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Putting listening practice at the heart of early years practice

An evaluation of the Young Children's Voices Network

Executive summary

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NCB's vision is a society in which all children and young people are valued and their rights are respected.

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Introduction

The Young Children's Voice Network (YCVN) at the National Children's Bureau's (NCB) Early Childhood Unit (ECU) promotes listening¹ to and participation with birth to five year olds at a local and national level. It is informed by a national advisory group of experts in the field of listening to young children, and received government² funding from April 2006 to March 2011.

YCVN aims to support local authorities (LAs) to meet their statutory duty to listen to young children to inform policy and the improvement of early years provision³, and has helped LAs to set up local practitioner networks, develop and share good practice locally and use young children's views to inform policy and practice.

In September 2010, the ECU asked the NCB Research Centre to carry out an evaluation of YCVN, with an emphasis on good practice to highlight what works.

The methodology involved five local authority case studies and in-depth face to face and telephone interviews with the leads for YCVN, early years, participation, training and workforce development, other key staff (e.g. early years advisors), and focus groups with practitioners⁴. Interviews and focus groups explored how listening practice was developed and embedded at strategic level and within settings.

Here we present a summary of the findings.

Policy Context

Since the introduction of the Childcare Act, 2006 and a specific duty on LAs to have regard for young children's views when developing and delivering services, there has been growing interest in listening to and participation with young children.

There is now recognition in the sector and from government that listening to young children to inform practice and policy is instrumental in providing services that meet their needs and support their learning and development. The Department for Education (DfE) has made a commitment to;

Introduce new support for the Early Years by retaining a universal offer, while also ensuring that services and opportunities reach those in greatest need.

¹ YCVN defines listening as a process which includes communication, participation, tuning in and appropriate consultation. See Listening as a way of life leaflet series. www.ncb.org.uk/ycvn/resources

² the former Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) now Department for Education (DfE)

³ (Childcare Act 2006, Section 3 (5) -duty to "have regard to such information about the views of young children as is available to the local authority"

⁴ A total of 42 people participated in this evaluation.

The recent review of **The Early Years Foundation Stage** (EYFS)⁵ proposes changes to the framework, covering regulation, learning and development, assessment and welfare. Listening to young children and supporting their participation continues to be implicit throughout the EYFS. Listening will also be important in the delivery of the **Health visitor implementation plan**⁶ that seeks to improve the health visiting service for children and their families, and will be integral to the government's commitment to **early intervention**⁷ to improve children's future experiences of learning, development and life chances.

Key findings

We briefly review the key findings below:

- The local YCVN strategies and priorities in the case study areas were primarily driven by an **early years pedagogy** perspective.
- Some YCVNs adopted a **children's rights perspective** that emphasised listening as an approach for developing effective participation of young children in decision-making.
- Participation in decision making was often viewed as a later stage in the process, after listening has become firmly embedded in everyday practice.
- Having piloted and disseminated listening and participation activities with birth to five year olds most local YCVNs were planning or implementing the mainstreaming phase.

Local YCVNs achieved many important successes. In particular, they:

- **Raised the profile of listening to young children in their local areas** and successfully challenged popular misconceptions that young children who cannot talk cannot express their views. A variety of creative methods and approaches were used to explore children's views and shape provision that better met their needs.
- **Adopted listening as an approach central to best practice** by identifying, engaging and developing high quality local settings as beacon settings to inspire and support others. Often settings started with specific projects to build confidence among staff and children and went on to develop listening as a whole setting approach. They linked in with a wide range of national initiatives and pedagogic approaches.
- **Improved communication among staff and with parents** by introducing a wider agenda of listening. This led to better communication between staff and parents about children's interests, needs and learning and ultimately improved the quality of provision. Managers listened to staff more and showed they valued their contributions, which helped to reinforce the above outcomes.

⁵ Tickell, C (2011) *The Early Years: Foundations for life, health and learning*, An Independent Report on the Early Years Foundation Stage to Her Majesty's Government, http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_124202

⁷ Allen, G (January 2011) *Early Intervention: The Next Steps*, An Independent Report to Her Majesty's Government, London: HM Government.

Perceived outcomes of listening to and participation with young children

Children showed improved:

- communication skills and language;
- confidence, self-esteem and independence;
- ability to initiate engagement with adults, and other children; and
- behaviour: children were calmer, concentrated more, shared and took turns better.

Parents developed:

- increased confidence and trust in staff;
- better relationships with staff;
- increased confidence in supporting their children at home; and became
- more involved in their child's learning and development.

Practitioners gained in knowledge, skills and confidence and demonstrated:

- an increased commitment to listening to young children;
- a shift towards a more child-focused perspective;
- a deeper understanding of children;
- earlier identification of children's needs;
- greater confidence to respond to children's needs; and
- better relationships with children, parents and within staff teams.

At a **LA** level local YCVNs achieved:

- greater awareness that young children have opinions and can be consulted effectively; and
- more commitment to listening as core best practice in early years; which together
- '*opened doors*' for the future development of listening work across local authority areas, and the participation of young children in local authority strategic decision-making.

What works to support listening to and participation with birth to five year olds

Within local networks

Having a clear strategic plan for network development
 Ensuring access to high quality listening training
 Identifying, building on and sharing good practice
 Being solution-focussed when facing challenges
 Maintaining a celebratory culture, enthusiasm and inspiring others
 Using an empowerment model to encourage ownership of listening work
 Having beacon settings to showcase a listening culture

Within settings

Having the commitment and support of managers
 Delivering high quality listening training to whole staff teams
 Securing the support of key stakeholders, for example, parents and governors
 Building staff confidence by starting on small manageable projects/areas
 Providing access to quality advice, peer support, and practice development resources
 Securing funding to cover practitioner release and development time

In partnership with LAs

Having network leads who are confident at operating at a strategic level
 Being proactive about establishing links with LA strategic partnerships, and presenting evidence of young children's views
 Having strong commitment to young children from LA senior leadership

Most case study YCVNs did not think their work would have happened without the involvement of the national YCVN.

- The support was described as an external driver or catalyst and offered local YCVNs an approach; demonstrated how to put listening at the core of their work; promoted the empowerment model as a useful way of working; and created a structure through which local networks were able to channel their listening and participation work.
- Overall, a national, accessible presence that brought credibility and validation to the work, one to one support, practical resources and good practice, and networking events were most useful.

Recommendations for policy makers and strategic leads

To help LAs and settings to further embed their work in this area, participating local YCVNs would like more support:

- a national reminder to LA leads of the statutory duty to have regard for young children's views;
- to raise the profile of national policy consultations with young children;
- with auditing and evaluation;
- with getting schools and parents to listen; and
- the incorporation of listening in to practitioner qualifications.

For the full evaluation report including local authority strategies and case studies visit: www.ncb.org.uk/ycvn.

For further information about YCVN contact YCVN Project Manager Lucy Williams on 0207 833 6816 or email to lwilliams@ncb.org.uk.