Perspectives: a series of occasional papers on early years education

2

let's talk about

listening to children

towards a shared understanding for early years education in Scotland

Learning
+Teaching
Scotland

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In the context of this paper, 'early education' is taken to mean 'from birth to eight' and early educators are all those who work with children in this age range.

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- Professor Kathleen Marshall, Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People
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Foreword

The purpose of this publication is to stimulate discussion about the theory, method and everyday realities of listening to children in early education in Scotland. It aims to encourage early years educators to develop a shared understanding of what genuine 'listening to children' means in the Scotland of today.

Listening to children can be a relatively easy and yet troublingly complex process. In either case, much legislation and guidance promotes 'listening' as central to the future development of early years services in Scotland. *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3–5* (Scottish CCC, 1999) encourages early years educators to:

- extend children's abilities to communicate ideas and feelings, in a variety of ways
- listen to what children say
- enable children to make and express choices, plans and decisions,

all of which can be seen to support the development of successful learners, responsible citizens, confident individuals and effective contributors.

Similarly, *National Care Standards: Early Education and Child Care Up To The Age of 16* (Scottish Executive 2001) states that 'Children and young people will have opportunities to express their views, exercise choice and, where possible, influence the program' and *The Child at the Centre* suggests managers 'Talk to children and get their views about their experiences' (Scottish Executive, 2000)

Kathleen Marshall's paper further sets out the legal context that requires professionals and parents to listen to children. It relates her role as Commissioner to the Articles of the United Nations Convention on The Rights of The Child and explains the obligation for all service providers and staff to provide opportunities for children to be heard.

This legislation is given a theoretical basis when Peter Moss promotes a 'pedagogy of listening' that considers power relations in the early years work place and a more practical basis when he discusses Alison Clark's Mosaic approach to gathering young

children's views.

Linda Kinney further develops the practical implications of listening to children, for example, when making decisions on how to spend scarce resources in a nursery or when carrying out curriculum planning.

All of the papers contained in this publication also suggest that there are very practical reasons why we should listen to children. Indeed, these can be related to the large body of recent publications in this field that suggest that listening to children may:

- aid personal and social development
- enable children and young people to feel empowered
- develop their sense of responsibility
- improve decision-making and independence
- increase confidence and self esteem
- develop cooperation and sharing skills
- increase experience of working to timescales, deadlines and targets
- reinforce discussion, debating, listening, planning, negotiating and problem-solving skills
- lead to a heightened awareness of democracy and human rights
- promote child protection by developing avenues of dialogue between adults and children/young people
- afford children and young people opportunities to develop employment prospects, achieve aspirations and have fun. (Barnes, C and Mercer, G (eds) 2004)

These benefits speak for themselves, and it is hoped that this publication will encourage a spirit of enquiry that might lead to new ways of working and act as a stimulus to long-term developments within the early years sector and the education community as a whole in twenty-first century Scotland.

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Children's voices – early years

Professor Kathleen Marshall,
Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People

One of the interesting things about my job is that I meet people of all different ages and stages. I might be with young children in the morning, the media in the afternoon, and politicians in the evening.

I have always been impressed by the motto used by the Scottish Civic Forum: 'Change happens when those who do not usually speak are heard by those who do not usually listen.' I regard it as a primary aim of my role to try to facilitate that kind of listening by the powerful to those normally regarded as silent on serious issues. I choose those words carefully, because our focus today is on young children, so it may not be appropriate to say that they do not 'speak' or to describe them as 'silent.' As we all know, for most of them it is quite the reverse. But, while their speech may be smiled at, and their noise may evoke a variety of responses (depending on context and relationship), what they communicate is often not taken very seriously as a contribution to public debate. And it should be taken seriously, while bearing in mind that, to say that something is serious is not necessarily the same as saying that it is solemn. Children's rights are serious issues, but not necessarily solemn issues. For example, international law recognises the right of the child to be brought up in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding. It also asserts the right to play. So the fact that young children might sometimes express their views to us through play or through noisy and gregarious activities, should not lead us to downplay the seriousness of what they are telling us.

My job is about safeguarding and promoting children's rights, and one of those rights, which is central to this event today, is to be listened to and to have your views taken into account. I want to explore what that means and what it commits us to doing.

But here I also want to set out a little defence in advance. I am not an expert in early years, unless having had three children in three years gives me some sort of honorary degree in the subject. But that was quite some time ago now. My remit covers all children and young people from birth to 18, or to 21 if they have ever been in care; and it covers most aspects of their lives. I would not say that early years work had featured highly in my professional background. So I am here to listen and learn as well as to contribute.

Why rights?

I am sometimes confronted with debates about the appropriateness of 'rights' language for children, especially young children. Some will say that they have 'needs' rather than rights; and that it is more appropriate to speak of the duties that others have to fulfil those needs than to pretend that children can be active agents in pursuit of their own rights. There are lots of dimensions to that argument, and some of it gets very philosophical. I have explored and explained my view on this in various pieces of written work, so I won't get too deeply into the philosophy here today. What I will say is that, as a lawyer, I like rights, because you can use rights as tools to pursue a claim in a way that you can't when you are merely talking about needs or duties. Of course children have 'needs'; but it is difficult to claim fulfilment of the needs unless there is a right to have those needs met. The fact that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has articulated some fundamental claims as *rights* of children, gives me a reasonably strong tool to work with in trying to reshape our society in the direction of respect for the rights of children.

Some also argue that rights are selfish concepts, inherently individualistic and subversive of family or community. However, I present respect for the rights of children as the hallmark of a generous society. The earliest Declaration of the Rights of the Child, in 1924, proclaimed that 'mankind owes the child the best it has to give'. The present Convention arose out of the tide of good feeling generated by the 1979 United Nations Year of the Child. The General Assembly of the UN decided to start drafting a Convention on Children's Rights that would have a higher status in international law than the existing Declarations. It took 10 years, and a lot of debate, to produce the current text.

The Convention was seen as a gift to the children of the world. Some of the rights set out in it were already part of other international treaties, but some of these had not been ratified by states for reasons that had nothing to do with the provisions applicable to children. It was felt that, if the provisions about children were gathered together in one place, that would be more attractive. And it is a strategy that seems to have worked. The Convention on the Rights of the Child has been ratified by all but two countries in the world; the exceptions being Somalia and the USA. This makes it the fastest and most widely ratified treaty in the history of international law.

But what does it mean to children, especially young children? I have sometimes found myself in the situation of having to explain my role to children; and the method I have adopted to do so is one that I have now taken over as a more general strategy. By ratifying the Convention, our government has committed us to bringing our law, policy and practice into line with its provisions. Therefore, I describe the rights set out in the Convention as a set of promises made by our government and our country that it will do certain things to make life better for children and young people. And I explain that my job is to keep the government and the country to its promises.

What this approach underlines is the fact that the promises have been freely undertaken by our society, and that they are already part of public policy. Therefore – I do not have to argue that the best interests of children should be a primary consideration in all matters that affect them – article 3 of the Convention commits us to that approach. I do not need to argue that no child should be discriminated against – article 2 already promises that. And, very relevant to today's event, I do not have to argue that children have a right to have their views taken into account in matters that affect them – article 12 of the Convention articulates that promise.

I want to look a little more closely at article 12, and how the participation right set out in it relates to the 'best interests' principle in article 3.

Article 12 – Participation

For the purposes of the Convention, a child is any person under eighteen years of age. Therefore, the right to participate applies in principle to children of every age. There is, however, a threshold built into the article itself. This is what the first paragraph of article 12 says:

> **'1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.'**

The threshold is the ability to form a view which, as we will all be aware, becomes apparent at a very young age. That view may be expressed in a number of different ways. It is up to us to find ways of understanding those varied forms of expression. We have to do this if we are to respect the right and fulfil the promise.

Perhaps I can add a little word about semantics here. The official text of the Convention speaks of children's 'views'. Some summaries and unofficial versions refer to the child's 'opinion'. Some people I have spoken to have expressed reservations about whether very young children can express 'opinions', which they regard as having a deliberative, intellectual content. The difference between opinions and views is one that I am sure many academics could get a lot of mileage out of, given the opportunity. However, we can circumvent the problem by reverting to the official terminology of a 'view'.

There are also some who are suspicious of children's rights because they believe the implication to be that children must always have their way. However, that is not what the Convention says. Article 12 requires us to give children an opportunity to comment on matters that affect them; to remove barriers to the free expression of their views; and to take serious account of their views, due weight being given to age and maturity. It does not require us to do what children want. It does require us to explain why we are not going with what the children want if that is what is decided. And it is important to

explain to children how a decision was reached and how their views were taken into account. Otherwise, they will feel that they were not listened to. It is my experience that even quite young children can understand the difference between having their say and having their way. But they will not believe they have had their say if they do not believe that they have been listened to and taken seriously.

Article 3 – Best interests

Article 12 is also balanced by article 3, which focuses on the child's best interests. The first part of article 3 says:

> '1. In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration'.

What this means is that all public policy must be shaped by the best interests of children. This applies to the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Executive, to local authorities and other agencies, and to the courts. It means, for example, that 'best value' decisions must take account of the interests of children as at least a primary consideration, as must the setting of budget priorities.

One of my aims as Commissioner is to make sure that regard for the views and interests of children becomes explicit in decision-making processes. Over the coming year, I will be contacting local authorities and other agencies to remind them of this commitment and to explain that I will be asking questions about how these rights have been respected in decision-making processes; and I will be looking for some explicit reference in the relevant records.

Views and interests

I mentioned earlier that some people prefer a focus on children's needs to one on children's rights; and this is echoed to a certain extent by the preference of some for a focus on children's interests rather than their views. However, as we have seen, the Convention speaks of both.

So far, I have given you only the first paragraphs of articles 3 and 12. I want to expand a little on this and show you how they are, or have been, related and what this says about the underlying philosophy.

Article 3.1 states that:

'1. In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.'

Article 12 states that:

'1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.'

'2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.'

At an earlier stage in the drafting process, the second part of what is now article 12 was actually the second part of article 3, so that it read as follows:

'1. In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.'

'2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.'

What this shows is that the drafters understood the expression of views as an integral part of the determination of interests. The question implicit in this approach is: How can anyone claim to be acting in a child's best interests, if a child has views on the matter and that person does not know what those views are?

The provisions were rationalised into one article on views (12) and one on interests (3). I can understand why, but I think something was also lost here. The expression of views is a free-floating human right, but it should also be seen as an integral part of determining where a child's best interests might lie. Because the Convention has to be read as a whole, this is actually still the case, but the connection is not as clear and startling as it was before, in the earlier draft.

What this connection means is that adults who design the decision-making processes that affect children must give careful consideration to building in ways of allowing children to express their views in ways that the children themselves feel comfortable with. It is not enough just to regard them as miniature adults. We must remove any unhelpful barriers and recognise the sensitivities of children who are often aware of their own vulnerabilities in the face of powerful adult figures.

My role

I have a particular interest in articles 3 and 12 and the relationship between them, because they are central to my role as set out by the Scottish Parliament. The Commissioner for Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2003 says:

> 'Section 5:
> (2) The Commissioner must have regard to any relevant provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.
> (3) The Commissioner must, in particular –
> (a) regard, and encourage others to regard, the best interests of children and young people as a primary consideration; and
> (b) have regard to, and encourage others to have regard to, the views of children and young people on all matters affecting them, due allowance being made for age and maturity.'

The emphasis on children and young people's views is further developed by a requirement on me to consult children and young people on what work I should undertake, and also to involve them in my work. In doing this, I must pay particular attention to groups of children and young people who do not have other adequate means by which they can make their views known. I must also prepare and keep under review a strategy for involving children and young people in my work, and submit it to the Parliament as part of my annual report.

You may have noticed some publicity about the launch of my national consultation with children and young people. This is part of my commitment to working with them. My staff have analysed reports of consultations with children and young people over the past five years. They have organised focus groups of children and young people across the country, ranging in age from six to 21 and have also been out on the streets with detached youth workers to engage with those who are not attracted by the idea of a focus group. This provided the material on which they could devise a set of issues to put to the vote. We have identified seven issues that are currently being voted on by children and young people across Scotland. These are:

- Safer streets
- Bullying
- Things to do
- Schools/ education
- Schools/ health
- Transport
- Parents splitting up

However, this consultation is targeted at school-age children and above. So, have we forgotten about the pre-school age group?

The answer is – no. We are fully committed to seeking the views of younger children about what is important to them, but we need a different way of doing it. I shall tell you what our thinking is on this and I would be interested in your feedback.

We plan to engage professional storytellers to work with some pre-school children in a way that will identify what is important to them. This will be fairly open-ended, and we will reflect on it to find out if there are common themes or if the responses are very diverse. We will build on those results to develop a story-based pack to help parents and carers find out what is important to these children, and ask them to feed back to us. If there is a lot of commonality, we might present the pack in a sort of 'three wishes' format, but I don't think we can decide on the final format until we have done the preliminary work. What I would like to get out of it is a firm idea of what young children believe would really make life better for them. I would also want to receive the reflections of parents and carers on this. And this would help shape the policy development work of my office.

Taking time

In adopting this approach, I am acknowledging that young children's views cannot be just asked for and identified as a paper ballot based on question and answer. There is a need to enter into the child's world, as far as an adult can, and to try to see things from their perspective. For example, some time ago, Children in Scotland ran a competition called 'If I were Commissioner for Children and Young People'. Children of all ages were invited to submit art work, poems and music on this theme. I was one of the judges. One of the winning entries, from a four-year-old, expressed the view that 'everyone should be able to see a duck on a sunny day'. When I first read that and saw the accompanying work of art, I was enchanted. It seemed quite a quirky little insight into a child's world. But the more I thought about it, the more significant I realised it was, because it is about access to the simple, joyful experiences of life. And it had evocations of caring people in the background who were able and willing to facilitate the child's access to this sight, and who did not hurry him on towards something that, in their eyes, was more important, but just gave him time to stand and stare, and wonder.

And that really makes you think about how much time like that our very busy lives and increasingly risk-averse culture of childcare allow for this kind of interaction with young children. We do not always need to be 'doing things'. Sometimes we just need to be with them, to be their security zone and their audience as they ride on the kiddie cars or play in puddles, or watch the ducks.

If we really want to listen to young children, we need to take the time to get to know them and to reflect on and understand what they are telling us. I am certainly committed to taking that time, and I am looking for inspiration and ideas from the speakers and audience here today.

Small voices, powerful messages, many interpretations

Linda Kinney, **Head of Early Childhood, Play and Out of School Care, Children's Services, Stirling Council**

This section is an edited transcript of Linda's conference presentation.

I am really delighted to be able to share with you today some of our work in Stirling, and our understandings about it.

I would like to share with you what it looks like, what it feels like, and the implications of listening to children in practice in Stirling. I am going to start with some background and context, because I think that these are relevant in terms of the stage that we have reached. I then want to go on and present some examples from practice that I think exemplify our understandings about the social, the political and the educational context in which we operate in terms of listening to very young children. Finally, I want to finish by looking at some of the challenges and the wider implications of working in this way.

'Dae poppies bite?'

This was a question asked by Andrew, who was four years old when he asked this. Andrew attended a nursery school in a regeneration area in the east end of Glasgow and he was one of a group of children who had been invited to visit the home and garden of the head of the nursery. The head had brought together this small group of children who were going to visit her garden and she was telling them about all the wonderful things they would see when they got to her garden. In particular, she told them that they would see a crop of giant poppies. So Andrew, who had been listening very carefully and respectfully, leapt out of his chair and shouted 'dae poppies bite?'.* 'Of course not Andrew, now sit down please', said the Head.

*** Andrew misunderstood the word 'poppies' to mean 'puppies'.**

This was an episode that I witnessed as a newly qualified nursery nurse working in the east end of Glasgow, some time ago now, and I have many questions to pose, linked to the title of my presentation today: Small voices, powerful messages, many interpretations.

I would like to talk about the context that I mentioned earlier, and in particular the creation of Stirling Council at the time of local government reorganisation, in 1996. From the outset there was a real commitment to, and a belief in, the importance of

listening to children and this was demonstrated in a number of ways. It was initially and very powerfully demonstrated in the political context. There was a belief that 'listening' was at the core of the local democratic process and was a driving force in local government. Stirling was the first local authority in Scotland to establish a children's committee, and the impact of this was to ensure a focus on children and families. One of the features of our children's committee was the priority given to involving children, and as local authority officers taking papers to children's committee, we were expected to tell elected members and members of the public, how we had actively involved children in the consultation process and how we had engaged children and supported their participation in the decision making process. The impact of this was to establish a local culture and expectation around the importance of children's participation and local consultation on matters that affected them. Alongside this was a policy context that supported this way of working and thinking.

From the outset, in our early childhood policy, for example, we stated quite clearly that consulting with children and supporting their participation would be essential to the development and expansion of any services. This also held true when we developed our policy about an integrated children's service. At the core of this policy, was our view of children and young people as social actors, active participants in all the matters that affected them. Therefore, consultation and children's participation was at the core of both our thinking and practice.

When I was preparing for today, I reflected on why this happened in this way in Stirling and where it came from – that from the very outset this was the thinking and the viewpoint taken. Clearly, there were changing social and political trends, but on taking a closer look, it was the people and the values they held, that made the difference and in Stirling there were key people in key positions, who shared the same value base. These people were Keith Yates (our Chief Executive who is still in post), Corrie McChord (the leader of our Council who is still in post) and other key directors and heads of service, with strongly-based principles that, when translated into policy and practice, helped to make the difference. In early childhood we were also extremely lucky, because we had a number of people who were leading nursery centres and were leading thinking in these centres in terms of quality, curriculum development and improvement. They were very experienced and knowledgeable about early learning and about young children, and some of these colleagues are with me today. The impact of this context was that we developed both a strategic and what essentially became a concerted approach to our practice. This provided a strong foundation from which we could explore, research and take some risks, on how effectively we could listen to children and consult with them. There emerged a real enthusiasm to develop our understanding and practice of listening to children, and we took up the challenge to make the importance of listening to children – as a co-creative approach – more visible.

Many of you know that we began this work with our publication, *Children as Partners*, (Stirling Council Children's Services, 2001) and I would now like to reflect on a couple of examples, and to share our current understandings about these examples, because I think they reflect some critical issues around listening to children.

The Drum: an example of listening

I would like to start with The Drum, which some of you may be familiar with. This has become a much talked about example, and was made 'famous' when it reached the front page of the Times Educational Supplement. Now, early years colleagues will know that very few early years practice examples reach the front page of the Times Educational Supplement, and those that do are usually highly political, and of course listening to children and consulting with children under five is highly political!

So – back to The Drum. On the face of it, the consultation in The Drum is quite straightforward and many colleagues will be working in this way – but I'd like to just remind you about this story.

The children at Park Drive Nursery had asked if they could have some musical instruments so that everyone in the group could have one each. The staff felt that this would be a good opportunity to consult with the children, and so staff and children talked in small groups about musical instruments; they looked at some photographs of instruments; they looked at different instruments and discussed their properties and the options around the different types of instruments. Eventually they got to the stage of choosing instruments from a particular range and as they were doing this, one instrument really caught their eye. It was a large drum and, faced with the opportunity or the option to have a large drum or some small instruments, the children, (and it was the majority of them) opted for the large drum, even though they knew that not everyone would have an instrument each. Of course the impact of that group discussion and decision was immediate. Some children had difficulty in accepting the decision of the majority because it did not match their decision. Some early years educators had difficulty in accepting the decision of the majority also, and they were really concerned that it might adversely affect the minority. For some of the early years educators this led to a real dilemma about what they should do. Should they do something for those children who lost out and who felt upset? Or should they make it okay at a later time, when they were involved in other consultations? What all of this led to was the staff group reviewing fundamental principles about their role and responsibility as early childhood educators. I am going to come back to this, once I have discussed one more small example:

Amy and Darren: an example of listening

This is the example of Amy and Darren who were involved in curriculum planning – again at Park Drive Nursery – where the staff were very keen to get the children's views about the effectiveness of the curriculum plan. The staff used photographs, survey sheets and storyboards to support the children and to encourage them to share their views about curriculum planning. The children were given happy and sad face stickers to use and were asked to identify which activity they liked best and which ones didn't they like. Amy had spent a lot of time in the craft area and put a sad face sticker beside the craft area picture. Dianne, her key worker, was really surprised about this and said 'Amy, why have you done that? You go to the craft area a lot, but you've put a sad face next to it?'. And Amy said 'Yes but that's because Chloe, my pal, keeps taking me there'. Darren, when he was asked to put his sad and happy stickers on, put a very sad face beside the block area. When his key worker talked more about this with him, what became evident was he really liked to play with the blocks – he loved blocks – but as soon as he went into the area other people knocked his blocks down. Again, the impact of this was very significant, because it provided really important feedback to the staff. What they realised was that they had been concentrating on the physical aspects of their curriculum planning and had not sufficiently picked up on the impact of friendship groups and behaviours. This led to an evaluation of the effectiveness of their observational skills, and the nature of their interventions in both group and individual situations and again it was an important development in relation to staff thinking about their practice.

I am taking the time to reflect on these examples, because I think there are some important learning points for us, because what these two examples were showing were the real challenges of listening to children, consulting with children and supporting their participation. We saw in The Drum example the tussle that goes on between the children and the tussle between the children and the adults. It also exposes issues of power – something we need to talk a lot about if we are going to engage in consultation with children. In listening to children, we must face up to the issues of adult power and power bases between children. We cannot ignore this, and making this a listening principle exposes that – we must not be afraid to talk about it and recognise it. It also means working outwith a comfort zone. We cannot legislate for what is going to happen, and there is an example later on in this presentation that I think demonstrates this well. There are also some dangers in working in this way – one of these dangers is that we exploit information that children give to us. Another danger is the disengagement of adults and of children. Of course, one of the dilemmas running parallel to such potential dangers is the amazing and significant understandings that we get about ourselves and about children's early learning. For me, and my colleagues working in Stirling, there are clear implications for policymakers and service providers. There are also implications for how we support people in our settings to be able to work in this way, which means that we need to reflect on how best

we develop our leadership skills and professional responsibility for what we are doing and for the information that we have.

To summarise, there were two key outcomes from our work on consultation with children: new understandings and insights about children and ourselves, and a deeper understanding of what it means to listen – 'the pedagogy of listening'. We now talk a lot about listening and I confess that when we began this journey of listening to children, we really did not fully understand the depth involved in what it means to listen. We are now exploring the concept of a pedagogy of listening. In particular we are exploring the 'value' of listening – this involves our own values, (both personal and professional) and the need to explore our values and to take responsibility for sharing them – we have a responsibility to talk about them. We have a responsibility to give ourselves time to be able to understand that there may be differences between our values, as well as differences in how well and how effectively we are managing these values, either as individuals, as settings or as a service.

A great deal has now been written about emotion and learning, and we know that we can't learn or engage in learning situations without emotion. Listening involves emotion. The example of The Drum illustrates this very well – so let's recognise it! Let's get it out! Let's understand it!

Of course, in early years we talk a lot about relationships. What we can see from some of these examples is the range of relationships. When talking about a relationship we are talking about an action, a reflection, the learning aspect of a relationship and, also – something we are beginning to understand better – the moral aspect of a relationship. We are looking at the importance of relationships, and just how effectively we are connecting, or tuning in. I think we pride ourselves in the early years sector on how effectively we tune in to young children and again, what we are exploring is a deeper understanding of just how effectively we are engaged.

We are also developing new insights into and understanding of children – as well as of ourselves. We are not only learning about children's development in learning – we are learning a lot of things about who we are as adults (which is not an easy place to be). I will come back to this shortly. We are continually amazed by what we are learning. We feel compelled to know more – not just about the children, but about ourselves. Something happened to us as a service that I am only beginning to understand this now – on reflection. The act of making our consultation with children visible has changed us as a service absolutely, and in a number of ways. What we understand happened to us was, in a sense, almost like developing a collective consciousness and, as a result, our image of the child changed. It changed from seeing children as being needy or in need of protection to seeing children as rich, resourceful and full of potential – and all of this was something that has helped to lead us to where we are going next.

We could not ignore what was happening – and this has led us into something that we call the 'Documentation Approach' to early learning in Stirling. What I want to discuss now is how this process relates to how we are listening to children. We arrived at this approach because we began to make connections with other people who were also thinking and working in this way. For example, we have made connections with Carlina Rinaldi (who is working with us on this special project), Peter Moss, Alison Clark and other colleagues in Sweden and in New Zealand. One of the interesting aspects of coming to this point is that we now really understand how powerful it is to document, record and make visible children's learning. We recognised that we needed to continue to think about how best to do this.

Cat's Poo: an example of listening

I would like to share an example of our documentation with you called the Cat's Poo. This is Croftamie and this is Tessa, one of our educators with a group of seven children aged 3 to 5. The nursery was working on a context for learning and as it was springtime, the context was Changes. The children had grown some pea seeds in pots inside the nursery and were ready to transplant them into their garden, in their vegetable patch area. So they went out with Tessa, armed with their spades and wearing their outdoor clothes. They began to dig the patch when it became apparent that over the winter, the local cats had been using the vegetable plot for a toilet. So Tessa began to dig out the faeces and put them in a plastic bag and suddenly all thoughts of planting stopped because the children started to enjoy pointing out all the faeces for Tessa to put in the bag. Of course, a lively dialogue started along with that and the children began talking about how they could prevent more cat intrusions. So Cat's Poo, a bit like The Drum had really caught the imagination of the group and of course the early educator realised that was an important learning opportunity. When they went back into the nursery, seedlings still in their pots, Tessa asked the question 'How can we stop the cat pooing in the vegetable patch?'.

Hannah:	'They don't like mouses. I've got a solution, my daddy knows what to do!'
Ross:	'I know, we could get our roars back and scare them away.', (We had previously 'left' our roars outside on returning indoors!)
Tessa (the educator):	'Yes, but you would have to stay all night Ross.'
Ross:	'I know, you could get a tent'.
Lauren:	'A spider!'
Tessa:	'Would that scare it away Lauren?'
Hannah:	'My brother could stay out all night.'
Catherine:	'I think we should make a pretend monster, no – a dog.'
James:	'We could get a real dog from Granny.'
Caitlin:	'I could get my brother, 'cause he snores!'
Tessa (the educator):	'But I'd be worried to leave him out all night.'

Ross:	'We could get some doors on the tent and get nets out and put the nets all around the vegetable patch and they would get stuck. We could make a tent over the vegetable patch. How about a net over the vegetable patch Tessa?'
James:	'We could make a cat house.'
Tessa (the educator):	'OK, maybe then the cat would leave our vegetables alone.'
Hanna:	'I could get my old potty out for the cat to poo in every night.'
Ross:	'I've got a potty.'
Tessa:	'Mmm not sure I'd want to empty it every day though!'
Lauren:	'My brother could empty the potty.'
Ross:	'I know, a trumpet! We could scare them away.'
James:	'Or a drum'.
Georgina:	'A very long net.'
Ross:	'How about a snake, I've got a yellow blanket and we could peep out and blow a trumpet at it and scare them away?'
James:	'I've got a wee torch and when I see the cat do a poo in the vegetable patch I'll just peep out and bang my drum at it.'
Tessa (the educator):	'And who is going to stay out all night and wait for the cat?'
Ross:	'The mummys and daddys could all stay!'

This conversation then led to a project that the nursery and the group of children became involved in. There are many learning points that this example demonstrates and there are many understandings we can take from it, although there isn't time to explore them all here today.

As a result of working in this way, our children are more visible. Their learning, their views and their ideas are visible. What our early educators report back to us is that our children are becoming more confident about expressing their views and ideas and sharing their thinking on a range of topics. They are also more outgoing. This ongoing dialogue between adults and children is also creating an intimacy between them, and that in itself is creating some deeper relationships between the children and the adults and indeed between the children themselves.

I have not said very much about families as yet, but we know from our research that there is also an impact on families. What we find is that families are increasing their level of involvement in early years settings and centres, as they can see more clearly the kind of work that is going on. They are more informed about what their children are doing every day when they are out of contact with them, and they are more confident about their role in listening to children. Parents are telling us that they are talking more to their children about what's happening in nursery. As a result, parents are telling us more frequently that they are really amazed at what their children know.

So we are getting deeper insights and understandings about how and what children are learning, about children's interests, talents and ability and about how to listen and how to value listening more.

But there are also real tensions in working in this way, which I touched on earlier. For some staff it is not easy. There can be differences of opinion and views. Working in this way means entering into professional dialogue, and that is sometimes uncomfortable for people to do. Some staff are more understanding than others about how to engage in this particular way of working, and those who don't feel so confident can feel anxious about 'getting it right', This is a way of working that is not supported by tick list or, and helpful as it is, *The Child at the Centre* (Scottish Executive, 2000). This is not going to help you to be able to decide how you respond. Take the Cat's Poo example. If you were sitting with that group of children, where would you take that conversation next? And who would be able to help you to understand how and where that conversation could go? Working in this way also takes courage, and takes us back to the issue about ethics and about how effectively we have gained children's permission and parents support to work in this way. These are some of the many questions that we are examining and asking what it means for us as a service. I think above all what I begin to understand about how we are working, is that it is essentially about how we live life, how we are living and learning together, and that is what we are doing in the early years service – we are living life – and so our work continues and we will continue to explore, research and take risks in this journey to better understand our potential …

What I would like to think is that if Andrew asked the question 'Dae poppies bite?' today in one of our early years centres in Stirling, the possibilities would be endless.

Listening to young children – beyond rights to ethics

Peter Moss, **Professor of Early Childhood Provision, Thomas Coram Research Unit, University of London**

There are four main areas for discussion in this paper 'Listening to young children: beyond rights to ethics'.

These are as follows:

- Why there is a growing interest in listening to children.
- The increasing body of work that is being generated on this topic.
- The benefits and risks involved in listening to children.
- The possibility of moving beyond a 'rights' based approach to listening towards an 'ethics' based approach. (Please note that these are not being put forward as alternative approaches, but as complementary ones).

A growing interest in listening to children

The growing interest in listening to children has been fuelled, as you will know, by a number of influences – one of which we have heard about from Kathleen Marshall today. Children's rights have gone up the political agenda in the last ten or fifteen years, and participation – as you have heard – is very much a children's rights issue – particularly Articles 12 and 13 in the UN Convention.

But listening to children is also of growing interest to the academic world where I come from. Participation is very much a part of what is sometimes called the new sociology of childhood, or childhood studies, and these disciplinary perspectives on childhood view children as active subjects, citizens with rights, experts in their own lives and active participants in research. In other words, the new sociology of childhood emphasises children as subjects to be listened to, not objects to be studied.

And then there is also growing interest, I think, in listening to children in the business world. I am thinking here of areas such as marketing, because, like it or not, as my Norwegian colleague Anne Trine Kjorholt points out, children today are increasingly being drawn into economic markets as consumers and workers. So there are a variety of influences, including other influences I haven't touched upon, coming together from different directions and with different objectives in mind.

To date, most of the research on listening has focused on older children. That's where a lot of the debate was in the early and mid-nineties, and that has been so for a number

of reasons. A lot of the key UN Convention players were mainly involved with older children. They were NGOs and so on, whose interest was in the school-aged child and in young people. Then there is the dominance of the paradigm of development, which is very powerful in the early years field. This can produce an image of young children as incomplete and at the start of a process of linear progress, which will deliver them eventually to maturity, adulthood and the ability to fully express themselves. So, in a way, there is a possibility that this paradigm of development implies that children have less to say when they are young and they have less reason to be listened to. The third reason I think is really important. There has been a tendency to focus on older children because of the dominance of certain languages, particularly speech and writing. But the theory of The Hundred Languages of Children, makes it very clear that we have no excuse for thinking that these are the only two languages available to us in working with children (or indeed adults), or in listening to them. So in some ways the problem is that listening to young children requires adults to learn, or relearn, and revalue other languages, and I think a lot of the issues in listening to children become much more interesting once we get beyond the idea that listening involves one person talking and the other person hearing them.

Body of work on listening

There are lots of other possibilities once we think about the idea of the hundred languages of childhood – or should we say adulthood as well? Malaguzzi says that 'children are born with 100 languages and by the age of six they have lost 98 of them'. (Malaguzzi, L, 1993) That is a very strong and powerful idea. But, as you have heard today already – and many of you will know this – an increasing amount of work is being done in listening to young children. We are getting to a critical mass, a 'lift-off', where lots of people are coming together to do some really exciting things, and for a variety of different reasons, and rationales. Linda Kinney has already focused on this in her contribution.

The Thomas Coram Research Unit – and especially my colleague Alison Clark – has done a lot of work on listening to young children. In 2003 we conducted an international review on listening to and consulting with young children, for the Department for Education and Skills in England. You can download this from their website (www.dfes.gov.uk). It gives examples of people who are working in this way. It has an interesting chapter on what is happening in Denmark – the acknowledged world leader in this field. Just published is a book called *Beyond Listening*, which is edited by Anne Trine Kjørholt from Norway, Alison Clark and myself. (Clark, Kjørholt and Moss, (eds), 2005)This brings together contributions from 13 practitioners and researchers from six countries and contains a wealth of fascinating, first-hand experience.

A lot of our work at the Thomas Coram Research Unit has been around the development of what Alison has called 'The Mosaic Approach' The first publication, called *The Mosaic Approach* (Clark, A and Moss, P, 2001) was developed as a result of researching issues important to young children in nurseries. The approach aimed to discover children's perspectives of the nursery, and what was important for them in a nursery. *Spaces to Play* (Clark, A and Moss, P, 2005) came out earlier this year. This publication is an account of a fascinating project in which young children have been involved in designing their outdoor environment. Alison is currently working on the 'Living Spaces' project, where young children under five and a practice of architects are working together on the design of a new children's centre.

The 'mosaic approach'

Why use the term 'mosaic approach'? A mosaic is made up of many small pieces that need to be put together to make a picture. Likewise, the mosaic approach gives young children the opportunity to demonstrate their perspectives in a variety of ways, calling on their hundred languages. So the mosaic approach brings together various forms of documentation and evidence. And it starts from a very specific view or image of children as experts in their own lives. This is, I think, a very powerful phrase, and one that is used a lot by researchers as well as practitioners. And it makes sense – if you want to find out about childhood, why not go and ask the people who are living it? Children are skilful communicators, particularly if you think about the hundred languages and you don't think about just speech and writing. Children are rights-holders, as Kathleen Marshall has pointed out. And children are also meaning makers – they are constantly trying to construct meaning out of their lives.

To sum up, the mosaic approach is multi-method and multilingual. It uses a variety of tools that play to young children's strengths and build on them.

Methods used in the mosaic approach

One of the methods used in this approach is to observe children. Another method – child conferencing – is an adapted form of interviewing children. Alison uses another interesting method. She gives digital cameras to two-, three- and four-year-olds, and they go off and take photographs. Or yet another method is where children go on tours of their environment and make maps. There could be a hundred methods, as well as a hundred languages. And it's a two-stage process. Firstly you document – the children document – using a variety of methods, such as those just mentioned, then the children and adults reflect on this documentation, enter into a dialogue, reflect, act and interpret what they have discussed. Listening is always an interpretive process, and we need to recognise its essentially subjective nature.

The benefits and risks of listening to children

This work on listening is of the utmost importance. I think it is actually potentially subversive and enormously transformational. And I think it has enormous benefits. But it is important to remember the cautionary words of the French philosopher Michel Foucault – 'Not everything is bad' he says, 'but everything is dangerous'. (Bernauer, J and Rasmussen, D, 1988). And there are, I think, many risks as well as benefits arising from this listening to children that I think we need to confront and think about. We need to keep a balance here. Many of these risks arise because of power relations, which Linda Kinney has already flagged up. As Foucault says, 'Human relations, whatever they are, whether it is a question of communicating verbally or a question of a love relationship, an institutional or an economic relationship, power is always present. I mean the relationship in which one wishes to direct the behaviour of another.' And all of us, children and adults, are implicated in power relations.

In my opinion, some of the most interesting work on early childhood today is being inspired and influenced by the work of Michel Foucault. Although he didn't write specifically about childhood, he explored principles and ideas that people in the early years field are really taking up. In the book *Doing Foucault in Early Childhood Studies: applying poststructural ideas* (Mcnaughton, G, 2005), students and practitioners write about how they are working with Foucauldian theories which, on the surface, might seem very abstract and difficult, but are really opening up all sorts of fascinating possibilities. I think in the early childhood field we really benefit from border-crossing into areas where we haven't often thought to look before.

Three risks

I now want to flag up three risks. Gaile Cannella, an American researcher, sums up the first risk very well: 'When voice is conferred upon the other without recognising or attempting to alter the inequities that created the original distinctions, the giving of voice or listening to just becomes another colonising apparatus.' (Cannella, G and Viruru, R, 2004). Even within a group of children there will be differences of power and inequalities. Glenda MacNaughton, for example, looks at some examples around gender, analysing how boys and girls are differently positioned in a group.

Because there is a lot of work currently being done about participation of communities in the development process, some very relevant and interesting literature is being written in this field. This, in turn, is developing a stimulating and interesting set of ideas about how you can engage with these power issues. For example, imagine that you are sending aid to a village in Asia. You will need to discuss how to spend the aid, but in doing so you will find that some people will be more vociferous than others. How do you deal with this?

The second risk is that these days listening has become very much a political or managerial tactic – a sort of tokenism – where listening is part of spin. So that instead of subverting or resisting power, listening becomes a means for reinforcing power.

And then thirdly, listening can become a way of managing behaviour more effectively, a means for governing more effectively – because if I listen to what you say, I can find out what I need to know to make sure you achieve the outcomes that I want you to have. I can find out what makes you happy, what makes you sad and what interests you.

Beyond rights to ethics

In the final part of this paper, I want to argue that 'rights' provide only one basis to justify listening. I want to discuss the idea that we can practise listening as a way of being and a way of living that should permeate everything we do in life – not just when we are at work from nine to five. This was first brought home to me very vividly, more than a decade ago, when I was editing a book called *Valuing Quality in Early Childhood Services* (Moss, P and Pence, A, (eds) 1994). I asked for a contribution from a very interesting Danish researcher – Ole Langsted – who had been doing work in the eighties, listening to children in kindergartens. The Danes were well ahead of us in this area of research, and used some fascinating methods, including tours and map-making. Ole wrote his contribution, and I asked him to spell out how to listen using bullet points. He is a very gentle, nice man, and I remember his patient reply. You need to want to listen in the first place and no amount of bullet points will help you if you don't have a culture of listening'.

This is what he wrote:

> 'More important [than structures and procedures] is the cultural climate which shapes the ideas that the adults in a particular society hold about children. The wish to listen to and involve children originates in this cultural climate.'

And that has been with me ever since. Of course there are tools and there are procedures and these are very important – but the question you have to ask is 'As a culture, as a society, do we want to listen to each other? Do we want to conduct democratic relationships?'.

This was re-enforced for me recently while I was editing Carlina Rinaldi's book *In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia* (Rinaldi, C, 2005). During the course of this work, Carlina sent me an e-mail that I think expressed the same idea. She said 'Listening is not only a technique, and a didactic methodology. It is a way of thinking and seeing ourselves in relationship with others and the world. Listening is an element that connects and that is part of human biology and is in the concept of life itself.' It is a way of thinking and seeing ourselves. It's about how we as people wish to be in the world. It's about how we want our society to be. It's a cultural political and ethical idea.

I think you can also understand Carlina Rinaldi's view when you read her chapter in *Beyond Listening* (Clark, Kjorholt and Moss, (eds) 2005) and here she challenges us to think on the meaning of listening. Because one of the interesting things is that there is a lot of talk about listening, but you rarely get anybody saying 'But what do you mean? What do you mean when you talk about listening?' And Carlina's chapter is one of the few examples I have seen that does just this – it really thinks deeply about what we might mean by listening. Because I think we tend almost by default to think listening is 'I speak, you hear' – that it is a sort of one-to-one correspondence, that it is a very simple process.

So what does she say? She says 'We listen not just with our ears but all our senses. And we listen to the thousand [it has gone up to a thousand] languages, symbols and codes we use to express ourselves and communicate.' So, again, not just speech, not just ears – it's everything. It's all the different ways in which we relate, and in which we respond to each other. As Linda Kinney pointed out, 'Listening is emotion. It is generated by and stimulates emotion'. And 'Listening is welcoming and being open to difference'.

Listening is an 'active verb that involves interpretation'. That seems to me to be a great challenge because if we accept that listening involves interpretation, it introduces many complexities into the situation. It doesn't produce answers, it generates questions. The more you listen, the more questions come up. And what I like about Carlina and her colleagues is that they see uncertainty as a value, not as a problem. 'Uncertainty is not insecurity but … the security that every truth is such only if we are aware of its limits and its possible falsification.' Carlina concludes this essay by saying 'Listening is not easy. [It requires] suspension of our judgements and above all our prejudices; it requires openness to change.'

Gunilla Dahlberg and I argue in *Ethics and Politics in Early Childhood Education* (Dahlberg, G and Moss, P, 2005) that one ethical basis for listening is what is called 'the ethics of an encounter'. This originates from one of the most important philosophers of the last century, Emmanuel Levinas. The central idea of the 'ethics of an encounter' is the importance of relating to the 'Other', in a way that respects otherness and avoids making the Other into the Same – what Levinas calls 'grasping'. Western civilisation is based on this concept that we 'grasp' others by bringing them into our way of understanding. So we understand the 'Other' in terms of our theories, concepts and experiences. When we are faced by difference, or diversity, we try to fit it into our system of understanding. I have my ideas about how the world is. I meet somebody who is different and I struggle to make sense of them in my own terms. I try to eradicate their otherness and make them into the same. I *grasp* them into my way of understanding the world.

Gunilla Dahlberg has argued in another paper that working with the ethics of an encounter is a tremendous challenge in education because education is very much given to grasping the 'other' and fitting the 'other' into pre-determined systems and understandings. Typically, we know what we want children to be – we have the outcomes and the assessments, and the job is to grasp the child. She writes 'To think *another whom I cannot grasp* is an important shift and it challenges the whole scene of pedagogy … [for it is] a teaching that interrupts the philosophical tradition of making ourselves the master of the child.' There is a strong tradition in education, to fit the child into our preconceived classifications. We have our systems and we fit children into them.

In our book Gunilla and I argue that the ethics of an encounter put listening at the heart of education and we use a pedagogy of listening to illustrate how this happens. This pedagogy of listening has been developed very much by Carlina Rinaldi and her colleagues in Reggio Emilia. The pedagogy of listening understands learning as a process, whereby we develop interpretative theories, provisional theories, about the world. We are always doing this – young or old. And these theories are generated through sharing, dialogue and listening. In her new book, Carlina puts it like this: 'Our theories need to be listened to by others … any theorisation, from the simplest to the most refined, needs to be expressed, to be communicated, and thus to be listened to, in order to exist'. It is here we recognise the values and foundations of the pedagogy of listening. So we construct our theories, we have a dialogue with others about them, others listen and respond and then we construct yet new theories. This is the process of learning as the Reggio Emilia practitioners understand it – and I think the theory is a challenging one.

Conclusion

To conclude, my argument has been that listening is an expression of rights, and that rights have an important part to play. But listening, I think, is also an expression of an ethical practice. Listening is the ethics of an encounter. It is also the expression of democratic practice. Because if we are able to recognise difference, to accept different interpretations and engage in dialogue, then we are conducting democratic practice. And if we bring listening into our work and our practice, then we are making ethics and politics first practice in early childhood education.

Continuing the conversation – the implications of listening to children

John Davis, **Lecturer, BA Childhood Studies, Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh**

The aspiration to consider pedagogy in early years is at the centre of the talks that form the basis of this publication. This has been defined in an earlier Learning and Teaching Scotland publication, *Let's Talk About Pedagogy* (Learning and Teaching Scotland 2005) as:

- a process of considering our practices
- a process of recognizing children as active agents who make choices
- a process that employs diverse learning contexts to support a variety of approaches to learning
- an approach that values the importance of play and is underpinned by knowledge of child development
- an approach based on the recognition that parents, children and professionals are a learning community and that professionals should continually review their practices.

This pedagogy paper goes on to consider how the role of early years practitioners relates to issues of social justice, stating:

> **'Pedagogy is about learning, teaching and development, influenced by the cultural, social and political values and principles we have for children in Scotland, and underpinned by a strong theoretical and practical base.' (Ibid)**

The aim of Learning and Teaching Scotland's Saturday seminars was to connect the listening with children agenda to debates concerning pedagogy in early years education. The above quote demonstrates that both concepts are intertwined and that their development within this field may be reliant on each other.

Yet in the practicalities of the workplace, there can be many barriers to listening to children. These can include: lack of staff training, lack of space or time, lack of staff, lack of clear understandings between staff and managers and lack of resources in terms of both methods and tools. This can particularly be the case when working with children with communication differences, where strategies with a long lead in will be required. However, it is important to recognize that effective planning should reduce the impact of these issues and that when educators value young children's and families' views, they can always find time to listen.

It is suggested that there may also be huge benefits for individual staff, organisations or services when children and young people are encouraged and supported to participate in decision-making processes. These may be that:

- children will influence the design and delivery of the service making it more relevant
- children will introduce new and innovative ideas
- the involvement of children will help to ensure that resources are used more effectively
- potential new clients will recognise that the way in which the service is delivered reflects the needs and opinions of its users
- staff and managers are able to plan more effective professional development. (Hill et al 2004, Kirby and Bryson 2002)

Yet these benefits may only be realised if we recognize that talking and listening should usually lead to some change in outcomes for parents and children; that techniques have to be developed within early years settings to enable different children's views to be recognised and that this may result in educators offering a range of options for parents and children.

This shift may also require educators to balance the needs of the child in the present with longer term educational aims – the future skills needed to be a primary school pupil, teenager or adult.

The development of a balanced early years environment is promoted by *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3–5*, which encourages early years educators to offer children a range of structured and unstructured learning opportunities. The listening to children agenda is also supported by approaches to team work such as those that occur within early years centres in Stirling by Linda Kinney, which enable more flexible and responsive practice. This type of approach and other traditions within early years in Scotland – for example that of Robert Owen's, that children should be encouraged to share, be kind, be curious and ask questions, – provide us with great hope that this publication, *Let's Talk About Listening to Children*, will act to support those many, excellent educators who already listen to children, and that it will encourage others to follow their lead.

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