of their daily lives.

Careful preparation for interviewing children is important (Graue & Walsh, 1998). This can include taking time to build up a full picture of young children in relation to their language, cultural group or class (Brooker, 2001). Some research suggests that young children respond in a more positive way to interviewing if the encounter takes place in a familiar environment with trusted adults (Gollop, 2000; Brooker, 2001). Maintaining rapport and monitoring the child's comfort is an ongoing process and at the end of the interview there must be appropriate debriefing with praise and thanks.

Several different forms of interview have been carried out with young children to find out their views of their early childhood provision, including individual interviews, child conferencing, group interviews and child-to-child interviews.

Child conferencing is a particular form of informal structured interview (Dupree, Bertram & Pascal, 2001). This method has been used in the Effective Early Learning Programme to include young children's voices in evaluations. Child conferencing has been adapted as one of the tools in the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001) as a recognition that some young children respond to the opportunities for talking in a structured way whereas others will find more play-centred approaches easier to take part in.

Group interviews are conversational encounters with a research purpose. This can be less daunting for young children than one-to-one interviews and can diffuse the balance of power between adult interviewer and child interviewees (Lewis, 1992; Mauthner, 1997; Carr, 2000; Brooker, 2001). However, less articulate or shy young children may not have the confidence to contribute to these encounters in a group situation.

The power dynamics between adults and children can be reinforced in an interview situation. This is an important consideration when interviewing young children. One response to this question has been an exploration of the role of children as interviewers interviewing other children. This 'child-to-child' technique has been pioneered in international development as a tool for conveying information to children as well as to discover their views. Playworkers in the UK have adapted this approach to work with younger children. Playtrain—a playwork consultancy—has trained children, including children with special needs, to act as special consultants.²

There has been little work undertaken into the possibilities of children of four and five acting as consultants for understanding the lives of even younger children. Clark and Moss (2001) explored this possibility with four-year-olds looking at the lives of children under two in their nursery.

Questionnaires

This method used for gathering the views of older children and adults in academic and market research has been adapted for use with younger children. Gadd and Cable (2000) used questionnaires, among other techniques: children drew faces to record how they felt about specified activities. This method runs the risk of being tokenistic if it is used as the only way for young children to convey their views and experiences.

Structured activities

Several research projects have developed specific activities for listening to young children about their pre-school experiences. Evans and Fuller (1996) adapted the popular role play activity of listening on telephones as a research tool. Armstrong and Sugawara (1989) developed the Day Care Center Toy and Interview Questionnaire. Puppets have also been used as a formal tool for listening to young children, as in the Berkeley Puppet Interview (Measelle *et al.*, 1998). Toys and puppets have been used more informally in consultations with young children as 'intermediaries'. The Daycare Trust (1998) introduced a teddy to groups of children in pre-school settings and asked children to explain to teddy about their nursery. Story telling has also been used in conjunction with puppets or children have been given an unfinished story to complete (Carr, 2000).

Personna dolls are another specialized 'prop' which has been used to listen to young children. These dolls are designed to help children explore different feelings, in particular about ethnicity and disability (Vandenbroek & Van Keulen, 2002; Hall, Hughes and Jarrett, 2002).

There are activities which have been developed as participatory tools for use by playworkers. Such games have been devised mainly for use by older children and adapted for the under-fives. Ranking games (Tolfree & Woodhead, 1999; O Kane, 2000) are one example where children are given a set of cards or photographs of activities or issues to rank in order of importance. A fishing game has been used (National Early Years Network/London Borough of Redbridge, 1998) where children use a rod and magnet to choose 'happy' or 'sad' faces as a tool to express their feelings.

Multi-sensory approaches

There is a range of techniques for listening to young children which shift the balance away from the written or spoken word to visual or multisensory approaches. These include the use of cameras and audio equipment, tours, map making and arts-based activities.

Photographs can become the focus for 'everyday listening' to young children and for consultations. Profile books are one example of the former. These can provide a living record of young children's lives in which photographs taken for and by the children play a key role (Driscoll & Rudge, forthcoming). This technique has been developed in a particular way in an early childhood centre in London and was one of the case studies in the review (see Figure 1).

Photographs taken by young children can provide a platform of communication between adults and young children. Research and development studies have included young children taking their own photographs of important places and people in their pre-school setting (Gadd & Cable, 2000; Clark & Moss, 2001; Lancaster, 2003). The 'London on your doorstep project' (Children's Society/ Save the Children 2001) used children's photographs as one tool to find out about their experiences of the wider environment. Outdoor spaces was the focus of a recent study to listen to young

Case Study

Fortune Park Early Years Centre is a Children's Centre* in inner London where the principles of listening to young children are embedded in everyday practice. This culture of listening has been developed since its opening in 1995. Profile books have become a powerful voice for young children in the nursery.

Supporting play and learning

Profile books in this setting are seen as 'a blank book that becomes a co-constructed representation of a child: his/her life, interests, learning and development' (Driscoll & Rudge, forthcoming). The books begin before the children join the nursery. Their keyworker, the member of staff who will work closely with the child, makes a home visit and takes photographs of the child and her favourite things. On the child's first day in nursery the profile book is there with the photographs already in place. These books become a positive record of young children's achievements and changing interests.

The profile books are an important tool for listening to *very young children*. Children under one can take pleasure in having a book about themselves and in sharing the books with other children and adults. The books are stored in boxes kept at floor level so children can help themselves.

As children grow older they are able to play a more direct role in recording experiences themselves and are able to revisit past books and to talk about and reflect on how they have changed.

Listening to and involving parents and children

The profile books open up new channels of communication between the nursery and the parents and carers and also between parents and their young children. The photographs and accounts are a way of listening to what is important for their children. Parents can use the books to describe particular interests or milestones which the children reach at home. This provides another powerful way for practitioners to listen to what is important for individual children.

Listening to children with special needs

Children with special needs make a *personal passport* with their keyworker which they take with them when they move to a new setting. This is in addition to their profile books. The passport describes themselves, their families and what they like to do. It gives the children the opportunity to explain their everyday needs. This can empower children through sometimes difficult periods of transition.

*Children's Centres are a national initiative in England to bring together education, care, outreach, health and family support.

Figure 1. Case study example: methodologies for listening

children (Clark & Moss, 2005) in which discussions based on photographs taken by three- and four-year-olds played an important role in deciding on changes to the play environment.

Several Danish studies (e.g. Rasmussen, 1999; Staunæs, 2000) have asked children to take photographs as a starting point for interviews. The photographs also serve as a representation of children's experiences which might not be easily articulated in other ways. Other projects have used photographs taken by adults as a stimulus for exploring young children's views (Warming, 2002a, b).

Young children have been involved in making tapes about their pre-school experiences. In addition to the example of the tours given above, Cousins (1999) and Evans and Fuller (1996) both found young children to be fascinated by the sound of their own voices. Use of such equipment requires a period of familiarization for the children.

Tours and map making are two techniques that have been adapted from participatory approaches used in international development, known as 'participatory appraisal'. Such methods have been devised to enable non-literate communities to articulate their local knowledge of an area and so engage with the development process (Johnson *et al.*, 1998). Tours involve young children taking researchers or other adults on a guided walk around their pre-school setting (Clark & Moss, 2001). Children can be in charge of the direction of the tour but also of how the experience is recorded, through children taking photographs, making drawings and audio recordings. Photographs and drawings can be incorporated into maps by the children.

Drawing and other arts activities have been used as another avenue for young children to express their views and experiences. In National Early Years Network/London Borough of Redbridge (1998) children decorated plates with happy and sad faces and then used these on a tour of the facility to indicate how they felt about the environment and activities. Listening to children talking about their own drawings can reveal important insights into their understandings. This has been one of the techniques used in studies to gather young children's perspectives on transitions to school (for example Dockett & Perry, 1999).

However, researchers may gain more from listening to young children's talking during the drawing process than from a formal analysis of the final drawing (Cameron & Clark, 2004).

Role play can be an important tool for young children to express their feelings. This can be another way for listening to young children which can involve their whole bodies and all their senses. Cousins (1999), Finch (1998) and Miller (1997) have each demonstrated how powerful a tool drama can be for helping children to explore their experiences of their pre-school environment.

This section on methodologies for listening demonstrates the range of tools available. The case study above illustrates how methodologies for listening can move beyond technique to focus on listening as a relationship (Rinaldi, 2001) in which young children, practitioners and parents can play an integral part. The following section considers what key themes young children have discussed in the studies under review.

Key themes

It is important to examine the published material to see if common themes emerge about young children's priorities, interests and concerns. This is made more necessary as the majority of research studies and consultation projects to date have been small-scale. One exception to this is the study by Dupree, Bertram and Pascal (2001). Between 1994 and 1995 some 945 young children were interviewed using child conferencing as part of the Effective Early Learning Programme (EEL). The children were asked questions relating to five of the dimensions of quality identified in the programme: aims and objectives, learning experiences, learning and teaching styles, staffing and relationships and interactions.

Gathering together common themes will give more visibility to these perspectives and may prevent the messages for policy, research and practice becoming hidden

among more powerful stakeholders. The subjects for consultation and research about young children's experiences of early childhood provision are wide-ranging. In some cases young children have been asked about their everyday experiences in the setting: the routines, the role of children and adults, the activities and the premises (Miller, 1997; Clark & Moss, 2001). Other consultations have had a more specific focus. These have included rules, discipline and resolving conflicts (Miller, 1997; Finch, 1998); outside play (Clark & Moss, 2005); moving to new premises (National Early Years Network/London Borough of Redbridge, 1998); transitions from nursery to school (for example Dockett & Perry, 1999) and transitions from setting to setting within the same day (Cousins, 1999; Wiltsher, 1999).

Young children have raised the following key themes in the studies in the review: friends, food and drink, the creative arts, outdoor play, the role of adults, achievements and transitions. This is not intended as an exhaustive list of children's interests and concerns but to provide a marker for ongoing research.

The importance of friends

A consistent theme running through many of the published studies has been the importance of friends (for example Daycare Trust, 1998; Clark & Moss, 2001; Warming in Clark, McQuail & Moss, 2003). Children talked about practitioners as well as other children being their friends (Clark & Moss, 2001). Warming observes that children's friendships often become a key theme even when the adult's research agenda may not include this topic (Warming in Clark, McQuail & Moss, 2003, p. 69).

Food and drink

Young children have expressed pleasure in being able to help themselves to a drink when they want to rather than having snacks brought to them at a particular time (Daycare Trust, 1998; Cousins, 1999). The Danish case study in the review featured a nursery where young children can help themselves to snacks throughout the day. The chairs are designed so children under two can climb up to the table themselves. Other studies have reflected children's enjoyment of eating as a shared communal activity. One example of this view is expressed by one of the three-year-olds in the study by Clark and Moss (2001) in which her favourite place was the 'fruit table' where children and adults sat together in a relaxed way to eat and chat.

Creative arts

These were the most popular activities identified by young children in the EEL programme (Dupree, Bertram & Pascal, 2001). Children were asked 'what do you like doing best at nursery?' When their answers were analysed, the following areas emerged as the best activities: imaginative play (44%); creative activities (42%) and water, sand and playdough (25%).³

Outdoor play

Children often put the garden among their list of favourite activities (Daycare Trust, 1998; Cousins, 1999). Children in the EEL programme placed physical activities and outdoor play as among the best activities (24%) next to the creative arts (Dupree, Bertram & Pascal (2001, p. 11). Some children have expressed concern that they are not allowed to go out when and as much as they would like (Cousins, 1999). The importance of access to outdoor provision was emphasized by young children in another recent study (Clark & Moss, 2005) which led to practitioners changing their practice in order to allow free-flow access to the children throughout the day.

The role of adults

Groups of young children in some studies have discussed liking adults who help them to do things and play with them (Daycare Trust, 1998; Clark & Moss, 2001). Others have expressed a dislike of adults shouting or raising their voices (Cousins, 1999; Wiltsher, 1999); in after-school clubs children liked the fact that staff were less directive (Wiltsher, 1999). Children have also raised the importance of having adults to keep order and help them feel safe (Clark & Moss, 2001). However, the four-year-olds interviewed by Cousins (1999) expressed reservations about some of the ways power was exercised over them. Children disliked being hurried and not allowed to finish what they were doing or making and being told to tidy things away. These sentiments were echoed by some of the young children in the EEL programme. For example:

I don't like having to stop. (Dupree, Bertram & Pascal, 2001, p. 13)

Achievements and identity

There have been several recorded examples of young children's expressed pleasure in seeing evidence of their achievements in their pre-school settings. Children in the Daycare Trust consultation were proud of things they had made themselves (Daycare Trust, 1998). Three- and four-year-olds photographed their drawings and pages from their profile books which recorded their progress (Clark & Moss, 2001). This may be linked to young children's sense of place identity which may be closely associated with their developing awareness of their own identities (Clark, 2003).

Transitions

Newcomers (to out-of-school clubs) often felt nervous on their first day and would have been reassured by some information beforehand on how out-of-school clubs differ from school or a guided tour of the place and someone to look after them for a while (Smith, 1999; Wiltsher, 1999).

Brooker interviewed children in a reception class about school. She found that though looking forward a great deal to school, they already saw it as a place where their own preferences (for creative play) would take second place to the perceived

Case Study: practice based on listening

This case study illustrates an early years setting where listening to and involving young children is embedded in practice. The practitioners have found creative ways to place young children and their ideas 'centre stage' – despite the considerable restrictions of their space. Wistanstow playgroup is a small rural playgroup in Shropshire, England, catering for children from the age of 2 years six months to school age. The playgroup meets in the village hall, a mock-Tudor building which is shared with other community groups. The joint leader of the playgroup is Judy Miller who has worked with young children for over twenty years and is a writer and trainer on young children's rights (see Miller, 1997).

Communication

A priority is given to listening to children's talking. The playgroup sessions are structured so as to enable practitioners to spend as much time as possible listening to the children's ideas and concerns. Adults sit at the children's level as the children are engaged in activities and on the day when children stay to lunch.

Close attention is paid to the language adults use. Practitioners focus on open questions which do not dictate the desired answer. They use reflective listening techniques by which practitioners repeat what they have understood children to be saying back to children to check understandings.

Routines

Routines are based on children's rhythms and interests. Children become familiar with the routines, for example, when is it time to tidy up ready for lunch? This familiarity enables children to play an active part in the smooth transitions between one activity and another. Drinks and snacks are designed in such a way as to not only meet children's physical needs but also to give children choices and to develop their skills. Drinks are placed in small jugs so young children can help themselves and learn how to pour their own drinks but this does not exclude mealtimes being a time of shared conversations with adults.

Supporting playing and learning

There is no adjacent play area so the indoor environment has been organized to allow bikes and large play equipment to be available each day. Children are asked which activities they would like to be available and play an active part in setting up and tidying away. It is not always possible to respond immediately to children's requests. The limited storage space means that some equipment has to be stored away under the stage or in practitioners' own homes. Observation notes are shared with the children and practitioners respond to children's requests to document particular achievements. At Circle time, children can show other children and practitioners pictures, models or an item from home that they are proud of. This is not, however, compulsory.

Decision-making

Children are introduced to the decision-making processes needed to run a playgroup. Children are involved in specific projects to choose play equipment, e.g. new play animals. The choices given to children are small in scale but genuine. Care is taken not to ask for children's involvement in a decision in which their ideas could not be considered. Children are given the opportunity to join in or opt out of activities and trips. Sometimes, children's own ideas lead to a new activity or event.

Figure 2. Case study: practice based on listening

adult preferences for academic learning (Brooker, 1996). The longitudinal study by Stephens (2001, 2003) into transitions to primary school highlighted some children's negative feelings about the change from a self-directed manner of working in nursery to a more directed approach in school. These concerns have been echoed in other studies of transitions (for example Dockett & Perry, 2001).

Caution must be taken in reaching general conclusions about what ‘young children’ have revealed as important themes, as a result of the small numbers of studies undertaken. There is a danger that the ‘voice of the child’ will be championed at the expense of recognizing the diversity of voices, experiences and opinions that young children may hold (see Clark, Moss & Kjørholt, forthcoming). Young children are as diverse a group of individuals as any section of society who are classified on the basis of age. However, as the views and experiences of young children have been under-represented until recently, it is still important to draw together those accounts which have been made available whilst recognizing the partial view these may give. Further studies are needed to broaden the range of young voices which are being heard, to include, for example, more of the experiences of young children with special needs. Young children’s participation is part of wider discussions about the link between participation and narrowing social exclusion (for example Hill *et al.*, 2004) in which the views and experiences of children of all ages from marginalized communities are sought.

Issues for practice, policy and research

What pointers does this review give as to future directions for listening to and consulting with young children in early childhood services? Emerging issues will be discussed in terms of practice, policy and research whilst recognizing that there are, in reality, no such neat divisions between these categories.

Practice

Early years practitioners are thus well placed to bridge the gap between listening and learning. Listening and observing young children has been fundamental to early years practice since the pioneers of early childhood practice (for example Smidt, 1998, p. 108). This principle can enable early years practitioners to provide environments which support everyday listening to young children. There may be a need, however, to help practitioners reflect on these skills in the light of emerging debates about young children’s participation. Nutbrown (1996) encourages early years practitioners to take a lead in this when she talks about ‘respectful educators—capable learners’:

Adults with expertise who respectfully watch children engaged in their process of living, learning, loving and being are in a better position to understand what it is these youngest citizens are trying to say and find ways of helping them to say it. (Nutbrown, 1996, p. 55)

Once confident in these abilities, practitioners could be well placed to help make the lives of young children more visible at a strategic level. Thus understandings gained about different groups of young children’s interests and priorities could inform policy decisions concerning early childhood services and wider provision for young children and families.

Listening to young children is best viewed as part of a culture of listening in which adults’ and children’s perspectives are recognized and debated (Rinaldi, 2001; Kirby

et al., 2004). This does not sit well amidst a culture driven by targets. Listening is time-consuming, particularly when the participants are young children. One of the challenges to practice is how to create environments in early childhood provision which respect and listen to practitioners, parents and young children. Little will have been gained if the interest in young children's participation leads to the championing of three-year-olds whilst excluding the views of 16-year-olds on the staff. This points to the need for debate about the principles on which to base listening and consulting with young children. One starting point for discussion is the framework adopted by Clark and Moss (2001, p. 5) which seeks ways of listening which are participatory, adaptable, multimethod, reflexive and embedded in practice.

Current practice in listening to children is spread among a multitude of different disciplines and settings. This review has focused on young children's views of early childhood provision. There is a growing body of expertise and experience in listening to older children about such topics as legal issues, the environment and health. There is also expertise to call on from the established fields of community arts, community development and international development which have the potential to enrich and diversify the growing knowledge base about listening to young children.

Policy

This review raises the question of what training is appropriate for early years practitioners around listening and consultation? This complex debate should be considered as an important element of initial training and in-service courses. However, there is a note of caution from the Danish perspective about the models of training needed. Warming (in Clark, McQuail & Moss, 2003, p. 75) notes that practice has been changed as a result of reflection and discussion 'rather than the easy implementation of some strict recommendations or training material'. This points to the need to explore reflexive models of training which enable practitioners to consider their existing practice in the light of current discourses.

There are budgetary implications for implementing a participatory approach to providing early childhood services. This may include the costs of training or the staffing costs and materials needed for particular consultations. There are also the possible resource implications of taking young children's views seriously. What if, for example, policy decisions were made to make access to an outdoor space a necessary requirement for registration of an early childhood setting?

One question remains as to how to represent young children's views at a strategic level. This review has discussed methodologies for listening to young children's views and experiences but has not tackled the methodologies for disseminating these perspectives at a policy level. There are significant challenges as to how to represent young children's views in these debates, more so than older children and young people. One reason is that participation at a strategic level is bound up with adult-led structures for debate. A national conference is not a conducive environment for three-year-olds to attend in person. However, imaginative ways need to be discussed for

bringing young children's perspectives to this audience. The use of multimedia represent possibilities here.

Research

The review points to opportunities for future research concerning young children's perspectives and rights at an individual, organizational and strategic level. At an individual level there is scope for more studies which draw on children's expertise about their early childhood provision. These include studies concerning different types of provision, for example young children's views about childminding. There is the opportunity for more studies concerning young children's perspectives of the indoor and outdoor environment. There is a particular need to explore different methodologies for including the experiences of young children with special needs (for example Marchant *et al.*, 1999). Impact studies should include children's perspectives on being consulted. This could include retrospective accounts from older children about their early years experiences. This should be in addition to further work into the impact on practitioners and parents.

Comparative studies are needed to identify and contrast approaches to listening to young children in early years provision. These studies could examine the meanings, processes, risks and possibilities associated with listening to young children (Clark, Kjörholt & Moss, forthcoming).

There is a particular need for research and development work into appropriate ways for making the lives of young children visible at a strategic level. Such research would consider how expertise in everyday listening could be used in new ways to promote the views and experiences of young children, but at the same time not to exploit them.

Conclusion

'Listening to young children' is a complex task clouded by a range of understandings of listening, consultation and participation. This paper, based on young children's perspectives of early childhood provision, has set out to examine some of these meanings and discuss these in relation to methodologies for listening. The key themes which emerge from the limited studies which have taken place to date present challenges for practitioners, policy makers and researchers in terms of the way forward for early childhood provision. Young children will best be served by changes which remain alert to their differing perspectives and interests as well as their needs.

Acknowledgements

This paper is based on a research report: *Exploring the field of listening to and consulting with young children*. Research Report 445 (2003) compiled with my colleagues Susan McQuail and Peter Moss for the Department for Education and Skills. The views

expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education and Skills.

Notes

1. See Clark, McQuail and Moss, 2003, pp. 17–28 for a full account of the selection and description of the case studies.
2. See Case Study Three in the full report (Clark, McQuail & Moss, 2003, pp. 22–23).
3. The children often indicated more than one 'best activity' as the percentages indicate.

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