

Listening and Learning: Empowering Children in Early Childhood Services

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"Listening is important for the children who are being listened to, but also for the adults who are listening, whether at home or in an early years setting, at school, at local level or in national government." (National Children's Bureau, 2004)

Introduction

The aim of the consultation with children was to listen to children in all matters that concern them within early childhood settings. The need for a shift away from the welfare model of 'minding' children and a move towards empowering children is something that we should seek to create within our cultural climate, given the trend of the last century which has been described as '*the century of the child*.' (Moss and Pence, 1994)

Valuable insights can be gained into children's feelings and thinking through this process, as well as a truly unique and bottom-up approach to assessment for service providers. The context in which this consultation process was carried out was in the belief that children are active participants in their own learning and experts in their own lives.

Why is it Important to Consult with Children?

Listening to children gives practitioners ideas of what children are feeling in their settings and with this comes the knowledge of what they may need from their early years experience. Consultation with children can be carried out for many reasons, it can be:

- Central to the learning process;
- Vital in relation to emotional development in very young children;
- Healthy for the development and retention of positive self-esteem;
- Important to view how society views early childhood and children;
- Important to establish continuity from the home;
- A fantastic way to evaluate your setting from the child's perspective.

It is important to listen to children within early childhood settings because it will help children to feel more valued as people who have to share time and space with others, given the lack of control they have over their own lives until they are older.

Really listening to children means taking their ideas, feelings and opinions to heart and acting on what you are learning from them in a continuous way. Practitioners face a challenge, to look upon children as experts on themselves and not that practitioners are

all-powerful and know best. Imagine the wonderful feeling given to children - I am respected and listened to, I am respectful and I listen to others. Would this not be a fantastic way to empower children, creating a democracy within any setting, evoking powerful feelings in the psyche of any child? How could this fail to raise the level of any child's self-esteem, creating an atmosphere of trust and negotiation within the spirit of enquiry?

According to Neaum and Tallack (2002:88) "*Self-esteem is established at a young age and research evidence shows that it remains stable throughout life, so it is vital that positive self-esteem is established when children are young.*" We respond to interactions and reactions through the emotions shown to us by others and in turn, we build an image from within. The emotional cues help us to shape our behaviour and help us to learn.

According to Elgin (1996) "*Emotions function cognitively, only when they embed beliefs*". If this is the case, parents demonstrate the emotional framework that children will later work from and in turn, lay the context in which we must work with the child. Shared negotiation within a framework for learning can be very liberating for children in early childhood settings.

Research is showing that our children are switching off from school at a very early age and one of the reasons may be the fact that school life is very much divorced from home life. How much negotiation do children get to live out in any one day? Negotiation would seem to be one way of making children feel more like they do at home; empowered, capable individuals who can take on many challenges if they are offered in the right context and in a way that is meaningful for them.

How many opportunities for learning are lost because we are not actively listening to what children want? Powerful learning can and does occur when children's interests are taken into account and they are exposed to real and valid daily choices within their environment; this is the core of real consultation.

Nutbrown (1996) suggests "*It appears that children who are given choices and genuine opportunities to take responsibility for their own actions are more likely to use the adult as a point of resource, rather than relying on them for approval, and to persevere in tackling difficulties rather than give up in the face of challenge.*" Enhancing children's learning in this way gives them a feeling of control over what they are doing and more choices of how they could do it.

Another way to augment children's learning is through the assessment process within a setting. Ackers (1994:74) suggests, "*Assessment is a process that must enhance children's lives, their learning and development.*"

Assessment of learning within the early years occurs at many levels in settings, through observations, curriculum planning, planning for individual children, a quality programme in conjunction with an early years advisor and perhaps some forms of reflective practice. I believe that this cycle of assessment is incomplete without children having their say. Under Article 12 of the U.N. Conventions on the Rights of the Child, "*Children have the right to express a view on all matters that concern them and to have that view taken seriously.*" We should make consultation with children part and parcel of the fabric of our everyday lives and make it an element of good practice within our settings. A truly unique and bottom up approach of assessment can be gained, given the right tools for listening. New insights will develop, new skills and knowledge will be formed and reformed, but more importantly, we may develop a shift in our attitude and thinking on how we as a society should view and work with children in the future. According to Clark and Moss (2001), a framework for listening such as this has the potential to be both used as an evaluative tool and to become embedded into early years practice.

How the Tool was Devised and Implemented

Birmingham Early Years Partnership has produced a Quality Assurance Program, and contained within this is a section on consultation with children. We were very kindly permitted to use this. The consultation process was a non-compulsory part of the programme and the tool is made up of a set of interview questions that have broad headings, the tool having been compiled by a number of people on the quality panel for the programme. I also took into account the work the ISPC had carried out in relation to consultation with children before I began this piece of work.

For some time, the Border Counties Childcare Network (BCCN) had wanted to carry out the process of consultation with children and it seemed timely, given my arrival there and how recently I had been working with young children at ground level, that I implemented this project. The consultation process was to be carried out with children aged nought-to-fourteen years of age and armed with one tool, I set about looking for other ideas to inspire me.

I decided that I would try to open out the set of interview questions for school age children, as many of the questions asked for the three-to-five year olds would be apt for this age group too; with some minor adaptations I was happy with the result. Langsted (1994:36) believes that "*interviewing children provides the opportunities about their own views and their daily lives which could not be required by any other method.*"

However, the nought-to-threes proved to be a very different matter. I looked for a tool for this age group, and to my surprise, I couldn't find one. I contacted High/Scope Ireland as I knew work was in progress with a model for this age group, but no tool for a consultation

process existed and no-one could give me any direction in which to look. What do early years specialists do when faced with a difficulty? Consult your theory, dig deep and develop your own tool, and that's exactly what I did.

I knew that Denmark had a long and distinguished history in this area, and it was to this country that I looked for ideas. I found my inspiration and decided for the nought-to-threes the best way forward would be to look at the early years setting physically, through a child's eyes. I set a series of questions to determine the information I wanted to gather, over the course of a day. The questions were based around emotional responses and reactions to people, places and objects. I had the youngest children in mind here, given their emergence of language acquisition, our understanding of this, and the role that emotion plays in children's overall development. I also had the notion that the younger the child, the more indirect the tool should be.

With all this in place, I had to sit down and work out practically how this was to be co-ordinated and rolled out. With seven groups already on the BCCN quality programme for three-to-five year olds, I decided that these groups were ideally placed and that I could carry out this process as part of the curriculum section of our quality programme. The National Children's Nurseries Association recommended two full day care centres in the region that had received their excellence award and two County Childcare Committees had also offered the names of two centres for school age children and I agreed to use these.

I believed the success of the project would rely heavily on the tools and how they were to be used and implemented and each age group had to be thought about individually. I looked at each question set out for each age group, beginning with the three-to-five year old age group. While trying not to have preconceived ideas, I knew from working with children that some questions would be answered more readily than others. I would need props to help capture and sustain their interest and to assist me in pulling out the information that I required.

One question outlined in the interview concerned me, and this was in relation to children thinking about their own learning and thinking, a higher order thinking skill known as metacognition. From my work as a practitioner and as an Early Years Specialist in Northern Ireland, I knew this level of thinking is difficult to capture and document within early years settings. I was not very optimistic that I could unearth this through interactions with the children unless I went about it in a way they would understand. I went back to children as experts in their own lives and as capable individuals at this stage because I believed if I offered this question in the right way, fruitful answers would surely come. Inspiration comes at odd moments and at three o'clock one morning I scrambled out of bed, with an

idea of using the learning environment to help me with my conundrum. I decided that if I took photographs of the children's play areas they may be able to tell me what learning might go on there. I believed that this would help those who are not good auditory learners, preferring visual learning and that these would aid their recall and help to create focus. I needed to be careful that no adult or child was engaged in play during these photographs, in case the children said only what they could see; I wanted them to project themselves into the question. I went on to use this tool for various other questions within the consultation around equal opportunities and it has proved very useful.

To get a full view of the consultation process, many viewpoints would be needed. What children said, felt, learned and reacted to would go towards helping build a better picture, with puppets, pictures and cameras at their disposal. Consultation in this way is known as the 'mosaic approach'. Here, you do not rely heavily on one method of consultation of extracting information from children but on many. In Italy this is regular practice and is known as using the 100 languages of children, the idea being that one form of communication alone will not give you the full picture you are seeking. This is a very reflective way of looking at consultation and one area from which I have accrued much learning.

The validity of the tools and research used could be called into question since there is no comparison against which to measure the findings. The same process on a different day could yield different results. However, this does not mean that children should not be asked. The fact that no two consultation processes would be the same adds to the uniqueness of this project and children will express their thoughts and feelings depending on the mood, environment and the interactions of a particular adult. I believe over time, if the same adult continually consulted with children, a balance would be achieved which would reflect a truer picture.

Findings from the Project

Nought-to-Threes:

- Children were well settled into the settings;
- Routines followed were mostly the same everyday;
- Exploration forms much of the learning for the seven-month old and one-year old, with better control and co-ordination for the one-year old. Imagination is beginning for the one-year old, and a lot of time was spent moving and transporting objects. Manoeuvring their own bodies in and out of different spaces was also very important to both;
- Much time is spent in repetition and in fine-tuning skills to consolidate learning;
- Listening requires effective skills in the practitioner;
- Being listened to can help the child to become a skilful communicator;

- Children have clear ideas about what they want and don't want to do and will make this known through body language, facial expression and language;
- The learning environment was set up to suit overall development;
- Children were viewed as active learners in both settings observed;
- Adults provided a good support network and a good mix of autonomy and dependence was shown in both settings;
- Some of the children's bodily needs were intense and the response time varied over the course of the day;
- Children have some choice in their daily routine during the day e.g. meals, toys, interactions, activities and quiet time. The rhythm and flow was led mostly by the child;
- Much prior learning and development was apparent, a good deal of learning was seen over the course of the day;
- Forms of idiosyncratic speech were heard over the length of the day and built upon by the adult;
- Children communicated in a variety of ways; shouting, squealing, moving, crying and looking/watching for short and long periods of time;
- Appropriate behaviour was learned from the adults in the setting, by how they reacted to what the children were doing. Children mirrored the facial expressions of the adults many times over the day;
- Strategies for unwanted behaviour existed;
- The adult labelled the emotion they believed the child was feeling throughout the course of the day;
- Children were good at making their needs known by the cues and gestures they used;
- Children liked to engage with other children of different age groups and used varying strategies in order to do this;
- Each child tried out new things in the setting over the course of the day;
- There was plenty of choice in activities and in one group, this was quite structured over parts of the day;
- Records of the children's learning were available;
- Partnerships with parents seemed to be of a high quality;
- The tool used needs to be evaluated and revised.

Three-to-Five Year Olds:

- Children had a captive audience and that alone helped to sustain the interviews;
- Children had not been asked these questions before and this was very novel to them;
- Children had an idea of why they were attending pre-school;
- Some children could verbalise who could attend and who could not;
- They knew the play areas they liked and why, but some were unsure of what they didn't like;

- Metacognition is present in children at this stage and given the right tool, they can express this very well;
- Emotional language and expression could not be verbalised very well with the children I observed. Without an emotional vocabulary, how could I expect children to answer an objective question? I had not foreseen this and therefore additional thinking and props related to this will be added;
- Some children could talk about the changes they would make to the pre-school.
- Children found it difficult to identify areas they might need help in;
- Children could name the friends they liked to play with and who helped them to make friends;
- The role of the adult yielded many answers and good insight emerged on how children see adults within settings;
- Only some children could identify behaviour strategies in the settings;
- Some children had clear ideas around what boys and girls do in pre-school; some opinions that could be deemed sexist were heard;
- When looked into in more detail, it emerged that some specific toys were seen by the children to be for girls or boys only;
- Some children knew how and why information was passed on to their parents;
- The greatest challenge was to get practitioners to view children as experts on their own lives; some groups accrued more learning than others;
- The tool used needs to be evaluated and revised.

Five-to-Fourteen Year Olds:

- Children had very clear ideas why they attended after school and many gave their own opinion too;
- Children could explain who could attend after school and who could not;
- Children could verbalise their own metacognition, but did not go into any great detail;
- Children could talk and explain about areas/activities they didn't like;
- Friends were an extremely important aspect of their time in after school, more so than adults or activities;
- They were well aware of the activities available and many wanted more choice and say over what they were doing;
- Children had an excellent grasp of what the role of the adult was within the setting;
- Children gave detailed answers about the areas they would like to change;
- Children had an excellent knowledge of behaviour strategies and why they exist;
- Questions around emotions were difficult for the children to answer, particularly from nine years onwards;
- Answers around equal opportunities were based around the behaviour of boys and girls, rather than what they did or spent time doing;
- Children could identify areas that they needed special help in, particularly mathematics, phonetics and reading;

- Children believed that their parents were kept well-informed by the after school on many areas, but many did not talk to their parents at home about it and this was their choice;
- Most control within the settings was in the hands of adults;
- The tool used needs to be evaluated and revised.

It is beyond the remit of this paper to go into detail on the learning and the more complex findings of the project. However, a more detailed account is available from the BCCN website (www.bccn.ie), as well as the tools used for each of the age groups.

Conclusion

The project and the findings show that much learning can be gained for both children and practitioners due to this process. Children, even at a very young age, have subtle ways of communicating, if we take the time to really listen. I believe that this is only the beginning, and as more research is carried out and more theories developed, we will gain a better understanding of this subject. The tools used may have helped to shape the project, but have limitations attached too. The timeframe was a huge factor in relation to this project and like so many others, I would have liked more time.

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