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RESEARCH ARTICLE

CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION TOWARDS ACTIVITIES AT THE NURSERY

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the concept of children's perception toward activities. The study took place at a nursery setting in Hull in the UK. The paper begins by explaining the meaning of children's voices, and the many ways to tune to these voices which can lead to production of desirable outcomes for children in general. It then goes on to clarify the various ways to communicate with children that allows for their participation and free expression of children's opinions, feelings etc. After that, the Early Years' Foundation Stage (EYFS) which is the framework for early years practice in the United Kingdom is explored to find out what extent the idea of tuning to children's voices is supported, and ways it could be applied in their learning and in particular, ways by which children could be included in the evaluation of activities provided for them. Next, the study presents the project carried out in a nursery setting in Hull city which involved developing a method of gathering children's perceptions about some of the activities which are provided for them during the day. Finally, I draw on some activities to allow children share their feelings, opinions, and responses to ascertain their preferences for activities. It is suggested that this is within children's rights as stipulated by the EYFS and proper consideration of children's voices by practitioners will provide them with the opportunity to participate in the evaluation of activities which could lead to desirable outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

The UN convention on the rights of a child in 1989 has brought about the adoption of the child rights by countries around the world and the UK signed its compliance in 1990, (DFE, 2014). Childhood is regarded as one of the most important stages in human life, and in the current era there is a new approach taken by developed and developing countries whereby children are given an opportunity to express their opinions and give their views, contributing actively to the process of growth and development (Palaiologou, 2014). There are emerging debates of the importance of including the perspectives of young children in their learning in bringing about improved outcomes for them (ibid). Listening to children's voices has also been valuable in early childhood research as it has contributed to good practice (Tay-Lim and Lim, 2013). When children are listened to, their interests and participation are considered in their planning and assessments (McTavish et al, 2012). It is necessary to listen to children's perceptions of activities as this study does. This study adapts a method recommended by Mortimer (2007) which is employed in observing children during the day to try to understand ways in which they communicate with practitioners in their setting. Examples of how children communicate include using body language which is a common way that children who have not yet acquired language give their voice, offering choices and noting children's selections, talking together in group conversation, using simple questions, one to one conversations, and stories (ibid, Roberts and Harpley, 2006).

All of these can help young children in the early years to express their views about the activities during the day at the nursery (Mortimer and Gallow, 2007).

Defining Children's Voices

In the early years context: There is no doubt that listening to children's voices is their fundamental right which was addressed in the Article 12 of the United Nations convention on the right of the child (UNHCR, 1989; 9). In the UK, the Every Child Matters policy (DFES, 2003) detailed out a significant course on futures of children regardless of their socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. The *Child Care Act* which followed *Every Child Matters* pushed for cooperation between families, schools and relevant agencies (The Child Care Act, 2004). These policies strengthened avenues through which the children could be heard (DFES, 2003; ibid). Children's voices represent their feelings and opinions and developing an ear for these is not as simple as handing out questionnaires and getting feedback, for example (Mortimer and Gallow, 2007). Instead, it is more than that, it should flow from beliefs that we hold and it should be an integral part of working with children (ibid). This is a culture that needs to be developed (ibid). In other words, giving ear to children's voices should be embedded in the principles underpinning practice where practitioners intentionally show consideration for children's views and opinions which is also achieved through the recording of pedagogical interactions (Young Children's voices Network, 2009). Listening to children, as put forward by Clark (2004; 1) is:

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- “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.
- The important stage in ensuring the participation of all young children, parents and staff, in all the matters that have affecting them.
- An ongoing part of tuning in to all young children as individuals in their everyday lives”.

Listening, approached from the above perspective, can lead to improved outcomes for children and they will be seen to learn in an environment where they can develop in confidence, safety and assurance (ibid). Therefore, listening is not just limited to the verbal interactions, it is an essential 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).

The benefits of listening to children’s voices: Listening is conceptualised as an ethical practice in the early years’ education and a fundamental part of early childhood development (Bath, 2013). Listening impacts greatly on children because it asserts that there is a two-way communication going on and acts as a platform through which their voices can be heard. It is also fundamental to observation and assessment practices in the early years (Bromley, 2009). Listening to children in the early years is rooted in the following virtues: respect, honesty, collaboration and openness, patience and timing and imagination (Young Children’s Voices Network, 2008). “Listening to children helps practitioners to tune in to the ways in which children make themselves understood and is the basis for developing communication and relationships”(EYFS 2007). The following figure shows the benefits of listening to children’s voices.

Communication with children: The multicultural nature of the present day society in the United Kingdom is reflected in the ethnicities of the children in most nursery settings and therefore communication in these settings requires a level of cultural awareness on the part of the practitioners. In other words, practitioners need some form of understanding of the diversity within their setting to enable them communicate smoothly with the children (Robert and Harpley, 2006). Understanding the diversity will also lead to giving ear to their voices irrespective of the avenues through which they express their opinions. This is especially so for those who are unable to communicate verbally in English (ibid). This is necessary to achieve desirable outcomes. According to Head (2013), ‘Communication is a vital human experience that should place children at the heart of their social network from the moment they are born. Learning to communicate in a variety of ways, through non-verbal and verbal allows children to explore emotions, develop relationships and begin learning about their world. This process starts within the community of the family (pg.243). Research reports that 59% of the time in a nursery setting, children were not engaged in talking (Dickinson and Tabors, 2001) and this suggest that there may be communication problems which is likely to affect children of different cultures more. Communication in the early years are actual interactions that show that the children are beginning to show ownership of their lives (Robert and Harpley, 2006) as

well as to show they need to participate in decision making, such as choosing activities they want to participate in. The contexts for which language makes some meaning for these children are the real experiences where children have the opportunity of expressing their likes and dislikes (ibid). Mortimer and Gallow (2007) argue that play provides opportunities for children to communicate with groups of children who have or have not attained verbal competence. In other words, during play, children communicate through verbal and non-verbal ways and this occurs in several forms. What is most important is that children should have an equal chance to communicate their choices through verbal and non-verbal means (ibid). Increased participation of children in activities at the nursery and one on one consultation with them could help practitioners monitor them successfully and effectively (ibid). Another way of doing this is observing children’s choices during play. If the children avoid a particular play activity, it is better to consider that activity and redesign it to suit the children’s choices (Clark, 2004). Play is central to teaching 3-5 year olds and therefore their participation during play is paramount (ibid). The curriculum in early years setting can be used to provide information about children at play and suggestions for what activities to provide (Mortimer and Gallow, 2007; DFE, 2012). Another important part of learning in the nursery is circle time. All in all, practitioners need to create enabling learning environments for children to be able to give their voice. The EYFS encourages listening to children’s voices (DFE, 2012).

Early Years Foundational Stage (EYFS): The Early Years Foundation stage, which is the framework for early childhood practice promotes the creation of environments that provide opportunities for children to give their voices (DFE, 2012). ‘Children learn and develop well in enabling environments, in which their experiences respond to their individual needs and there is a strong partnership between practitioners and parents and/or carers’ (ibid; 3). As discussed earlier, the context within which children express themselves are real life experiences and the early childhood settings should be able to create enabling environments for those experiences. “Children’s creativity must be extended by the provision of support for their curiosity, exploration and play. They must be provided with opportunities to explore and share their thoughts, ideas and feelings, for example through a variety of art, music, movement, dance, imaginative and role play activities, mathematics and design and technology” (EYFS 2007; 2). Enabling environments therefore bring out the best outcomes in children. Early years settings need to place priorities on listening to children and include it in their planning and assessment (DFES, 2012). It is therefore necessary that an early years setting under the EYFS employ practitioners who possess:

- ‘The depth of understanding of children’s perspectives to develop it as part of a setting’s overall pedagogical approach
- The leadership skills to develop a common understanding of children’s perspectives among staff in order to ensure that it does not become tokenistic
- The ability to link children’s perspectives with the learning and developmental stages in the Early Years Foundation Stage in order to create a phased programme that can support children in acquiring the required skills, 5 understandings and attitudes, including the ability to be critical of provision, throughout their time in a setting

- The capacity to deal with conflicts and tensions between children's, colleagues' and parents' views of quality provision' (Coleyshaw et al., 2010; 4-5).

The Case Study

I visited a nursery setting in Hull to conduct a study which looks at how children can best communicate their likes and dislikes in a nursery setting. By creating activities that provide opportunities for them to voice their likes or dislikes for the activities, the children were able to express themselves. The following questions form the basis for the inquiry:

- Are there any activities that children seem less keen on participating in?
- What activities do children enjoy most and why?
- How can the curriculum help practitioners to listen to children?
- What type of activities are children involved in during the day?

METHODOLOGY

A variety of methods were combined in order to create a full evaluation of children's voices in an early years setting in Hull, UK. Referring to the effective of provision of choices for children during playing time, Mortimer and Gallow said that children are able pass on important and relevant information about what they like and dislike, their strengths and needs (2007). The findings from this study can shed new light on different ways that practitioners can approach accessing children's voices. Figure 2 shows an adaptation from Mortimer and Gallow (2007) to suit this study. There are many factors that influence listening to children, such as expertise of the practitioners who work with the children, children who work with them and their ages, and space, the time and the resources which are available. These were all taken into consideration in the design of the method for this study. One of the important methods when starting to listen to young children in early years setting is observation as it helps the practitioner to see children's strengths and choices. Practitioners can form a culture of observation to access children's voices (Mortimer, and Gallow, 2007). Regular observation of children's choices and acting on them is an important sign of the success we have made in encouraging children to participate.

Another method used for accessing children voices is interviews. This method is quite popular in gathering data for adults (Clark, 2004) and also appropriate using this tools with children in early years setting. There are many different ways to do that, one way to do that which Miller suggest is: group interviewing in the circle time following the similar approach to interviews, which allowed adults to communicate with children during this time (Miller, 1997). Another style of interviews is child-to-child interviews, which involves older children acting as consultants to younger children. Furthermore, still and moving films are a new way to give children the opportunity to communicate their perceptions (Clark, 2004). There are a number of programs that have used this method as a way to explore the fundamental beliefs and record the views of children at different ages (ibid). This has proved its effectiveness and success. Examples are digital still cameras, videos and polaroid which have been noted to be suitable children from 3 years and above (Clark and Moss

2001; Lancaster and Broadbent 2003). The mosaic approach is a multi-method approach which uses the photographs taken by children as an essential illustration of children's views (Clark and Moss, 2001). In addition, adults can communicate with children in an early years setting in a natural way by performing arts and play. So during role play activities using 'intermediaries' such as toys and puppets can provide the possibility of consultations with them. For example, the Day-care Trust (1998), used a teddy bear to start to talk with children in their nurseries. Stories and pictures, imaginative play in general can be used to introduce situations which encourage children to talk about anything they want (Mortimer and Gallow, 2007).

I adapted Mortimer and Gallow's (2007) methods in gathering data from the children on their likes and dislikes. Below are the methods:

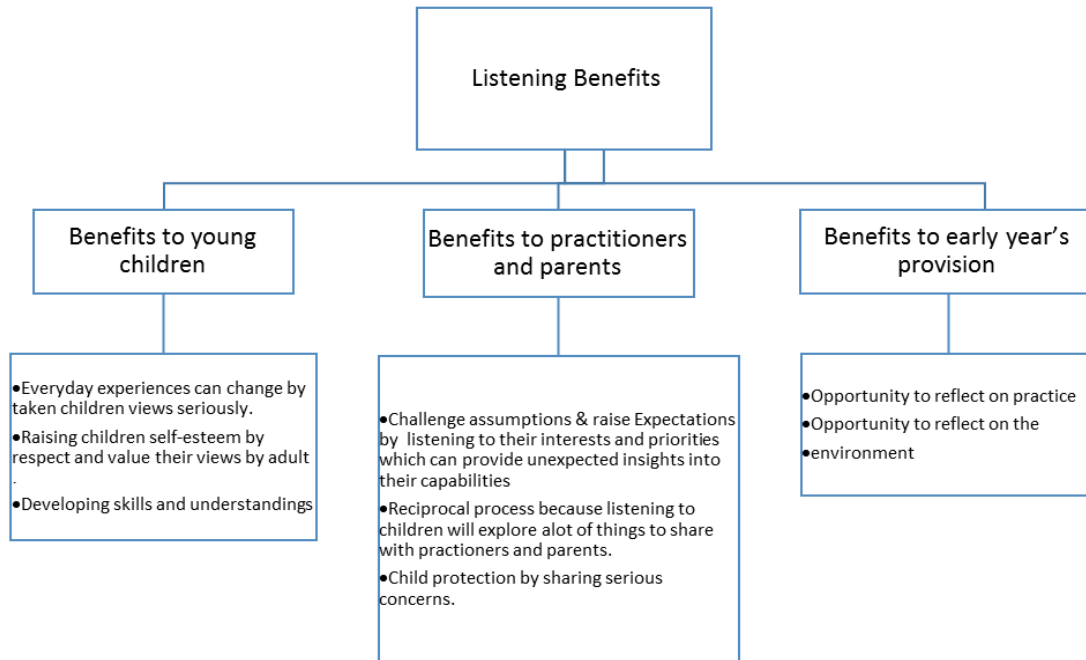
- "Observing children at play with photography
- Offering choices and noting children selections
- Talking together in group
- Using simple questions
- Using one on one conversation
- Stories and pictures, imaginative play in general can be used to introduce situations which encourage children to talk about their feelings" (Mortimer and Gallow, 2007,11).

There are strategies for monitoring development by the effective listening to children's voices daily (ibid, 2007, 14).

- Listening to children effectively as Mortimer and Gallow suggest, can be achieved if practitioners regularly speak to the children during circle time, record what they say individually, and take note of their views, choices of play and what they try to tell adults about their experiences in the setting.
- Adhering to policy requirements about how to consult with children and how children view the early years provision.
- Record the sources of any evidence so that you can show how your planning was done in the light of feedback from children.

I used the Listening Cycle (an efficient model put forward by it by McAuliffe (2003)), to develop a rough model for a process of active listening to young children. The cycle consists of five steps, namely, listening, recording, reflecting, take action and feedback.

- Listening is a one of the most important communication skills to communicate with children by using your tone and your body language, you can encourage them to express their views and ask questions to develop conversation.
- Documenting children's views will help in continuity of care because you can share your documents with their parents and any other person who takes care of them.
- Reflect: Once you listen to children's views and you record it, it will reflect on your practice because you will consider their preferences.
- **Take action:** It is important to take action after you know their views because that will be a pointer to them that their views are appreciated.



Adapted from: Clark (2004)

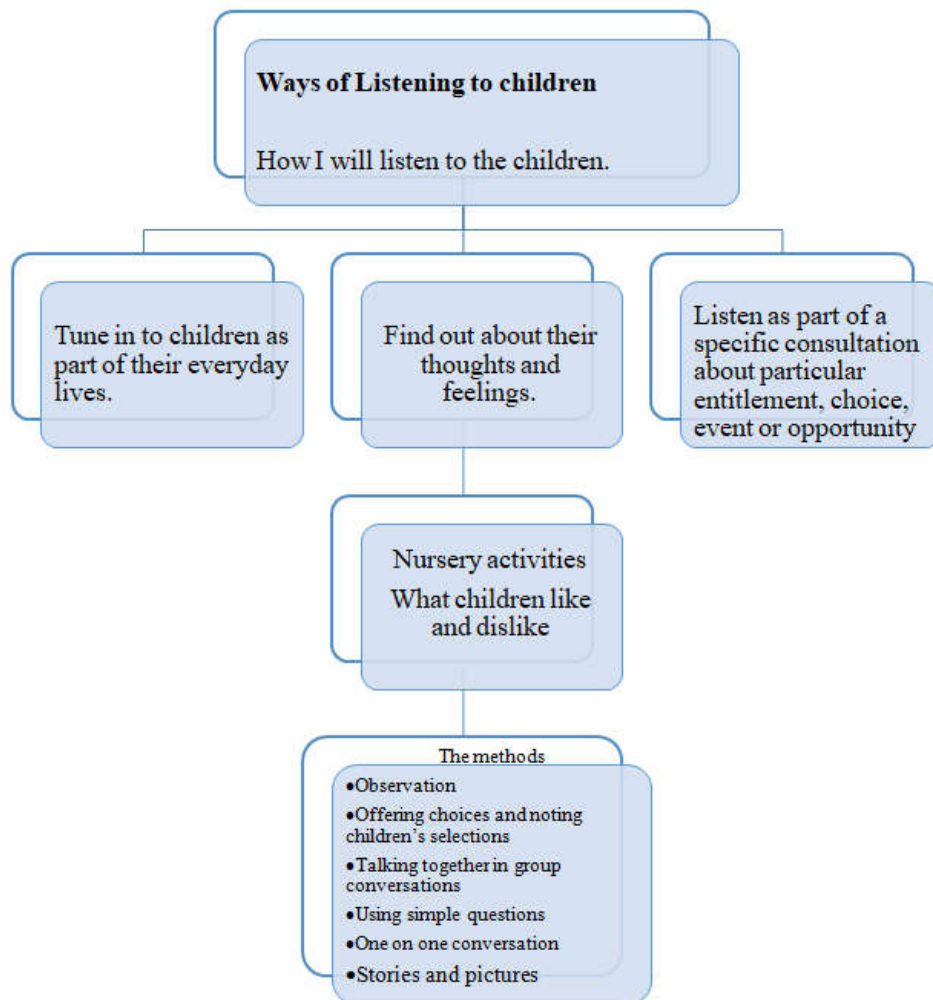


Figure 2. Methods of Accessing Children’s Voices Adapted from: Mortimer and Gallow, (2007)

- **Feedback:** it is important to take honest feedback from the children after providing your service and after you consider their views. This is what makes a difference between being listened to and feeling that you have been listened to (McAuliffe 2003).

Procedure and Results

I visited the class of 3-5 year olds in a nursery setting five times. Each time, I had a purpose which ranged from getting the children to know and accept me in their class to carrying out the study about listening to their voices. The following is a summary of my reflections of data collection.

Day One: This was an exploratory visit to know children closely and get acquainted with the nature of activities they are engaged in. I also wanted the children to know me and accept me in their learning space. I noticed that the children were very keen to include me in their play. This might be because most of them have seen me in the nursery, since my daughter attends as well. Then I introduced myself to them and spent the day trying to communicate with children and share in their play, reading and painting. I also noticed that the children spent most of the time playing in the outside area. I wondered whether the choice to plan more outdoor activities was due to the children's preferences. This influenced my decision to carry out my studies while the children played outdoors on my next visit. These were my plans:

- Story telling using a puppet to get the children's attention and creating opportunities to listen to every child in groups or individual children

They communicated with each other very well and those with language difficulties used body language to express themselves.

Day two: The aim was to obtain children's perspectives of their likes and dislikes by listening to them and observing their behaviour. I noticed that most of the children copied what others said about their likes and dislikes when they were observed in groups. However, when observed on individual basis, they tended to provide more individual responses. I also used clue words such as 'like' and 'dislike' to prompt their responses. Using the puppet to communicate with the children helped to get their attention a reasonable period. This ensured that they concentrated on the activity and I was able to get feedback from them.

For example, the puppet asked the children: What toys do you like most? Take a picture of the toys you like most. The children were excited about communicating with the puppet. They were very eager to answer the puppet's questions. One child named the puppet Sam and they continued speaking to the puppet about a variety of issues. The children found ways of expressing their interest as they spoke to the puppet there interests. For example:

Puppet: Which place do you like most? All children answered: Outside.

Puppet: Can you tell me why? (the puppet named every child to give them a chance to participate and explain individually)

Child 1: I like going outside because I love to play with those

Child2: I also always play with red bike.

Child3: I like the slide because there are stairs and I can go up and slide down.

Child 4: I like to build a bike.

Child 5 pointed at the parking area. When asked if he knew the name of the area, he said, 'car' (which led me to understand that he likes cars).



Photograph A



Photograph B shows a picture of the puppet used in this study



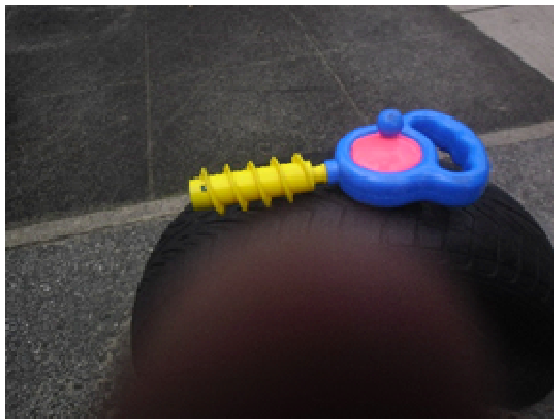
Photograph C



Photograph E



Photograph D



Photograph F

Photograph A was taken by a child to indicate an area he liked most in the nursery. I recorded the children's views in my reflective journal and upon reflection, I considered these views in the next day's planning.

Day three: Because all the children chose the outside area as the place they liked to learn, I planned the day's activities around it. The puppet went around the outside area during free play time to speak to every child individually and give them one sticker. He then asked them stick it where they like most at nursery. Some children stuck the smiley faces on bikes. The children also stuck smiley faces on photos they took the

Some of them stuck sad faces on pictures of places they didn't like. I encouraged them to give an explanation or reasons for their choices. The children had the chance to talk about their photo which gave them the opportunity to explain their preferences of the outside area. They complained that there were too many rules in the inside area and they did not have the freedom to run around or climb as they would normally do outside. This was the feedback I generated from carrying out the activity. By giving ear to the children's voices and behaviour, we adapted our plans and followed their interests, which continued to grow and develop. The children were also more actively involved in the learning process because they contributed to the planning. Some of the children found it easy to give their opinions using simple vocabulary, but for others, it was quite difficult especially those who had limited vocabulary (non-English speakers and those with speech difficulties). To include them in the learning, I used a multi-method whereby they were able to express themselves using non-verbal means. Although, not all children understood the questions asked straight away, the questions were further explained to them in different ways.

Limitations of the study: There were several limitations to this study which were supposed to be taken into account when choosing the research methodology. They are as follows:

- Children at the age of 3-5 can find it difficult to pay attention for a stretch of long periods.
- Some children had limited vocabulary while others had speech difficulties. This limitation was overcome using different methods. But using something as simple as a smiley or sad face, it became easy to access children's perception (Miller, 2012)
- Obtaining parental consent to allow children participate in this project was difficult; it took a period of 3 weeks. Despite the prolonged period, only less than half of the children returned the signed consent (5 out of 12 children).

DISCUSSION

Children's lives are formed by the many ways we choose to communicate with them (McTavish, 2012). The children in this study were provided with experiences and given the opportunity to express their perspectives using various forms. This was quite successful because this approach provided rich experiences for the children to develop and implement their ideas. This supports Clark et al.'s views that previously prevailing views that children are not able to give suggestions towards their learning is outdated (2011). Such views are likely to hinder children's development. The questions posed at the onset of the empirical research were aimed at getting children to give their opinions. The strategies various strategies employed provided children with the medium to air their view. This discussion will address those questions with regards to how the children registered their opinions. From the data, it is clear that the children preferred outdoor activities. Most of the places they identified were outdoors. When asked to give their reasons, they complained of being restricted indoors and thus they were not keen on indoor activities. It is important to note that the children knew exactly what they wanted. Creating opportunities for children to give their opinions is vital for their learning. The children seemed to be well engrossed in the learning because it was what they wanted and were

The role of the curriculum in helping to create opportunities and enabling environments for children in the early years to give their voices has been discussed earlier. The Early Years Foundation stage supports listening to children's voices and therefore practitioners should strive to create these opportunities and environments for children to give their voices. I drew on some of the topics recommended by the curriculum and adapted it to the context of the setting by considering how children needed to be taught. The EYFS also stipulates and recommends working with children's families to achieve desirable outcomes for their children (DFE, 2012). This study therefore recommends that practitioners should form a culture of liaising with parents to understand what the children's opinions are about their learning. This is especially a good strategy for children with speech or language difficulties because they tend to be shy in the setting or become aggressive because they are misunderstood. Their families can therefore express the children's views until they are become settled in the setting.

Conclusion

This assignment has addressed the need to listen to children's voices in an early years setting and recognised the profound effects that it has in their learning. Both global and national policies have recognised that protecting children's rights can lead to improved outcomes (UN convention on the rights of a child; DFE, 2005; DFE, 2012).

This paper has also reported an empirical research carried out in an early years setting which focused on ways to listen to children's voices. The research confirms that children learn better when they are able to contribute to the process by expressing their views (Mortimer and Gallow, 2007). The outcomes of the research further indicate that 3-5 year olds express their views in different ways and some of these are unique to the children. The practitioners must therefore explore these means through which different children in their setting can express themselves freely. When these means have been explored, they should then be incorporated into the curriculum, planning and the culture of the setting. In reflection of my personal experience of the research I conducted, I learned not to take children's voices for granted because it turned out to be a power tool of communication and for learning.

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