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### Original Citation

Percy-Smith, Barry (2011) Children's voice and perspectives : the struggle for recognition, meaning and effectiveness. In: Listening to Children and Young People with Speech, Language and Communication Needs. J&R Press. ISBN 9781907826085

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**Children's voice and perspectives: The struggle for recognition, meaning and effectiveness**

**In Roulestone, S. and McLeod, S. eds Listening to children and young people with speech language and communication needs J & R publishers 2011**

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## **Children's voice and perspectives: The struggle for recognition, meaning and effectiveness**

Barry Percy-Smith

### **Abstract**

This chapter critically reflects on the way in which 'listening to the perspectives' of children is understood and the complexities at play when ideas about children's participation unfold in practice. Drawing on children's participation literature across the world as well as wider theories of participatory practice, the chapter uses *space*, *audience* and *influence* to discuss how listening to children with speech, language and communication needs becomes a struggle for recognition within public sector systems which are themselves not participatory. The chapter outlines the importance of understanding children's participation as a relational concept in the context of everyday lived realities.

“At the meeting we were told what was proposed and we put our views across about it. No one wanted the merger [of special needs schools]... Mine's the only school for disabled that still does GCSEs. If I am put into a special school with young people with mental or behavioural difficulties my chances of succeeding would be affected. But they did it anyway. They were just ticking boxes, because it looks like they are just listening to us even if they are not. The decision then went to the young people's scrutiny committee but the decision is going through anyway.”  
(Young person, 16 with special needs)

## **/H1/Introduction**

As a result of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and, in the UK, legislation such as the Children Act (2004) the imperative for children to ‘have their say in all matters that affect them’ is now embedded in mainstream social and public policy and practice in the UK. The sociology of childhood, in turn, acknowledges the active agency of children as *competent social actors* in their own right (James & Prout, 1990) and in anthropology as *active cultural producers* (Amit-Talai & Wulff, 1995). Article 12 of the UNCRC states that:

Children have a right to express their 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 significance of this article for decision making is that children should have a chance to express their wishes, feelings and needs about the individual education, health and care they receive and have their contributions taken seriously<sup>1</sup>. To that extent there is an onus on services to ‘involve’ children in decision making and ensure practice reflects children’s needs. This in turn necessitates adults fully understanding the reality of children’s everyday experiences but also, to do so from the child’s perspective.

Article 12 is seen as one of the most powerful and symbolic rights for children in that it provides the conduit for children to access power and decision making and for children to realize their other rights. “Having a say,” “listening to children’s perspectives” and “involving children” have all become synonymous with the notion of

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<sup>1</sup> The Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009) has made it clear that Article 12 is to be read as applying not only to the child as an individual, but to groups of children and children in general.

children's participation. Children's participation is especially important for children who are vulnerable, 'excluded', have specific needs and for whom their needs and circumstances might otherwise go unrecognized or misunderstood. The value of listening to children in these situations is not just to ensure their needs are met through 'effective' service delivery, but also to challenge professional assumptions and stereotypes about the lives of children with particular needs. In addition, children derive immense benefits and sense of inclusion from being involved in a decision regardless of the outcome. This is especially important for children who have particular difficulties with communicating their everyday realities such as children with speech, language and communication needs.

In the UK, as elsewhere, there has been significant progress in developing children's participation in decisions about service provision. Participation is now high on policy and programme agenda and the language of participation commonplace for many practitioners. For the most part 'listening to children' has focused attention on the use of 'appropriate' often creative methods and techniques (Clark & Moss, 2001; Coad, this volume). However, attention has also been directed to establishing structures for hearing the voice of the child such as children in care forums, youth councils and student councils and a readiness to consult with children when decision making requires. Young people's advisory groups are a common feature, particularly in health and social care settings and there has been a rapid increase in initiatives promoting children as researchers (Christensen, 2004; Kellett, 2005<sup>2</sup>). Christensen argues that "in order to hear the voices of children [...] it is important to employ research practices such as reflexivity and dialogue [to] enable researchers to enter into children's *cultures of communication*." (2004, p. 165) To a large extent there is much to celebrate in hearing the perspectives of children. But

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<sup>2</sup> See also the Young Researchers Network at the National Youth Agency in the UK.

critics are increasingly asking what the impacts and benefits are when children participate and share their perspectives and for whose benefit. Specifically:

- To what extent does listening to children/children's participation really influence decisions and how far are benefits realized in children's lives?
- What constitutes meaningful participation and whose agenda is children's participation working to?
- What are the implications for relationships with adults when children participate?
- To what extent are children able to articulate their perspectives in everyday life contexts?

Using these questions as a focus, this chapter critically reflects on the way in which listening to children is understood and operationalised with a particular focus on some of the complexities at play when theories of children's participation unfold in practice. The chapter draws on the wider children's participation literature and in turn wider theories of participatory practice, but focuses the discussion on children with speech, language and communication needs.

### **/H1/Children's perspectives: A concept struggling for recognition?**

The explosion in development of children's participation in public sector settings at the turn of the century has given rise to a widespread array of practice. What commonly passes for participation is, in effect, consultation wherein children's involvement is restricted to a one-off articulation of a view point on issues and decisions taken elsewhere. However, professionals are becoming increasingly aware that, to have impact, children's perspectives need to inform all phases of the decision making or development cycle – including inquiry (developing a better understanding of the issues at

hand), being involved with others in deciding on actions, taking actions and evaluating the outcome<sup>3</sup>. By focusing on ‘children’s perspectives’, we are in essence saying we want to understand the world through children’s eyes. But for what purpose? If we seek children’s views and ideas for the purpose of organizational change and service development (as is so often the case) then we need to think about how effectively children’s perspectives inform decision making beyond simply voicing issues.

The state of children’s participation seems to be characterised at present by a hiatus between the imperative of capturing children’s views and producing tangible outcomes. Whilst practitioners and managers are becoming increasingly adept at hearing children’s views, they are now confronting the challenge of ‘embedding’ children’s participation within their systems and practices. This has given rise to a growing number of critical voices seeking to reflect on and develop a more focused theory of practice in a bid to more effectively realize the aspirations of the UNCRC (Lundy, 2007; Fielding 2007; Thomas, 2007; Percy-Smith 2010<sup>4</sup>). Lundy for example argues that voice is not enough, instead we need to pay attention to:

- the **spaces** for children to express a view
- that there should be an **audience** to listen to that view
- and that the voice should exert an **influence**

By bringing *audience* and *influence* into the picture we are in effect deepening and widening our understanding of children’s perspectives as occurring in relation to others (Cockburn, 1998; Percy-Smith 2006; Fielding 2007; Mannion, 2010). But what

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<sup>3</sup> For those involved in commissioning services this may be better known in terms of a commissioning cycle – assess, plan, do, review.

<sup>4</sup> See also special issues of *International Journal of Children’s Rights* Issue 16, 2008 and *Children, Youth and Environments* Issues 16 and 17, 2006)

happens when children's perspectives collide with those of adults? Who decides which perspectives should prevail and influence, and what types of spaces are most appropriate for children to participate? The remainder of this chapter will use Lundy's framework to explore further these three key issues in children's participation.

## ***/H2/Impact and influence: From 'perspectives' to 'power' in decision making***

A key question running through many of the discussions about children's participation is whether it has any impact on policy and practice (Tisdall & Davis, 2004). In essence, are children's perspectives really heard? At the level of practitioner intervention there is considerable scope for the 'individual' child to influence proceedings about the services and care they receive. This is dependent on the nature of the relationship the professional strikes with the child as will be discussed later. For children with speech, language and communication needs, this necessitates developing a quality of engagement which allows two-way exchange involving effective communication, learning and joint decision-making.

However, evidence suggests that at a policy level, influencing change is more difficult. Part of the problem here is that local public sector service systems are hierarchical rather than participative which means that ultimately adults retain control over decisions. Decision-makers may be keen to take account of children's views but children rarely have an input into final decision making (Percy-Smith, 2009; Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2011). Children are often consulted but then don't hear what happens after they have had a say. In the worst cases children may be consulted on decisions already made. In contrast to prevailing approaches wherein children's perspectives are sought in a relatively instrumental and often detached way, in a participatory system children are

involved as active participants in all phases of the decision making or commissioning cycle – identifying and making sense of the issues at hand, developing solutions and evaluating outcomes. Within this latter articulation of praxis, children are part of the decision-making process rather than inputting into it. The more comprehensive the involvement of children in all phases of decision-making, the more likely it is that the outcome decisions will reflect the needs and realities of the children taking part and the more likely children will realize a positive experience from their participation. Yet the more children are involved the more power they have, which for many decision-making adults can be seen as a threat and a challenge to their identity as knowledgeable professionals (Lansdown, 2006). Learning how to work collaboratively with children with speech, language and communication is central to the development needed in public service systems for children’s perspectives to have an impact (see Figure 1 for an example).

**Insert Figure 1 here**

There is a key challenge therefore with facilitating the participation of children in ways that are meaningful and effective, in terms of having impact. The challenge as Kemmis (2001), drawing on Habermas (1987), argues is to bridge lifeworlds and systems through developing an ‘appropriate’ *communicative action space*. Visuals have been shown to be both an appropriate way for children to articulate their perspectives, but equally can be effective in communicating the message in an impactful way (Percy-Smith & Walsh, 2006). If the medium helps maximize the impact of the message this can initiate learning for professionals and service providers and stimulate reflection on their own, taken-for-granted assumptions, about children’s needs and how their services

should respond (see example in Figure 1). But, children also need to be able to participate and share their perspectives on terms that matter to them and when they feel the need to communicate needs, issues, ideas and concerns, not just when it suits service providers. The extent to which participation is meaningful and effective or not is dependent on whose agenda participation is for. So often participation is driven by adult agenda, yet if children want to have a say about an issue that they feel is important according to their own agenda this may be more difficult.

Reflection on whether children's perspectives have an impact or influence decision making challenges us to think of children's perspectives not just as the contribution of new data, but as a critically reflexive process of learning for change as the expression of lifeworld experiences engages with systems in a dynamic way. For this to happen the position, inter-relationship and response of adults is critical. In this sense we need to understand children's perspectives relationally.

## **/H2/ Children's perspectives as a relational concept**

According to Lundy's second proposition – "*audience*" – we need to understand the significance of children's voice is in relation to others. Because of the power inequalities which tend to be inherent in relationships with adults (in particular adults driven by target pressures), children's perspectives tend to be articulated in contexts of inequality. By implication the role of adults and quality of adult-child relations are arguably more important than structures and approaches for 'coming to know' the perspectives of children. If we are to understand children's perspectives in relation to others we need to attend to "the relational and mutual nature of participation and to the

dialogical space within which norms of recognition and inter-subjectivity are constituted and negotiated.” (Fitzgerald et al., 2010, p. 301)

Fielding (2007, p. 307) similarly argues we need to move to a more participatory form of engaging children’s perspectives characterised by:

an intended mutuality, a disposition to see difference as a potentially creative resource, and more overt commitment to co-construction which requires quite different relationships and spaces and a different linguistic schema to form such aspirations.

By extending ideas of children’s perspectives in terms of a relational ‘*social learning*’ process (Percy-Smith, 2006) we need to think about what listening to a child’s perspective really means in practice. Recognition of a child’s perspective should not simply involve hearing a set of ideas. Rather it involves, connecting with the whole ‘experience’ of that person’s world and appreciating the significance of that view or experience in the context of the child’s life. Warming (2006) uses Honneth’s (1995) theory of recognition to understand professional relationships with children. She differentiates between “*realization*” – in which there is a cognitive appreciation of the knowledge children share, and “*recognition*” – a deeper process of ‘coming to know’ the child’s position, which Honneth proposes is facilitated or negotiated through dialogue and mutual recognition. As Boylan and Dalrymple (2009, p. 75) state:

By listening to children and young people we can gain the information we need for a fuller understanding of the issues that affect their lives. By dealing with voices, we are affecting power relations. To listen to people is to empower them ... If we were to really listen to children and hear what they have to say,

it would result in the need to radically change many of the services that are currently provided. ... the starting point ... is to continue to make visible the paradoxical discourses, which come from the exercise of adult power.”

Participation is about power and as Gallagher (2008), drawing on Foucault, argues: power is always negotiated in specific contexts of action. In seeking children’s perspectives we need to think about the extent to which children can negotiate power in relations with adults. For Janssens et al. (2000), this challenge for professionals involves a transition from the “*expert*” to a more “*interpretive*” professional practice. Drawing on the principles of the *interpretive professional* Percy-Smith (2003) has developed an understanding of what it might mean to ‘democratize the encounter space’ between child and adult in a dynamic process of mutual learning and recognition, adapted here for the purpose of this chapter (see Figure 2).

**Insert Figure 2 here**

Reconceptualising adult-child relations in this way has implications for how spaces are created for children to share their perspective (Percy-Smith, 2010). Structures such as school councils may be limited in appeal as contexts for children to share their perspectives in a meaningful way. Children may not wish to take issues that affect them in their day-to-day reality to a decision making forum, instead may seek more immediate attention. In contrast, more informal approaches for example through small groups and one-to-one communications can often provide a more conducive environment for children with speech, language and communication needs to participate in relationships of trust, respect and mutual reciprocity. For example, in the UK the Parent Support

Advisors service<sup>5</sup> involves practitioners working in a person-centred way with children and families where, through building relationships of trust, children can voice their inner most concerns and receive empathic support in response to the child's needs (Percy-Smith, 2010b).

## **/H2/ Rethinking *spaces* for children's perspectives in the context of everyday life**

By recognizing that children's perspectives need to be understood in relation to adults, the previous section highlights the importance of the *spaces* in which children share their perspectives. Spaces for children's participation tend to be dominated by more formalized structures and processes driven by service development, commissioning and research agenda (Percy-Smith, 2010a). There is an assumption that through 'having a say' in local authority decision making, group interests are represented, individuals are 'empowered' and the excluded become included. The underlying rationale seems to be that inclusion and empowerment only happen through mainstream public sector decision-making. Yet evidence suggests that children are more likely to feel empowered when they feel they have been able to have an influence on decisions and choices being made or simply by deriving a sense of value and esteem from being involved (Percy-Smith, 2007; Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2011). Many of the choices and actions which characterize, shape and give meaning in people's lives are taken outside of public sector service and governance contexts within everyday life contexts. This suggests that if the goal of seeking children's perspectives is to bring about a greater sense of inclusion then we also need to look at how children's perspectives and contributions are 'accommodated' in everyday relationships and activities.

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<sup>5</sup> Parent Support Advisors are employed by schools and work within schools and also undertake outreach work with families in their homes

Fielding (2006) echoes these sentiments by arguing against the current [managerialist] emphasis on participation for effective services and organizations and suggests instead that we focus on participation for the benefit and well-being of human communities. What is important is not children's perspectives per se, rather the benefits and realities for children. Moss and Petrie (2002, pp. 12-13) in turn argue for the need to shift thinking from the instrumental provision of *children's services* to *children's spaces* where children and adults engage together on projects of mutual significance. Space or context for children to actively contribute their perspective is important here, not just as a physical space, but a social space characterised by a quality of relationships between children and others within which children can meaningfully articulate their perspectives in multiple ways.

## **/H1/ Conclusions**

This paper has explored some of the key issues and challenges that characterize the way in which children's perspectives are understood and approached in practice. The paper argues for the need to look beyond the 'simple' act of children voicing a view, to understanding the significance of children's perspectives in relation to others. At an individual level this needs to happen in relationships of trust and mutual recognition. At the level of policy, children with speech, language and communication needs should be able to articulate their perspectives, needs and desires as a collective along with, and in competition with, those of others. Increasingly we are seeing a greater acknowledgement of the need to be more aware of whether and how we are hearing and including the voices of all children, including those with specific speech, language and communication needs in appropriate ways. Whilst the chapters in this book provide valuable examples of

hearing the perspectives of children with speech, language and communication needs, we need to be cognisant of the extent to which these perspectives are influencing decision-making and service development and providing benefits in children's lives. The paper argues that children with speech, language and communication needs should be more actively involved in all phases of the decision making or commissioning cycle including developing a better understanding of the issues, working with adults to consider different decisions and evaluating the changes that have been made.

However, this paper has also highlighted the tendency to focus attention disproportionately on children's involvement in local authority decision making dominated by the agenda of service providers. For children with speech, language and communication needs to feel a sense of value, inclusion and equality, attention also needs to be focused on everyday interactions, relationships and contexts. Accordingly I have argued that paying attention to the quality of everyday adult-child relationships is central to hearing the perspectives of children and for children to feel valued and included in society rather than just being represented in decision-making. Key to involving children with speech, language and communication needs in a meaningful and effective way is the imperative of developing appropriate contexts, media and relationships together. These will be explored further in subsequent chapters.

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Figure 2. Creating a communicative action space between adult professionals and children with speech, language and communication (SLC) needs

