

## WAYS OF LISTENING TO CHILDREN: CHILDREN'S VOICE IN A NURSERY SCHOOL SETTING

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### ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in children's experiences and perspectives of their own lives. Researching with children involves actively listening to their voices and validating their stories; working with young children can open spaces for meaningful, respectful, and inclusive engagements in learning in both formal and non-formal education settings. Children are no longer viewed primarily as becomings, but as beings, whose ideas, experiences, choices and relationships are interesting in their own right. Children, like adults, are "social agents", who make sense of their experiences. This paper discusses the multi-level several approaches regarding the assessment of children's metaphorically termed "listening to children's voices", adopting Mortimer and Gallow (2007) method. In this study, children were provided with various experiences and then were provided with the chance to describe their opinion through different ways. The need to understand children's views in early years setting has been addressed in this study and the strong influence of such an activity in children's learning has also been identified. This study also presents an empirical study conducted in an early years setting which emphasised on different methods through children's perspectives could be heard.

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## INTRODUCTION

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) led to the adoption of children's rights by countries around the world, with the United Kingdom becoming a signatory in 1990 (DFE, 2014). Childhood is considered as one of the most important stages of human life, and in the current era a new approach is being taken by developed and developing countries which allows children to give their views, contributing actively to their process of growth and development (Palaiologou, 2014). There are debates concerning the importance of including the perspectives of young children in their learning as a means of bringing about improved outcomes (*ibid.*). Listening to children's voices is also seen as being an essential part of good practice in early childhood research (Tay-Lim and Lim, 2013). When children are listened to, their interests and participation are considered in planning the curriculum and assessments, assessing the effectiveness of provision (McTavish *et al.*, 2012).

It is necessary to listen to children's perceptions of learning as playing activities, which this study does, because it can contribute towards bringing about improved outcomes for them. This study adopts a method recommended by Mortimer and Gallow (2007) as a means of observing children over the course of the day in order to understand the ways in which they interact with teachers in a nursery setting. There are various ways in which children can be helped to communicate their opinions: offering options and perceiving their choices; communicating in a group conversation; using simple questions; conducting one-to-one conversations; and telling stories. Children who have not yet acquired language commonly use body language to 'voice' an opinion (Mortimer and Gallow 2007; Roberts and Harpley, 2006). Such techniques, if used at the nursery, could encourage children to express their views about the activities (Mortimer and Gallow, 2007).

### Listening to Children's Voices

It is undoubtedly that children have a fundamental right to have their voices heard, as noted in Article 12 of the United

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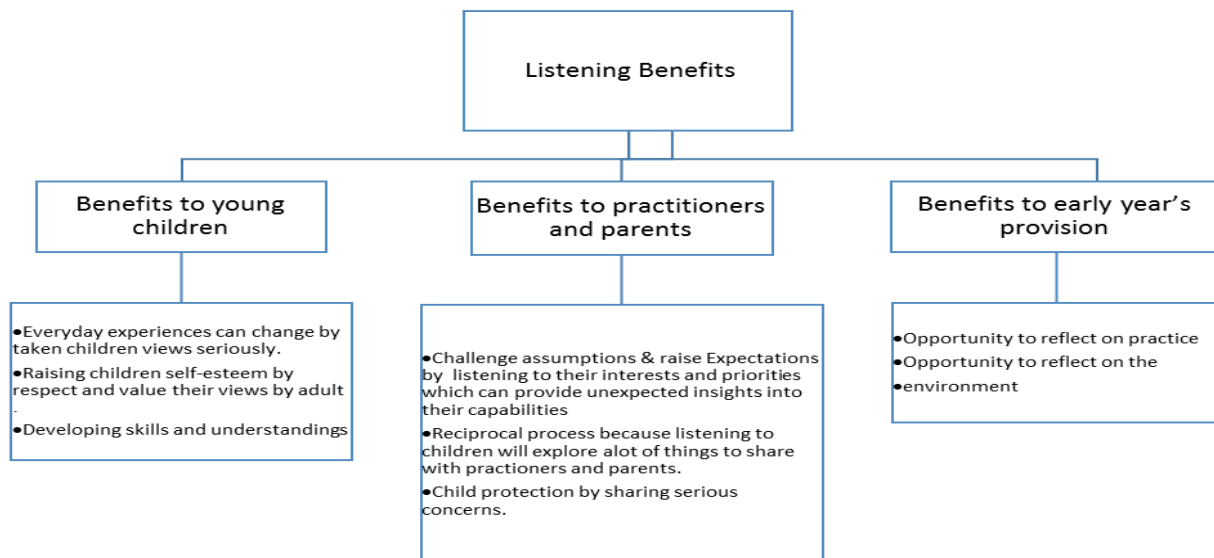


Figure 1. (Adapted from Clark 2004)

Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNHCR, 1989, p. 9). In the United Kingdom, the Every Child Matters Policy (DFES, 2003) made detailed provisions to safeguard the future of children regardless of their socioeconomic or ethnic backgrounds. The Child Care Act of 2004 pushed for co-operation between families, schools and relevant agencies. Together they were intended to strengthen the avenues through which children's voices could be heard (DFES, 2003; *ibid.*). These new developments brought in policy requirements about consulting children on their views on early years provision. Providers of early years provision were also required to record evidence showing how feedback from children had been incorporated into their planning (*ibid.*, 2007, p. 14). Clark (2004, p. 1) offers a useful definition of listening from the practitioner's viewpoint:

An active process of receiving (hearing and observing), interpreting and responding to communication – it includes all the senses and emotions and is not limited to the spoken word.

Clark also emphasises that listening constitutes “an ongoing part of tuning in to all young children as individuals in their everyday lives” (*ibid.*). In other words, giving ear to children's voices should be embedded in the principles underpinning practice. It involves practitioners intentionally showing consideration for children's views and opinions and is also achieved through the recording of pedagogical interactions (Young Children's Voices Network, 2009). As Mortimer and Gallow (2007) note, children's voices represent their feelings and opinions. They deserve to be heard, but developing an ear for these is not as simple as, for example, getting feedback from questionnaires. Instead, these authors emphasise that it needs to flow from beliefs that we hold and should be an integral part of working with children. It is a culture that needs to be developed. Researchers working with children in an early years setting need to be aware, then, that communicating with children is not just limited to verbal interactions but involves using all the senses and emotions. Listening to children involves communicating effectively, encouraging participation, tuning in and offering choices (Mortimer and Gallow, 2007).

### Benefits of Listening to Children's Voices

The early year's education system considers listening as an essential part of its ethical practice. It is the fundamental aspect of the development in early childhood (Bath, 2013). The children are highly impacted through listening since they come to believe that there is a two way communication present and that their voices are being heard. The observation and assessment within early years is also based on this fundamental practice (Bromley, 2009). Imagination, honesty, patience, timing, openness, collaboration and respect are all virtues which are based on listening to children in their early childhood years (Young Children's Voices Network, 2008). Relationships and communication can be formed with the children if they are being heard as they are now able to present themselves in a manner that they are understood (EYFS 2007). The advantages of listening to children are shown in the following figure.

**Early Years Foundational Stage (EYFS):** The framework for the childhood practice is known as the Early Years Foundation stage that allows the establishment of such an environment where the children are provided with an opportunity of being heard (DFE, 2012). When enabling environments are present, the children learn and develop. Their individual needs are catered to and a strong partnership is formed between the caretakers or practitioners and the children (*ibid.*; 3). Children are observed to express themselves in a real life experience context which is why it is essential that at an early age there is an enabling environment where they can share those experiences. Play, curiosity and exploration are the aspects which must be supported to bring about their highest level of creativity. They must be allowed to share their thoughts, ideas and feelings along with providing them opportunities to explore. For instance, movement, dance, art, imaginative play, mathematics, technology and design would allow this creativity to be exhibited (EYFS 2007; 2). The best outcomes in children can be brought about through enabling environments. The priority for the early years setting must be to listen to the children and make it a part of the assessment and planning (DFES, 2012). Hence, the EYFS employ practitioners must possess the following.

1. The ability to understand the perspectives of children and the depth of it to help develop the overall pedagogical approach.
2. The perspectives of the children between the staff must be understood through leadership skills in order to make sure it doesn't become tokenistic.
3. The perspective of the children must be linked with developmental and learning stages in the Early Years Foundation Stage to establish a phased program which helps children attain the desired skills and abilities.
4. Within a setting, throughout their time period, the attitudes and ability of critical provision must be understood.
5. The quality provision expected by the parents, colleagues and children must be managed along with any tensions or conflicts (Coleyshaw et al., 2010; 4-5).

### Case Study

To conduct a thorough analysis, a nursery setting in the UK was visited. The idea was to understand how the children are able to communicate their likes and dislikes. It was observed that opportunities and activities were created for the children to voice their likes and dislikes through these activities along with being able to express themselves. The basis of inquiry is carried out through the following questions:

1. Are there any activities which the children are hesitant or less keen to participate?
2. Which activities are mostly enjoyed by the children and why?
3. How do the practitioners listen to the children when using the curriculum?
4. During the day, which kind of activities are the children involved in?

### Ethical Consideration

Gaining access to the designated research context via the gatekeepers is obligatory prior to the research (Greig and Taylor, 1999, p. 152). Therefore, before undertaking the study, we visited the school which was close to my house in Manchester. We entered the school past the receptionist by submitting the consent form to receive permission to conduct this project. We chose a class which my friend's daughter attends, and had prepared a parental consent form before initiating the study. After seeking and receiving the approval of first the school and then the children's parents, we had the chance to begin my first visit to let the pupils get to know me.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

Multi-method techniques support ethical practices because they permit young children to actively document/record their ideas and feelings (O'Kane, 2000). A complete evaluation of the voices of the children needs to be carried out which is why several methods would be combined at applied to the early years setting in Manchester, UK. The children are able to display their likes, dislikes and needs when they are provided with choices during play time (Mortimer and Gallow, 2007). Hence, it is through this study that several approaches regarding the assessment of children's voices can be extracted. The Mortimer and Gallow (2007) adaptation can be observed in Figure 2.

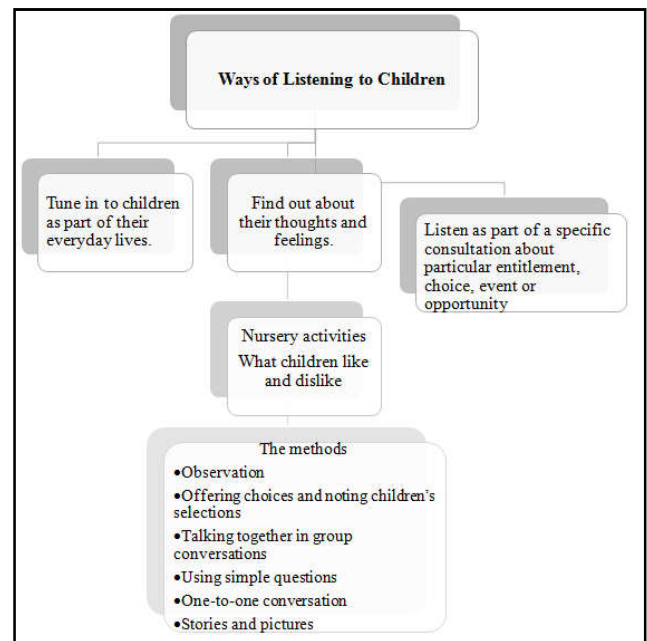


Figure 2. Adapted from: Mortimer and Gallow, 2007

Several factors are responsible for influencing the listening of the children's voices. These include the expertise of the practitioners, the ages of children worked with, the time, resource and the space which is made available. The method being designed as part of this report will take into account these aspects. Observation is considered as one of the essential methods which need to be used for listening to young children. Strengthens and choices of the young children can be observed by the practitioner. The voices of the children can be heard by forming a culture of observation by the practitioners (Mortimer, and Gallow, 2007). Interviews are another method which would be used to hear the voices of the children. For adults, this method is used quite often and is popular which is why it is being used for children as well (Clark, 2004). There are several methods for carrying out interviews out of which the one suggested by Miller is most appropriate. The adults were able to communicate with the children during circle time where a similar approach to interviewing was being carried out (Miller, 1997). Child to child interview is also another style during which older children are required to act as consultants to the younger children. The children are provided with opportunities to communicate their ideas through still and moving films (Clark, 2004). The extraction of the fundamental beliefs of the children and recording their views at different stages of their life is carried through these kinds of programs (ibid). Several case studies have shown that this process is effective and successful. Polaroid, videos and digital still cameras are some of the examples which are suitable for children 3 years and above (Clark and Moss 2001; Lancaster and Broadbent 2003). Children's views can also be illustrated by allowing them to take photographs. This is a multi-method approach also known as the mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2001). By performing arts and play, the adults are allowed to naturally communicate with the children in an early years setting. Hence, consultations may also be possible by conducting role playing activities and using toys or puppets as intermediaries. For instance, a teddy bear was used by the nurseries to initiate conversation with the children at Day-care Trust (1998). Situations may be introduced through imaginative play, pictures and stories in order to encourage the

children to converse (Mortimer and Gallow, 2007). As Clarke (2000) pointed out:

Techniques include the use of mapping and modelling, diagrams, drawing and collage, child to child interviewing and drama and poetry. These participatory research methods are designed to empower those who take part by enabling people to represent their own situations, to reflect on their experiences and to influence change. ... These tools appear to have particular relevance when seeking to reveal the multiple perspectives of young children who are themselves the least powerful individuals in the institutions they are part of. (p. 3). The main goal of using multi-method techniques is to appreciate the children voice and seek diversity in their views. (O'Kane, 2000). In the present case study, the Mortimer and Gallow's (2007) methods would be adopted to extract data from children regarding their likes and dislikes. The methods are the following:

1. Group talk
2. One on One conversations
3. Through photography observing children
4. Use of Simple questions
5. Providing choices and analysing the selections by the children
6. Introducing situations through imaginative play, pictures and stories to help children express their feelings (Mortimer and Gallow, 2007, 11).

For the effective ability to listen to the children voices, there are several strategies built for monitoring (ibid, 2007, 14)

- Using the suggestions brought forward by Mortimer and Gallow and listening to the children. During circle time, the practitioners must constantly speak to the children, carry out individual recording, make notes of interviews, provide play choices and record the experiences being told in a certain setting.
- The policy requirements which state how the children must be consulted and how they view their early year's provision.
- In order to show how the planning is done, the sources of evidence must be recorded keeping in mind the children's feedback.

McAuliffe (2003) presented a model known as the Listening Cycle which will be used as part of this report. The active listening of the young people would be carried out through the development of the rough. There are 5 steps included which are as following:

1. One of the most essential communication skills is listening, which means using the right tone and body language to communicate with the children. They need to be encouraged to express their views and develop conversation by asking questions.
2. Continuity of care is possible through the process of documenting of the views of the children. It is possible to share the documents with the parents or any guardian who takes care of them.
3. After the listening and recording of the children's view is carried out, it would be possible to consider their preferences and reflect on the practices.

4. After extracting the views, it is essential to take action. This will show that their views and ideas are being appreciated.
5. Children must be asked about their honest feedback regarding the services being offered. It is then essential to consider their views. Through this process it is possible to differentiate between actually being listened to and feeling that you have been listened to (McAuliffe 2003).

### Procedure

The class of 3-5 year olds was visited four times in a nursery setting. There was a purpose behind every visit which ranged from understanding the children and having them to accept the activity as part of the class environment to study their voices. The data collection reflection summary is as follows.

#### *Day One (March/10)*

To become associated with the children closely, an exploratory visit was made. The nature of activities was understood and it was required that the children become associated with the analyst as well. The children were quite eager to participate in the activities. The daughter of the analyst is also present in the same nursery which is why it was easier for the children to recognize the individual. The process was restricted to efficiently communicating with the children and forming a strong bond with them. The painting, reading and playing activities were participated in. The children are mostly noticed to spend their time in the outside playing area. Hence, the question was to whether establish activities indoors or outdoors. The decision to carry out the analysis upon the children activities was affected by their outdoor preferences. Hence, the plans to carry out the activities were using a puppet for story-telling to attract the attention of the children and establish opportunity for every child to be heard as an individual or group. The communication process went extremely well and body language was used by those who could not communicate efficiently through language alone.

#### *Day two (March/11)*

The purpose was to listen to children and note their behaviour in order to understand children's opinion regarding what they like and what they do not like. I noticed that during group observations, majority of the children simply copied what other children had mentioned regarding their likes and dislikes. But, they gave more individual answers when they were asked separately on an individual basis. In order to encourage them to answer, I even used hint words, for instance, "like" and "dislike". It was easier to maintain the attention of children for a reasonable duration of time by using a puppet to interact with the children. Through this, it was made sure that children focused on the activity and so it enabled me to obtain feedback from them. For instance, the puppet inquired from the children about the toys that they like the most, and to take a picture of their most liked toys. The children were enthusiastic about interacting with the puppet. They were quite keen to respond to the questions asked by the puppet. One of the children gave the name "Sam" to the puppet and they kept on talking to the puppet regarding many different topics. The children found various ways through which they stated their interests while they talked to the puppet about their likes. For instance: Puppet: Which is your most liked place?

All children replied: Outside.

**Puppet:** Why is it your most liked place? (The puppet called out each child's name so as to give them a chance to take part and explain separately)

**Child 1:** I like being outside because I like to play with the bikes.

**Child 2:** Even I always play with red bike.

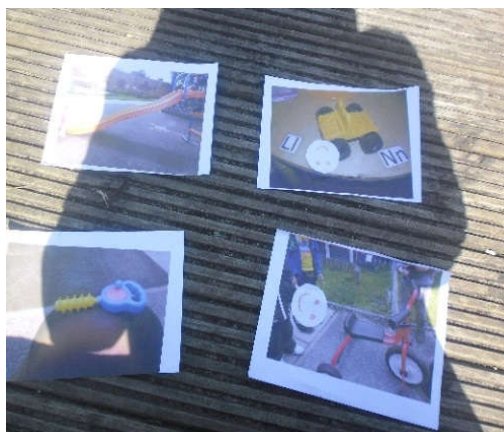
**Child 3:** I like the slide because it has stairs and I like to go up and slide down.

**Child 4:** I like to make a bike.

**Child 5:** pointed at the parking area. When asked if he knew which area it was, he said, 'car' (which made me understand that he is fond of cars).

### Day three (March/12)

Since all the children mentioned the outside areas as the place where they like to learn, I organised the entire day's activities in that area. The puppet stayed in the outside area during free play time and spoke to each child on an individual basis and offered them one sticker. He asked the children to paste the sticker wherever they like best at nursery. Few children pasted the smiley face stickers on bikes. Some children pasted smiley faces on pictures that they took the day before (see images (1, 2, 3 & 4)). Some even pasted sad faces on photographs of places that they disliked. I prompted them to provide reasons for why they made those choices. The children were given the opportunity to speak about their picture through which they were able to explain why they liked the outside area. They criticised that the inside area had too many rules and regulations. They did not have the liberty to run here and there, or climb, as they would usually do in the outside area. This is the response that I obtained by conducting this activity. We listened to the perspectives of children and understood their behaviour through which we adjusted our plans and followed their likes, which continued to increase and develop. The children were quite active participants of the learning process since they also added to the planning. It was convenient for children to explain their opinion through use of simple vocabulary. However, for some it was not easy, particularly those with limited vocabulary (children with speech difficulties or non-English speaking children). I made use of a multi-method in order to make them part of the learning. Through this method, they could explain their perspectives by way of non-verbal cues. Yet, all the children did not understand the questions right away, and had to be further explained the question in various ways.



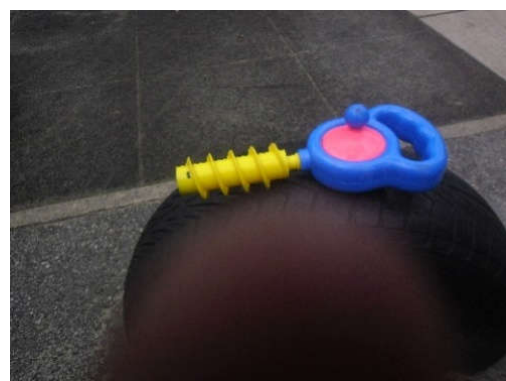
Photograph 1



Photograph 2.



Photograph 3.



Photograph 4.

## 7. Discussion

Children's lives are developed in the various ways that we decide to interact with them (McTavish, 2012). In this study, children were provided with various experiences and then were provided with the chance to describe their opinion through different ways. This was quite an effective approach since it led to rich experiences for the children to build and apply their ideas. This is in favour of the perspective of Clark et al. that past perspectives which believed that children are not capable of giving opinions regarding their learning is no longer valid (2011). Such perspectives will now obstruct the development of children.

Moreover, listening carefully to children and allow them to express themselves require adults to attempt many times to seek their opinions and views (MacNaughton & Williams 1998). In this study, it is not an easy task to enable the child to speak frankly of his/her needs, unless things intrigued him to do so. Apparently, teachers and adults find time for children to

direct the conversation in order to speak honestly of their perspectives. I realised during the conversation, pretending dull speak, that children love someone, especially role models like teachers, to listen to them carefully. Thus, if teachers, parents, older brothers and sisters want children to become thoughtful, they should set themselves as good listeners. The purpose of the questions asked at the beginning of the empirical research was to enable the children to provide their views. Different approaches were used in order to provide children with the means to present their perspectives. The discussion presented here will be regarding those questions that helped in making the children state their views. The data clearly indicates that children mostly liked the outdoor activities. Majority of the places that they stated were outdoor areas. When inquired about why they preferred the outdoors, they criticised that the indoor areas were quite restrictive and so they did not prefer indoor activities. It is essential to observe that the children were clearly aware of what they wanted. It is beneficial for children's learning to develop opportunities for children through which they can state their views. They children appeared to be quite involved in the learning since it was about what they wanted and were satisfied with. There have been discussions earlier on about the role of the curriculum in facilitating the development of opportunities and providing such environments to children in the initial years through which they can present their views.

Listening of children's opinions is supported by The Early Years Foundation stage. Thus, practitioners should work on developing such opportunities and environments through which children can express their opinions. I utilised some of the topics advocated in the curriculum and adjusted it in the context of the setting by taking into account how the children should be educated. It is also specified and advocated by the EYFS to work with families of the children in order to obtain desirable results for their children (DFE, 2012). Thus, it is recommended in this study that a culture of interaction with parents should be developed by practitioners so as to understand children's perspectives about their learning. This strategy is particularly beneficial for children having language or speech difficulties since they are usually shy in an educational setting or tend to be hostile when they are misunderstood. Interaction with parents will enable parents to present their children's opinions till they are well settled in the setting and are able to express their views on their own.

### Limitations of the Study

As the study was conducted with children, there were limitations which I expected to encounter, such as:

- It was quite difficult to attain the parents' consent forms. Some of them were hesitant and asked to meet me personally. It took nearly two weeks to receive 10 signed forms.
- Some children could not focus for long periods; they might lose attention and hence cause confusion during the exercise.
- Manchester has various nationalities, particularly Arabs, and some children have limited vocabularies. However, I tried to overcome this problem by reaching out to the children with simple methods, such as putting sad/happy faces on items to facilitate easy access to their perception (Miller, 2012).

### Conclusion

The need to understand children's views in early years setting has been addressed in this study and the strong influence of such an activity in children's learning has also been identified. This study also presents an empirical study conducted in an early years setting which emphasised on different methods through children's perspectives could be heard. It is confirmed through the research that children are able to learn better when they can be part of the process by presenting their opinions as well (Mortimer and Gallow, 2007). The fact that securing children's rights can result in enhanced outcomes has also been acknowledged in both national and international policies (DFE, 2005; DFE, 2012; UN convention on the rights of a child). It is further presented through the research outcomes that 3-5 year olds state their opinions in various ways and some of them are quite unique to each child. Thus, practitioners should understand the different ways through which different children openly present their views in their setting. When the different ways are understood, they should be integrated in the planning, curriculum, and in the culture of that educational setting. As a result, listening is not only verbal interactions, it is a fundamental part of the art of using all your senses and emotions to communicate with others especially with the children in an early years' setting. Listening to children involves communicating effectively, encouraging participation, tuning in and offering choices (Mortimer and Gallow, 2007). With regards to my personal experience of the study that I carried out, we understood that children's opinions should not be overlooked since it is a very useful instrument of communication and for learning.

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