ED 457 963   PS 029 773

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TITLE	Listening to Children's Perspectives of Their Early Childhood Settings.
PUB DATE	2001-08-00
NOTE	24p.; Paper presented at the European Conference on Quality in Early Childhood Education (11th, Alkmaar, Netherlands, August 29-September 1, 2001).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Childhood Attitudes; Comparative Analysis; *Day Care; *Early Childhood Education; Evaluation Methods; Foreign Countries; Interviews; *Preschool Children; Program Evaluation; *School Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS	United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

The Effective Early Learning Programme in the United Kingdom (UK) has included the voice of children as an integral part of their evaluation and improvement process. This study interviewed approximately 945 children from 23 different geographical areas of the UK about their views of certain aspects of their early learning settings. Children were interviewed in groups of three to four and were asked questions about five dimensions of quality; this study focused on three: (1) aims and objectives; (2) learning experience; and (3) relationships and interactions. Findings revealed that children thought they attended day care/preschool to play, to learn, and because their parents were working. More parents than children focused on need for childcare as the main reason for the child attending the setting. Far fewer parents mentioned learning. Children reported a variety of activities they liked best; the most commonly mentioned of these were imaginative play, creative activities, water and sand play, outdoor play, construction play, and language activities. A variety of activities were reported as disliked, the most common of which were creative activities and imaginative play. Children perceived the adults in their setting as being there to provide care, counseling, help, and teaching. They were able to perceive different roles for different adults and could identify differing status accompanying the role. Slightly over half the children indicated that they liked the people at their setting. About half the children thought the people in their setting liked them. Children were very clear about the rules and could identify things they were not allowed to do (such as hurting others or running) and things they must do (including sharing, obeying, learning, listening, and cleaning up). No significant differences were found between four types of settings in answers to questions regarding aims and objectives. (Contains 27 references.) (KB)

Listening to Children's Perspectives of their Early Childhood Settings.

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Introduction

Since the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, the children's right to have a voice, and to have their opinions heard, has led to many providers and practitioners in the field of early years seeking ways to involve children's opinions and perspectives in the evaluation and development of practice in their settings. Since it's inception in 1993 the Effective Early Learning Programme has sought to include children in the evaluation process through informal structured interviews. The Effective Early Learning Programme has operated through an ethos of the empowerment of all participants, an ethos which embodies participatory practice and the rights of children as citizens.

This study considers the use of the informal structured interview to ascertain the views of young children about certain aspects of their settings. The historical context will be outlined; along with the present position of children's rights in the UK, and the question, "Why is it desirable to include children's voices in evaluation and decision making?" will be answered.

The Historical Context and the Present Position in the UK.

A brief outline of the main dates and events, which have shaped the history of the development of children's rights, is useful here in setting the scene for this study. The charity "Save the Children" endeavours, in its work, "to make children's rights a reality": and they provide the following list as part of their training materials.

- 1989 The Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act.
- 1923 Eglantyne Jebb, the founder of The Save the Children Fund, drafts the Declaration of the Rights of the Child.
- 1924 Declaration of the Rights of the Child adopted by the League of Nations.
- 1948 UN General Assembly adopts the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- First Children Act implemented.
- 1959 UN adopts second Declaration of the Rights of the Child.
- 1979 International Year of the Child. Working group established to draft a Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted by the UN General Assembly.
- 1990 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) becomes international law on 2nd September.

The Articles, which are of particular relevance here, are Articles 12 and 13.

Article 12 says; *The governments of all countries should assure that a child who is capable of forming his or her own views should have the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting that child, and that the views of that child should be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.*

Article 13 includes the right to the freedom of expression and says: *this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice*

The notion of children's rights and participation in decision-making can be seen as recent developments in historical terms, in relation to Western society. Miller (1997) traces changes regarding the concept of childhood to the seventeenth century, linked to the religious reforms of Puritans and Jesuits. This then, was the era when "childhood" became a separate time in a person's life. Interestingly, Freeman (1997) notes that the nineteenth century saw the birth of the "child-saving " movement, but that legislation concerning child protection was introduced, "more than 60 years after legislation to protect domestic animals." Early legislation, which was focused on care and protection, still, according to Sinclair Taylor (2000), constituted "a deficit model of childhood" as the child was still seen as the property of the parent. Pollock (1996) says, with regard to education "In the past there was less listening to children than regulating them. Education was perceived as a passive process." It was not until the 1980's that a different role was seen for children, one that includes having a more active and participative element.

By September 1995 The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child had been ratified by 177 nations including the UK. However, what impact this has had on practice in all areas has been questioned by Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, (2000) who point to the findings of the UN committee examining Britain's report in 1995 which concluded, that "the best interests of the child were not reflected in education, health or social legislation, (and that) Article 12... was not being addressed adequately in legislation or practice."

Lansdown (1996) echoes this and adds, "There is a long way to go before we can claim that our respect for children's rights is consistent with the demands placed upon us by the Convention." However, this does not mean that children's voices are not being heard. Presently in the UK there is a great deal of interest in the area of listening to children's perspectives and children as participators. Clark and Moss (2001) outline the work taking place and the most notable aspect of this is the amount of work being undertaken by charities like Save the Children, The Children's Society and Barnardos. Much of the work taking place either includes young children or can be adapted to suit younger children. This interest has not been confined to charities. Recent government initiatives have included within their guidance consultation with children, notably the development of Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships and the development of Sure Start programmes.

Some studies have indicated reluctance among teachers to consult with their pupils, these include Keys and Fernandes (1993) and Wade and Moore (1993). Lloyd-Smith and Tarr (2000) also discuss educational research and argue the "reality experienced by children and young people in educational settings cannot be fully comprehended by inference and assumption". They go on to argue that the actual experiences, as

perceived by the child, cannot be inferred by others and that research into their experiences must, therefore, necessarily include them. However, Sinclair Taylor (2000) says that the introduction of the National Curriculum, and the SATs system of testing with the publication of school's test results in the form of league tables, has led to education becoming a "commodity that is weighed and measured for the benefit of the prime customers, parents." This leaves children with no rights to participate in decision-making. She also goes on to consider the training of student teachers which, in her view, reinforces the concept of " a product model of learning which fails to see children as active participants in decision-making about their own learning." The work of practitioners in the early years has particular relevance here as it is in this period of time that the foundations of life are built. If these practitioners can become more aware of children's rights and how to enable children to develop the skills needed for full participation in society then an effective start will have been made for the child to build upon. Nutbrown (1996) asks the question, "Do educators watch children's actions and listen to their voices with wide eyes and open minds?" This point will be considered further in the later section.

Why Listen to Children?

"The child carried on the back does not know the length of the road."

The benefits of listening to children and encouraging their participation in evaluation, decision-making and planning can be seen in different domains:
- benefits to the child and to the family;
- benefits to the setting, and, ultimately to society as a whole.

However, these benefits can not, in reality, be separated, they are interwoven with each other, and react upon each other, they are considered separately merely for the sake of convenience.

Benefits to the child and to the family.

Wood (1998) clearly links encouraging participation with empowering children as learners, outlining, "learning to participate successfully is a fundamental underpinning to the development of a positive sense of self, enabling children to express their opinions, ideas and make informed choices." France (et al 2000) further discuss the concept that childhood is a "negotiated process", whereby children are active in constructing their own social worlds. James and Prout (1996) describe a shift away from an emphasis on structure to that of agency where children are recognised as being individuals in their own right. This leads Mayall (1996) to arguing that "the aim of research should be to work for children rather than on them." This has always been a fundamental tenet of the Effective Early Learning Programme, that rigorous and systematic research is linked to developmental change.

Miller (1997) outlines the benefits for children again as being linked to empowerment and indirectly, to becoming more effective learners. She outlines the benefits as follows: developing the ability to express their personal needs leads to the development of recognising the needs of others and the improvement of skills such as co-operation, negotiation and problem-solving. This is allied to growing self-esteem and confidence, and inclusion in the decision-making process improves the child's capacity to commit themselves to making them work. Clark and Moss (2001) outline similar benefits following the use of the multi-method Mosaic approach. They also

add, from their study, a further benefit may be that some of the children become more able to engage with the "day-to-day life in the kindergarten".

There are obvious benefits for families as a whole if children are involved more fully, and, as outlined earlier, in other so-called "less developed" countries this level of involvement and participation is more traditional. However, as with practitioners, the possible level of involvement and participation for children is again dependant of the adult's construction of childhood. Thus working with parents/carers is fundamental to the process of encouraging children's participation. Miller (1997) outlines the benefits clearly, including; the relationship with their child becoming much easier, less conflict and more co-operation. The child reacts to receiving more respect by giving more respect. Wood (1998) also outlines a role for all adults concerned with the child as being one, which goes beyond care and protection to one of "enabling and empowering children".

<u>Benefits to the setting, and to society as a whole.</u>

Miller (1997) outlines the benefits to the setting as being related to the adults and the children. She claims that children that are more fully involved in decision-making are more likely to be co-operative if they have helped to shape the provision; also that the insights that adults can gain about children by listening to them more effectively enables those adults to meet the needs of individuals more closely; provision linked to the needs of service users is more likely to meet those needs; and finally that such provision is likely to be more popular with service users and, therefore, more sustainable.

The benefits to society as a whole have to be considered on a long-term basis. Children who have learnt the necessary skills for participation during childhood are, according to Miller (1997) more likely to become "more capable and involved citizens." She goes on to see the additional benefits of "respect for the principles and practice of democratic life." For Clark and Moss (2001) the benefits of using their multi-method Mosaic approach include "promoting the ongoing dialogue between children, staff and parents."

It can be seen that involving children in decision-making and evaluation can have far reaching effects and is, therefore a process that is worthy of more consideration. Participation and consultation can take many forms, and it is the informal structured interview type that is under consideration here.

Constructions of Childhood.

The construction of childhood adopted by adults working with children will both shape the way in which they interact with them on an everyday basis, and their willingness to include children's perspectives and opinions in their self-evaluation programmes. These are philosophical issues that will affect individuals' capacity and willingness to encourage full participation. Therefore, those who are considering this kind of process need to consider the starting points of all involved, including those of parents'/carers. Full participation is the culmination of a long process and there are different levels of participation, as outlined by Miller (1997) using Harts (1979) "eight rungs on the ladder of citizen participation." Those who view children as subjects, or as "empty vessels" waiting to be filled will need time and development to reflect fully on their own perspectives and to take into account the wider issues

surrounding their views. This view is elaborated upon by Wood (1997) who says that children's self-esteem, self-worth and self-efficacy are dependant upon the response to them of "significant others". She goes on to link this to the child as a learner adding, "how they perceive themselves as learners is largely dependant on the messages they receive both at home and elsewhere."

Miller's (1997) outlines the fundamental difference between consultation and participation and this is needed here in considering children's voices in setting evaluation. She says, " In consultation the people seeking your views will have the ultimate power." Whereas participation, " implies joint ownership of the decision-making process and active involvement of all parties. Power is shared."

In considering the concept of "childhood" it is important to bear in mind our own subjective perspective, and our "Westernised" viewpoint. Woodhead (1999) considers the case for a global perspective on early childhood and concludes, "I am torn between competing images- on the one hand an image of acute and highly visible social inequalities- and on the other hand of standardised childhoods regulated on the same technically regulated mass production principles as the fast food industry." He outlines his view that "child development" is an idealised construction, which "misrepresents childhoods within a wider global context." He also takes this point further saying that not only are there different views on the developmental process but also different views about the "development of self." Woodhead sees Child Development theories as being "constructed by adults for other adults, and used in order to make sense of, regulate and shape children's lives and learning." He goes on to attest that having a "Westernised" view of childhood can lead to other forms of childhood being labelled as " deprived, deficient and damaging." Woodhead also considers children who work, and adds, "Wanting to contribute is as much a feature of early childhood as wanting to learn or wanting to play". Miller (1997) also considers childhood from a wider perspective saying that the Westernised view of childhood as a fixed period in life which is permeated with "romanticised notions of happiness, innocence and freedom from responsibility", is a recent way of viewing childhood and one that is only found in so-called "rich industrialised societies". Miller would contest that some children who work are participating fully in the life of their families, make a valued contribution and are involved in decision making to a much greater extent than in so-called civilised societies. Therefore, personal subjectivity and philosophy must be taken into consideration.

Lloyd-Smith and Tarr (2000) consider the concept of childhood from a sociological perspective and perceive childhood to be a social construction, and go on to outline four constructions of childhood, expanding upon those outlined by Jenkins (1993). The four constructions being: children as possessions; children as subjects; children as participants and children as citizens. Woodhead (1999) also outlines four constructions: the tribal child, the developing child, the adult child and the social child. The "social child" is seen as a social actor, Woodhead continues, " the social child emphasises the way children can be enabled to grow in competence through participation. Dahlberg et al (1999) from, a post-modern perspective, consider the construction of "the child as co-constructor of knowledge, identity and culture." Childhood is seen as a social construction and children are active participants as "co-constructors of meaning." Children, in this construction, have agency. Dahlberg et al progress to say, " children have a voice of their own, and should be taken seriously, involving them in democratic dialogue and decision-making and understanding childhood." This is echoed in Woodhead's (1999) alternative paradigm that "emphasises the plurality of pathways through childhood, where early development

and education is a sociocultural process, and the status of children as active participants, with their own perspective on issues in their lives."

The EEL programme then takes place against this background and seeks to include the children in the self-evaluation processes in early years settings. The programme emphasises the use of a democratic approach, and includes all participants in the evaluation. The whole process is based upon the active involvement of all participants, and becomes an effective tool for the professional development of the practitioners involved. "Paradoxically then, this definition of quality is not static or finite but varies with time and place. We make no attempt to give it a fixed definition but encourage the individuals within each setting, including the parents and children, to document and review how they experience the quality and effectiveness of the learning process." (EEL Manual) The aim is to support practitioners to improve on their "previous best" through gradual, incremental change and development, not through revolution. During the intensive three-day training process this democratic approach is emphasized, and practitioners and managers are encouraged to:

- nurture a feeling of trust and confidence with participants in the setting,
- be committed to a collaborative and open mode of operation, encouraging and supporting the participation of all those within a setting in the Evaluation and Improvement process

Further to this principles of operation are outlined as follows

- The process of evaluation and improvement is shared, democratic and collaborative.
- The process is opted into and not imposed.

Thus EEL has included the voice of children as an integral part of the evaluation and improvement process since its inception seeing their voice as being as equally important as those of other participants.

Background to this Study.

The study is based on two phases of the Effective Early Learning Programme, which took place during 1994 and1995. The programme is based on professional development, involving evaluating and improving quality in early childhood settings. Settings undertake a rigorous process of self-evaluation, which includes interviews with children, amongst others. The processes are based upon Rogerian and Vygotskian theories of teaching and learning and are located in the action research paradigm. The interviews undertaken by practitioners have been analysed and categorised using the NUD.IST computer software package.

The Effective Early Learning Programme brings together education and care provision and is suitable for use in all types of settings, those in the public, private and voluntary sectors. The process undertaken is one of externally validated self-evaluation, which leads on to action planning and improvement. It is also accessible to practitioners with a range of qualifications, ranging from those who are relatively untrained to those who are qualified teachers. It can lead to accreditation through a three-module process. The framework for evaluation includes all participants, practitioners, managers, governors, parents and children. Although it is flexible, it is

based upon evaluating the setting under the "10 dimensions of quality" (Pascal and Bertram 1994). The framework has the following 10 dimensions of quality:

- Aims and Objectives
- Learning Experiences/Curriculum
- Learning and Teaching strategies
- Planning, Assessment and Record-keeping
- Staffing
- Physical Environment
- Relationships and Interactions
- Equal Opportunities
- Parental Partnership, Home and Community Liaison
- Management, Monitoring and Evaluation.

Although these dimensions are considered separately it is important to note that in reality they impact on and effect each other, and, in analysing their data, practitioners are encouraged to cross-reference their findings including assessing how one area relates to another, and how findings in one dimension may reinforce or contradict findings in another.

The process of evaluation is conducted in four stages: evaluation, action planning, implementation, and reflection. It is intended that this process then becomes a continuous cycle of development and improvement, and integral to the work of the setting.

For this particular study the Children's interviews from Phase 2 and Phase 3 of the programme were studied, some 945 interviews from children covering 23 different geographical areas of the UK. At this time the children were only asked questions, which covered 5 of the ten dimensions of quality (outlined above) as follows:

- Aims and Objectives
- Learning Experiences
- Learning and Teaching Styles
- Staffing
- Relationships and Interactions.

For the purposes of this study analysis has been based on 3 areas:
1. Aims and Objectives
2. Learning Experience
3. Relationships and Interactions.

As the sample used was large it was decided to focus on these three areas in order to give a more detailed analysis of selected areas. These dimensions of quality were selected as the children's perspectives and opinions in these areas are less frequently sought by practitioners and they could prove to be the most revealing in terms of evaluation of the setting.

The questions asked were as follows:

1a. Why do you think you come to nursery, playgroup etc.?

2a. What do you like doing best at nursery etc.?
2b. What don't you like doing?

3a. What do you think the adults are here for?
3b. How do you feel about the people you meet here?
3c. How do you think they feel about you?
3d. Tell me 3 things you are not allowed to do.
3e. Tell me 3 things you must do.

The following guidance is issued alongside the questions to help practitioners:

"Ideally using a range of photographs of activities and people within the setting, talk informally to a range of children, covering the topics outlined below. (This is best completed by talking to small groups of 3 to 4 children. The conversations can then be tape recorded or written down by a helper.) Each group interview should take a maximum of 20 minutes.
NB. These questions are a guide only; adapt their format to suit individuals.
This guidance and instructions for carrying out the interviews are all part of an intensive 3 day training programme for practitioners that begins the Effective Early Learning Programme.

The discussion regarding methodology will follow the section on findings.

Findings.

Data has been analysed using the NUD.IST software package and also by hand. It should be noted that analysis of interview text from any one participant may provide more than one category of response. The percentages set out in the following tables therefore, are based on frequency of occurrence and may not total 100%.
The analysis will be outlined under the dimensions of quality headings.

Aims and Objectives.

The Effective Early Learning Programme Manual describes this dimension in the following way:
" This dimension refers to the written and spoken statements within a setting in which the aims and objectives of the provision for learning are made explicit. It also focuses on issues such as how the policy statements are formed, who is involved in their formation and how they are communicated to involved parties. The extent to which these aims are initiated, shared, communicated and understood by all the parties involved needs also to be considered."

The children's perspectives on these issues was sought by asking the following question:
1a. Why do you think you come to nursery, playgroup etc.?
The answers to the question have been categorised and are presented in the following chart.

Definition	No. of Responses	Percentages
Emotional, social etc.	606	61.4
Curriculum	275	29.1
Parents/Childcare	198	20.97
Don't know	76	8.04
Environment/Safe	75	7.9
Environment/Stimulating	38	4.02
Parents/Liaison	5	0.54
Staff/development	1	0.1
Equal Opportunities	1	0.1

The majority of responses were categorised as being in the area of emotional, social, dispositions, autonomy, independence, confidence, play. Responses typical of this type are:

" Because I like my friends and we play" 19.03.intc3
"'Cos L need to 'cos its comfy here" 16.05.intc5
" To play with my friends and all the toys" 19.20.intc2

It is pleasing to note that play featured prominently in the children's responses and this is concurrent with prevailing theories of early childhood care in the UK.
The next most favoured category was that of curriculum. Responses in this area were concerned with learning. Typical responses were:

" I have to go to school to be taught" 19.08.intc2
" I came here to get my brain to work" 16.14.intc2
" You have to learn your letters and do everything" 19.08.intc5

Most responses in this category were around the area of literacy with the children focusing on reading and writing.
The next most popular category was that concerning their parent's need for childcare while they were working. Some responses here were:

" Because I want to and my mum goes to work for pennies" 19.02.intc2
" Because our mums and dads go to work, and they can't keep after you! They go to work to have money." 19.09.intc2

Some of the children's responses focused on their age or their size, indicating that they felt that it was the right time for them to be attending that setting. Some also demonstrated a clear understanding of the concept of change and development over time. They knew where they had been before attending the present setting and also their next step. For instance:

" Because I'm not 4 yet and I'm waiting to go to big school." 20.16.intc1
" 'Cos we're getting bigger." 20.11.intc1

A small number of children indicated that they came to the setting because it was a particular day; this was due to either part-time attendance or the fact that the particular setting was only open on certain days. Some children also felt that attendance was compulsory, but gave different reasons for this.

" 'Cos the police will lock you up if you don't." 20.05.intc1

"When you are told to come by mummy you have to." 20.25.intc2

As always with young children they gave some very amusing answers that related to their own preoccupations at that particular time.

" Because you (staff) would get lonely." 19.17.intc3

" Because I do. I don't always, I have chicken pox. 20.06.intc1

"I come 'cos I need to grow up to be a doctor." 21.15.intc1

" I came here because my mum sent me here. She wanted me to sit down." 15.20.intc3

Perhaps these perceptions reveal far more about the parent's perspectives than those of their children!

Comparisons to other participants.

As could probably be expected, there was a slight majority of parents who focused on the need for childcare (51.6%) as the main reason for their child attending the setting, with the category for emotional and social reasons coming next in number of responses (41%). More parents than children mentioned the category of Equal Opportunities (8.17%), however this is only to be expected. Far fewer parents than children mentioned the curriculum (13%) and this is quite a surprising result as one would have assumed that education and learning would be high on the parent's agenda.

Managers tended to include nearly all of the categories in their responses, perhaps indicating their desire to be seen to be saying the right thing. For them 3 categories came out as almost equally mentioned, emotional (35%), curriculum (34%) and stimulating environment (33%). Staff similarly had the same 3 categories as most frequently mentioned but with different percentages and therefore possibly different emphases of importance, although this does not necessarily follow. Their responses were, emotional category 55%, safe environment 52%, stimulating environment 41%, with curriculum at 35%. The governors also had the same 4 categories featuring heavily in their responses but again in a different order, emotional and social received the highest number of mentions 48%, with curriculum next at 43%, then safe environment 31% and stimulating environment 27%.

There does seem to be general agreement that the category including social and emotional aspects is of significant importance, this is quite reassuring for practitioners as many have felt the "top down" pressure placed on early years providers of all types to begin so-called "formal education" at an ever earlier age. There seems to be quite a good healthy balance between the main categories featured in all responses, and hopefully this is reflected in the actual practice within the setting. This is where the

Effective Early Learning Programme is particularly useful in encouraging practitioners to reflect using all of the data gathered, and cross-referencing interview data with observation and documentation to obtain a complete and valid picture of their setting.

Learning Experiences.

The Eel Manual describes this dimension as follows:

" This dimension is concerned with the range and balance of learning activities provided and the learning opportunities they present for the young child. The curriculum is interpreted very broadly to embrace children's all round cognitive and social development. It includes a consideration of the extent to which the activities and experiences offered provide learning opportunities in language and literacy, mathematics, science, technology, physical, human and social, moral and spiritual, aesthetic and creative experience. It may also include reference to the National Curriculum (or it's equivalent) core and foundation subjects where this is appropriate. When considering issues of continuity and progression, the extent of differentiation within the learning experiences offered to cater for individual needs is also addressed."

In consideration of this dimension the children are asked the following 2 questions:

2a. What do you like doing best at nursery, playgroup etc?
2b. What don't you like doing?

The results are presented in the following chart.

Definition	No. of Responses	Percentages
Imaginative Play	414	43.8
Creative	394	41.6
Water, sand, playdoh	238	25.1
Physical/outdoor	228	24.1
Construction	212	22.4
Language	190	20.1
Fun	154	16.2
Computer	78	8.2
Everything	53	5.6
Physical/indoor	49	5.18
Music	48	5.07
Dinnertime	43	4.5
Numeracy skills	36	3.8
Work	32	3.3
Independent activities	19	2.01
Trips	17	1.79
Don't know	12	1.26
Animals	10	1.05

As can be seen from the chart, the overwhelming majority of responses fall into the first three categories, which all encompass the creative domain of learning. These results are similar to those arrived at by Mortimore et al (1988) who administered the "smiley face" scale to a stratified sample of nearly 2000 children attending a sample of 50 schools in the Inner London Education Authority. In that study, of older children, using the computer was the most positively rated activity, with creative activities and physical education being the next most positively rated activities. West et al (1997) postulated 3 key dimensions in conceptualising children's attitudes towards school activities: interest versus boredom, level of difficulty, and success versus failure. They go on to say, "A given activity therefore may be liked because it is of interest, because the level is appropriate or because the child is successful at it." This is probably also the case for younger children, but also to be taken into account is the younger child's need to explore. They are still very much at the experimental stage taking joy in discovering new activities and experiences, and also repeating familiar activities to rehearse their feeling of pleasure in success and accomplishment. The involvement scale used in the Effective Early Learning Programme outlines the concept of deeper levels of learning occurring when a child is engrossed or deeply involved in an activity, they are operating in Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" and cannot be seduced away from their learning.

The children's responses were very varied, included here are some of the typical and interesting ones:

" I like everything." 19.05.intc2

" Eating bananas, and sticking." 19.11.intc1

" Working writing is best, I like reading by myself." 20.04.intc4

" My best thing is snack time I love all the food." 16.11.intc2

The children's responses to the second question asked were similarly varied; the children had as many dislikes as they had likes.

Definition	No. of Responses	Percentages
Creative	163	17.2
Imaginative	144	15.2
Water, sand, dough	134	14.1
Like Everything	130	13.7
Don't like/person named	107	11.3
Construction	98	10.3
Language	96	10.1
Physical/outdoor	82	8.6
Working	64	6.7
Don't like/everything	54	5.7
Sitting on carpet/routines	44	4.65
Dinner	32	3.38
Don't know	31	3.2
Physical/indoor	30	3.17
Music	30	3.17
Numeracy	19	2.01
Being disciplined	18	1.90
Don't like attending	18	1.90

Again it is the activities within the creative domain that are the most frequently mentioned, however, in this case the numbers of responses are much lower. It should also be taken into consideration that young children's likes and dislikes change on a daily basis and their replies are most often related to things that they have been doing recently, or something exciting that has stayed in their mind. So, therefore, to obtain a clearer picture one would need to ally the answers given by an individual to other sources of data such as observation techniques; parental and practitioner information. Some interesting examples of responses are given here.

" Hare painting, you get all mucky and if you eat the paint you'll die. You get paint on your clothes and your mum tells you off." 20.17.intc1

"I don't like sitting down because I'm not tired." 16.16.intc2

" I don't like having to stop." 21.09.intc1

" I don't like work but sometimes I have to do it, and I don't like sitting at the tables either." 19.03.intc7

These examples help to illustrate how much practitioners can learn about individual children by listening to them and by taking their opinions seriously. However, listening and valuing their opinions is not enough, this needs to be linked to appropriate action, so that children are able to see the consequences of their involvement.

Comparisons with other participants.

In this domain direct comparisons with other participants would not be valid as the adult participants: manager, staff, governor, parents, are not asked questions regarding the children's likes and dislikes. The purpose of the adult questions is slightly different in that the interviews seek to establish the range and types of learning experiences offered to the children in order to fulfil the needs of the evaluation. It has never been a part of the Effective Early Learning Programme evaluation process to consider individual children, but practitioners are able to use the techniques they have learnt to consider individuals in more detail, if they so wish. The children's interviews are designed to enable their voices to be heard within the evaluation process, however techniques used are applicable to other circumstances. The practitioners undertaking the evaluation process are encouraged to use data obtained from the children's interviews to consider their provision; to evaluate provision through the child's eyes, as can be seen from the examples given, their opinions can be very illuminating

Relationships and Interactions.

The EEL Manual describes this dimension as follows:

" This dimension looks at how the children and adults interact, how far and in what ways relationships are expressed and developed in activities is also considered. The social rules and codes of conduct which operate are seen a significant. The opportunities for self-initiated learning and the degree of staff intervention would fall

within this dimension. The involvement of the children and their interactions in the activities is highlighted as a means of reflecting on the quality of the educational experience they provide."

The questions asked are as follows:

3a. What do you think the different adults are here for?
3b. How do you feel about the people you meet here?
3c. How do you think they feel about you?
3d. Tell me 3 things that you are not allowed to do?
3e. Tell me 3 things that you must do?

The questions will be considered separately here.

3a. What do you think the different adults are here for?

Definition	No. of Responses	Percentages
Caring	281	29.7
Pastoral	217	22.9
Help	206	21.7
Teach	183	19.3
Play	171	18
Discipline	138	14.6
Subject related/ teach	136	14.3
Work	120	12.6
Other	59	6.2
Don't Know	57	6
Adult related	47	4.9
Love/children	26	2.7

It is clear, when reading the interviews, how perceptive the children really are. They exhibit detailed knowledge of the different roles of the staff, and also have some understanding of the relative status of staff. These results are interesting in that the first 3 categories are concerned with the affective domain, the caring, helping side. It is quite heartening that the children perceive these qualities in the practitioners, when, in fact recent years in education in the UK have seen a rise in "top down" initiatives and the pressure to achieve "targets" and to pass inspections has been an additional burden to practitioners and managers. Obviously practitioners have not lost sight of their role despite the pressures they feel, and the children appreciate this. Their answers often display quite detailed knowledge of the various roles adults have within the settings; they often name staff and describe what they do. This was also found to be the case in Sterling where the Council is "committed to putting children first". (Kinney 2000). Children in one nursery were given an A3 sheet of paper showing diagrams of various areas inside and outside the nursery. They were then given playmobile figures and asked where they would like the nursery staff to go. The children spontaneously named the figures, and made comments about why they were placing them as they were. The staff found, "Their comments were full of insight, flagging up the strengths, skills, but also weaknesses, of particular people." This

demonstrates how perceptive the children can be; the following interview data will illustrate this.

(child named the head teacher) "To make sure you are not fighting, to let us play with toys when you are hurt." 19.09.intc2
" She brings all the teas and works in the shared area" 10.07.intc9
" The dinner lady cuts up your dinner." 10.16.intc3

It is clear that even at an early age children are able to perceive different roles and also to outline the differing status that accompanies that role. Adults who are aware of these perceptions will be more able to ensure that alongside valuing all children as individuals the same principles need to be demonstrated with regard to staff.
The responses dealing with issues of discipline are also interesting when considering the actual interviews, and not just the percentages. Some children refer directly to particular members of staff and methods of discipline. This would need very sensitive handling within the setting,
As with other dimensions the children had some very amusing things to say:

" So the children can get in." 19.03.intc20
" The teachers come to school to think." 10.05.intc4
" To find shoes when they go over the wall." 13.01.intc5
" I don't know why the adults are here they don't usually do anything!" 21.15.intc1

3b.How do you feel about the people you meet here?

Definition	No. of Responses	Percentages
I like them	520	55
Don't know	41	4.3
Like some-names	36	3.8
Don't like-names	34	3.5
Other	33	3.4
Mixed reaction	31	3.2
I like my friends	30	3.12
I love them	23	2.4
I don't like-everyone	9	0.95

The positive responses do prevail over the negative ones, showing that the children are positive regarding the people in their settings. The question does not indicate whether it is referring to the adults or to the other children in the setting so the children have been free to answer it according to their own interpretation. If more specific information is required the question could be asked separately for adults and children.
Again some of the answers are amusing and also revealing.

" I don't like the dinner ladies as they shout at you, I like everyone else."
21.01.intc1

" Yes I like these people because they have lipstick and skirts on." 21.22.intc5

"I like the teacher she gives us another chance." 10.05.intc1

" I think I like their faces and I like their shoes." 09.01.intc22

" I like them, even the boys, but not if they hit me." 09.04.intc3

" The people here are so nice, kind, lovely and good, but sometimes they get cross."
10.16.intc2

3c. How do you think they feel about you?

Definition	No. of Responses	Percentages
They like me	431	45.6
Mixed reaction	66	6.9
Don't know	36	3.8
They love me	38	2.9
My friends like me	28	2.9
They all hate me	25	2.6
Other	25	2.6
Some like me	18	1.9
They don't like me	1	0.01

Here again the positive comments predominate. Practitioners would need to look carefully at children who give very negative responses as this may reflect low self-esteem and self-image. Questions of this nature can reveal quite a lot about the individual, however, in interpretation the practitioner should consider the circumstances, a child giving a negative response may just be having a bad day! The practitioner also needs to look at the children's responses as a whole to build a picture of the relationships within the setting, and to combine the information gained with other data. Some examples of responses are provided here.

" I haven't asked them how they feel about me yet!" 10.03.intc3

" I think the teachers feel proud about me. The children at nursery think I'm really nice." 14.20.intc10

" You like us because you smile." 10.17.intc1

" They'd better not think about me!"

3d. Tell me 3 things you are not allowed to do?
3e. Tell me 3 things you must do?

The following chart combines the responses to both of these questions, as it is useful to consider them together.

Definition	No. of Responses	Percentages
Do dangerous/ hurtful things	436	46.1
Specific things named	413	43.7
Run, jump, shout etc.	237	25
Places where not allowed	138	14.6
Be naughty	111	11.7
Be rude	92	9.7
Don't know	38	4.2
Other	18	1.9
Definition	**No. of Responses**	**Percentages**
Must play and share	342	36.1
Do as told	299	31.6
Learn/do activity	297	31.4
Be quiet/listen	220	23.2
Tidy up/clean up	136	14.3
Have drink/snack	84	8.8
Hygiene related	75	7.9
Other	42	4.4
Don't know	32	3.3
Tell teacher what you are doing	16	1.69
Say goodbye to mum	10	1.05

Children are always very clear about the rules in a setting, " the do's and don'ts," it is however quite surprising that there are quite a high number of responses for "do as told." Practitioners would need to look carefully at the rules of their setting, and at how the rules are decided, if they have a majority of responses that could be termed as coming within an "authoritarian" domain. The children's perspectives on discipline and rules are very interesting and help practitioners to evaluate whether their intended outcomes coincide with the children's perceptions, or are in conflict with them. Issues of discipline, autonomy and conflict resolution are difficult ones for some practitioners and would need to be handled sensitively, as they relate to people on a very personal level that can challenge their philosophy and their concept of childhood. Some examples of interesting answers are given here.

" You are not allowed to touch teacher's desk, don't go in her bag, or touch her special book." 10.05.intc3
" Not steal, only teenagers steal." 15.18.intc2
" Not babies you mustn't touch them." 9.19.intc6

" You must cross your legs and put your fingers in your lap." 10.03.intc7
"We must say goodbye and not come to nursery with a sulky face and scream at our mummies." 19.02.intc1
" You must keep you ears open and mouth shut when teacher is telling the story." 10.07.intc7

In this dimension again due to the nature of the questions asked any direct comparison with other participants' perspectives would not be valid.

Differences between types of Provision.

In total 265 settings took part in the EEL Programme during Phases 2 and 3. The following table gives a breakdown of the different types.

Type of Setting	Number taking part
Nursery class	72
Reception class	60
Playgroup	26
Nursery school	25
Work place nursery	22
Family centre	16
Special needs unit	12
Private Day Nursery	10
Early Years Unit	9
Under 5's Centre	8
Opportunity Centre	2
Local Authority Day Nursery	1
Not given	2

A small study was undertaken to ascertain whether there are any significant differences between responses from children in different types of setting. We wanted to consider whether the type of setting had any influence on the responses. It should be noted here that wide differences could occur in the characteristics of settings of the same type, including: difference in size; ratios of pupils to adults; age composition; curriculum; buildings and resources. The point to make here is that the label "type of setting" may mask almost as many differences within setting type, as between setting type.

Three different geographical areas were chosen, that represented both urban and more rural locations. Within these areas four types of setting were common: reception classes; nursery schools; nursery classes and family centres.18 interviews were chosen at random from each type of setting. Then responses to the first question concerning Aims and Objectives were considered to see if there were any significant differences in responses given between the settings.

Findings.

No significant differences were found between the settings, however, it was interesting to note that children in the reception classes did not answer, "don't know" to any of the questions asked. This may be due to the fact that the children are slightly older and may be more confident; or that they have a clearer perception of adult expectations; or that they may feel that when an adult asks a question they should provide some information and that "don't know" would not be acceptable.

This was a very small-scale study and much further work would need to be undertaken to discover whether "type of setting" does, in fact have any effect on the responses received. There are many other questions that could be asked, such as: "Are there any significant differences of response based on gender?" or "Are children from ethnic minority communities enabled to participate fully in the interviewing process?" The area of considering children's perceptions of their early childhood settings is one that provides many avenues for research.

Methodology.

The technique for ascertaining children's perceptions under consideration here is informal structured interviews. It should be noted that in the Effective Early Learning Programme this technique is combined with many others in order that practitioners are able to build a full evaluation report for their setting. The process is one including data gathering in many forms, and practitioners are encouraged to cross-reference between the data to gain a clear understanding of how the participants' perceptions relate to what is actually taking place in the setting. An important part of the process is how links are made to action, in the action planning stage. This is also important for the children. When their views have been sought there must be some outcome, as they need to feel their opinions are valued alongside those of others, as if this does not take place they will soon come to realise that their opinions do not have significance.
Informal feedback from practitioners is always very positive about undertaking the children's interviews. It is the element of the process that they often enjoy the most; and they can be surprised by the outcomes. The following quote, which comes from a "School Enquiry and Research" Newsletter (2000) gives one practitioner's thoughts.

"One of the most rewarding aspects of our involvement with the EEL project has been the children's responses to the interview schedules. Their views on the way the school is run, the teacher's job, and parent's involvement have been expressed very naturally and with great insight. They also came up with some surprises and made us think."

The EEL process aims to empower practitioners. There are guidelines provided for practitioners in the EEL Manual, and during the three-day intensive training interview techniques are discussed. But, practitioners are then able to use their professional judgement as to how and when etc. to undertake the interviews. They are able to adapt the technique to suit the needs of the children within their setting; this is one of the strengths of the process. This does however mean that, in terms of this study, it is only the outcomes of the interviews that are available, and not the processes involved. The interviews will have been conducted under widely differing circumstances and in many different ways. Therefore it is impossible to judge the validity of the responses obtained; we have been dependant on the professional integrity of those practitioners taking part. Some practitioners will have conducted the interviews in small groups others may have conducted them on an individual basis. It is worthwhile here to consider some of the difficulties and restrictions that need to be taken into account when conducting interviews with young children.
Dockrell et al (2000) outline some of the issues to be taken into consideration, including the setting for the interview, saying that if the interview takes place in their

institutional setting one has to bear in mind the inevitable distraction of others. This is particularly so in the case of young children. If the interview is undertaken in a small group situation group dynamics need to be taken into account, such as: the size of the group, the personalities within the group: and the fact that young children have a tendency to agree with others. Dockrell et al (2000) sum this up by saying, "some participants may dominate...some members of the group may be hesitant to offer a different or alternative perspective." They also discuss the tendency for young children to agree with the interviewer or to feel compelled to answer because they have become used to having to answer adult's questions, this may lead to the children guessing an answer or making something up in order to "please" the adult. Begley (2000) also considers the relative power relationship between the adult and the child, that can be even more of an issue when doing research with children who have special needs, she says, "the method had to include strategies to reduce the unequal power distribution between the researcher and the children." With regard to the points made above, in the Effective Early Programme the practitioners conduct the interviews with the children in their own settings, so this means that they know the children well, and can take these points into consideration when deciding how best to conduct the interviews.

Burgess (2000) says that studies involving children require a "multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach." He goes on to add, "researchers need to give some thought to ways in which innovatory methods of social investigation can be developed and used with children so as to gain access to children's perspectives of the worlds in which they live and work." Woodhead (1999) in his work also considers implications for research into early childhood saying, "The question is about the status we accord the child through the methodologies we adopt and the conclusions we draw; and about whether we allow children space to alter our agenda of presuppositions?"

Conclusion.

This study has shown that children are able to express their opinions in ways that are very perceptive and that give practitioners real insight into the children's perspectives of their early childhood setting. These insights then give an added dimension to the whole evaluation process. Interviewing young children is a valid technique for ascertaining children's perceptions, but for more in-depth work this would probably be most useful when used in conjunction with other methods, such as those outlined by Clark and Moss (2001) in the Mosaic Approach. The benefits for all involved in listening to children's perspectives are wide ranging and will ultimately affect society as a whole. The issues discussed here are philosophical, ethical and morally based, as Woodhead (1999) concludes "Morally, it seems to me that as teachers, students and researchers, we have a responsibility to be attuned to how the tasks of childhood are perceived, felt and understood by those children, their parents and other carers who have to solve the problems of living and growing up, in circumstances that may be vastly different from those that shape our own personal and academic priorities." This is not only true of children in so-called third world" countries, but is also true of those who live in poverty and deprivation in the "developed" nations. The UN convention on the Rights of the Child is far from being realised but it is the responsibility of all those engaged in working with, or researching with, young children to strive to ensure

that children's right to active participation maintains a high profile in practice as well as in theory.

"Each new generation offers humanity another chance.
If we ensure the survival and development of children in all parts of the world, protect them from harm and exploitation and enable them to participate in decisions directly affecting their lives, we will surely build the foundation of the just society we all want and that children deserve."
UNICEF

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