Respect or empowerment? Alternative understandings of ‘listening’ in childcare social work

Alison McLeod describes a research project that explored the effectiveness of communication between social workers and young people in care. Interviews with young people revealed that, even though their social workers had described making significant efforts to listen to them, the young people did not feel their voices were heard. It is argued that this contradiction arises because the adults and the children understood something different by the term ‘listening’. The adults saw it more in terms of paying respectful attention to what the young people had to say. The young people, in contrast, felt that listening was demonstrated by delivering services that accorded with their expressed wishes. The two also had different conceptions of the social worker’s role. While the adults regarded emotional support and therapeutic intervention as key elements of the social work role, few young people shared this view. Although they appreciated reliable social worker availability, what they valued most was practical support combined with promotion of their self-determination. The implications of these findings for childcare social work are discussed.

‘Listening’ and social work with children
A key feature of the Children Act 1989 was that it increased children’s rights in law, in particular what can be seen as a political rather than a welfare right (Freeman, 1999), namely the right to be heard. The Act complemented the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, requiring courts and social care staff to ascertain and give consideration to the wishes and feelings of children and young people before making decisions that affected them. The Children Act 2004 and associated guidance and publications have extended this requirement to cover the involvement of children and young people in policy and the planning, delivery and evaluation of services (Kirby et al., 2003). A shorthand term often used to describe the range of activities encompassed by these requirements is ‘listening’ to children’ (see, for example, Children and Young People’s Unit, 2001). ‘To be listened to’ is highly valued by children themselves (Thomas, 2002). However, as Moss and colleagues (2005) argue, there may be risks involved in using the term ‘listening’ uncritically and without attempting to define what it means, since it can mean many things, not all of which have positive connotations or are compatible with one another.

This article draws on research (McLeod, 2001), the aim of which was to explore how effectively social workers in practice go about listening to children in care. The findings suggested that, although both social workers and young people thought listening was a core component of the social worker’s role, they had different interpretations of the term ‘listening’. The gap between their consequent expectations fed into feelings of dissatisfaction among the young people. Important questions were raised around the issue of appropriate autonomy for young people and the role of the childcare social worker in promoting this.

Research outline
The study population was chosen geographically: all the children and young people looked after in one district of a local authority in the north of England. There happened to be exactly 100 of them, representing approximately 20 per cent of all those looked after in the whole authority. Questionnaires were sent to their social workers enquiring about the efforts they had made to elicit individual children’s wishes and feelings and to respond to them, and 75 responses were received. A postal survey of the children was not undertaken because of doubts about the usefulness of this method of data collection with younger people (Sudman and Bradburn, 1984), though...
this view is open to challenge (Scott, 2000). Young people were instead approached by their social workers or carers and invited to participate in the research. Fourteen initially agreed but only 11 were subsequently interviewed. The intention was to interview the social worker for each young person seen. Eleven social workers were interviewed, but in only eight cases were these a ‘matched’ pair; some social workers were unavailable and some young people changed their minds about participating.

A study was also made of relevant case records. The young people who took part in the research were aged between nine and 17, more than half were boys, all were white British (as were 98 per cent of the study population). All had been looked after for at least six months. Their living arrangements reflected the range of placements in the study population as a whole. All names and other identifying details have been changed.

The question of representativeness arises in any small-scale qualitative study (Ragin, 1994). In this case the research participants came from one authority whose practice in listening to children may not have been particularly advanced; the young people were approached via staff or carers rather than directly, which may have introduced an element of screening into the selection of the sample; consequently, younger and disabled children were possibly under-represented (Curtis et al, 2004). However, there is a view that critical awareness in the researcher is more important than having a representative sample (Fuller and Petch, 1995) and as Munro asserts, ‘whether these children are idiosyncratic or representative, their views matter’ (Munro 2001, p 130). In any case, many of the views expressed by these young people echo those found in other studies (Butler and Williamson, 1994; Aiers and Kettle 1998; Bell, 2002), which supports the validity of findings based on them.

To find out whether or not the young people’s voices were heard the concept of ‘listening’ was broken down into four social work activities:

- **communication** – setting up a dialogue with the child, answering their questions and explaining to them the situation and their options;
- **consultation** – seeking the child’s views on choices facing them;
- **participation** – promoting the child’s involvement in planning and decision-making;
- **redress** – providing opportunities to complain and seek recompense for grievances.

The postal survey and the interviews with social workers sought to establish what efforts they had made to listen to specific children in each of these ways. In the interviews with young people the same categories were used as a framework for a loosely structured interview that sought to establish whether or not they felt they had been heard. After an explanation that the interviewer wanted to find out whether social workers listened to looked after children, they were encouraged to describe their experience of the care system. Some chose to draw a ‘map’ of their progress through placements and talked as they constructed it. Where the topics did not arise spontaneously, young people were prompted to enlarge on explanations they had been given, preparation for moves and other changes, choices they had been offered, whether their views had been consulted, how involved they had been in meetings and care planning processes, any grievances and their resolution. They were then asked to describe a good social worker and to rate their own social worker(s) on how well they listened to them.

The outcome of the process was a conundrum: it echoed Sinclair’s finding that ‘While social workers may think they are listening, young people do not feel as though they are heard (Sinclair, 1998, p 139). The social workers reported making extensive efforts to listen to the children. They gave vivid, detailed and convincing accounts of the trouble they took to promote effective communication, to consult and in some cases to enable effective participation or take complaints seriously. Many demonstrated an underpinning
understanding of child development and an awareness of a range of strategies necessary for opening up communication with children of different ages and abilities (Clark and Moss, 2001; Stalker and Connor, 2003; Schofield 2005). On the other hand, hardly any of the young people felt that they had been heard. They complained that nobody listened to them, that they were not consulted or given essential information:

No one explained anything. I didn’t know what was happening. It was horrible. (Ben, aged 11, now at home on a care order, talking about when he went into foster care)

Many felt unable to exercise choice in matters affecting their lives:

I was told you’re going there [to a certain foster home] and that’s it . . . I’ve got a lot against the Social, I mean it seems I have to ring up the Social to see if I can go to the toilet! (Wayne, 14 years)

Nearly all said they hated reviews and other planning meetings:

You’re so nervous. It feels like the whole world’s staring at you and you feel so inferior to them. (Kerry, 15 years)

Few felt they could influence important decisions affecting their lives and none had any faith in formal channels for redress. Steven, a 16-year-old living in a children’s home, voiced a string of grievances about how he had been treated during his lifetime in the care system. On being asked if he could bring the issues up at his review meeting, he said:

I can say what I like but I’m wasting my breath. No one takes any notice.

When using the official complaints procedure was suggested he described it as ‘a waste of time and energy’. To the idea of going to the police with his more serious allegations his response was:

The police don’t listen to us. They just think we’re a load of shits.

Talking to the young people about their experiences in the care system and talking with their social workers about the same events was often like hearing two completely different stories. While it is not unusual to find two participants in the same process perceiving it differently (Siddell, 1993) and many of the young people’s dissatisfactions are reflected in other research (Aiers and Kettle, 1998; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2000), an important issue was raised by the findings: the adults and the children showed by their answers that they had a different understanding of what it was to ‘listen’. These different interpretations of the term reflected different views of the childcare social worker’s role, which in turn has implications for the way social workers work with young people.

The young people’s view: listening as action

In the words of Roberts (2000, p 238), ‘It is clear that listening to children, hearing children and acting on what they say are three very different activities.’ For these young people, however, they were one: if a social worker did not act on what they said, they had not listened:

Half the time [social workers] aren’t listening. Especially Veronica. She used to look like she was listening, but she never was. She used to just look and nod and do nothing. (Alistair, 15 years)

The way the young people judged whether someone really listened was by whether they acted in response to what they had heard. This interpretation might seem to be at variance with Thomas’s finding that ‘being listened to’ was much more highly rated by children than ‘getting what I want’ (Thomas, 2002). However, the young people I interviewed were not simply wanting their own way. They recognised the need for rules and boundaries on behaviour, though they also expected fairness and flexibility. What they wanted was more say in what happened in their lives.

It came over very strongly from the young people’s interviews that they believed that they knew what was best for them, and that their wishes were too often overruled:
They tend not to listen to you because they think they know better all the time. (Steven)

Actually I think a five-year-old knows just as well what they want as a 15-year-old. (Anna, 17 years).

They insisted that even young children should never be placed somewhere they did not want to live:

I pleaded with [the social workers] to go back to my Mum but they didn’t take no notice of what I was saying . . . I was seven or eight. I wasn’t that young. At that age I should have been listened to. (Kerry)

Contact was another burning issue:

Social services doesn’t have the right to stop anyone from having contact with their real parents. (Steven)

In a number of instances where young people protested that their wishes had been over-ruled it did indeed seem that the decisions that affected them might have been made without their welfare or their wishes being the primary consideration. For example, one young person had been brought back from an expensive out-of-agency placement to save money, even though it meant changing school and breaking established social networks. Another had been refused permission to take part in a documentary about the care system on the grounds that the public exposure might have an adverse effect on him; the young man believed it was really because managers did not want adverse publicity. (Off the record his social worker thought he was probably right.)

A few of the adult informants took a whole-organisation view of what listening to children entailed. One talked of the need for more sensitivity to young people’s wishes in the type of resources provided, better preventive services so that they did not have to be looked after, and a greater range of foster homes to avoid residential placements. Another advocated improved awareness of young people’s feelings in the way services were delivered: for instance, less intimidating meetings. A third spoke of the need for independent monitoring of the care planning process to ensure that children’s views were fully considered.

Young people were indignant at having to have police checks done on friends’ parents before they could spend the night with them or at their carers being instructed not to feed them certain foods because of food safety scares:

I’m 14 and I feel strongly I’m old enough to understand the risks I’m taking and make my own mind up. (Wayne).

As Munro points out, fear of scandal and public witch-hunts breeds defensive social work practice. This militates against allowing children in care too much autonomy, which itself risks ‘over-protect[ing] them from one of the crucial stages of maturation’ (Munro, 2001, p 36): the chance to learn through their own mistakes.

The social workers’ view: listening as attitude

The children, thus, had a view of listening which involved actively promoting their autonomy. The social workers, as might be expected, expounded a more sophisticated view of what it was to ‘listen’, but the most striking difference was that they saw it as more of a receptive process. For them, real ‘listening’ was a question of attitude. In this they reflect the view that listening is ‘first and foremost about an ethic of openness to and respect for the other’ (Kjorholt, Moss and Clark, 2005, p 178).

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However, the majority of social workers addressed listening in the context of the quality of a one-to-one relation-
ship. To ‘listen’ was used to mean ‘to pay attention’. For example:

She was shouting . . . and there was quite a crowd around and I said . . . ‘You’re playing to the audience. I’m not listening to you.’ (Kerry’s social worker)

It was used to mean ‘to take seriously’:

People sometimes stop listening to him because you don’t know what’s fact and what’s fantasy. (Alistair’s social worker)

Audrey (Tammy’s social worker) perhaps summed up the social workers’ view of listening when she said, ‘I think it’s just hearing her, being respectful.’ In other words, ‘listening’ was an attitude embodying respect. The difference here, from the children’s view of listening, is that the social worker who pays attention, takes what they say seriously and hears the young person out respectfully, believes they are listening. The worker does not necessarily feel obliged to deliver on what the child has requested. Audrey, in the quotation above, was explaining how she had responded to 15-year-old Tammy’s request to move out of a children’s home when there were no other placements available. Audrey wanted Tammy to feel she had taken notice of her complaint, even though she could not change the situation for her. Tammy was unimpressed.

Constraints on action

Many social workers were very exercised with the question of how lack of resources constrained their ability to meet young people’s expressed wishes:

The fact is we’re trapped by resources: if I could have found him a foster placement, I would have.

But there were other reasons for failing to agree to young people’s wishes apart from lack of resources. Alistair’s social worker commented that listening to Alistair did not mean accepting all he said at face value: he often found it necessary to confront his fantasies. Kerry’s social worker, Brenda, felt she must contain Kerry’s excessive demands for attention. Other constraints on workers’ ability to carry out young people’s wishes included the child’s safety, the parents’ views, decisions by courts or senior management and the administrative straitjacket of a bureaucratic organisation. Young people’s wishes were often seen as unrealistic: for example, Brenda would not agree to Kerry’s request to go and live with her elder sister because she did not believe the sister really wanted her and feared it ‘would all end in tears’. Her view reflects Schofield’s (2005) argument that allowing a child responsibility for a decision before they are developmentally ready is a recipe for chaos. A distinction was drawn by several workers between what a child might want and what they might need. John, a social worker for disabled children, talked about the conflicting ‘wants’ and ‘needs’ of an autistic teenager, Callum:

If you gave him one of those little computer games he would play on it obsessively all day and all night: that’s what he would choose to do if you let him. [But] if we’re looking to enhance the lives of children, give them new experiences, and you’ve got an obsessive behaviour that’s just repeating what they’re doing already, then I think you would say we ought to be trying to move them on to something, because it may give them a better quality of life. I don’t think you’re helping them by letting them continue. So you make judgements for them.

What John is saying here echoes the legislation in giving the child’s welfare priority over their wishes and feelings. He believed that in the case of this child it was right to over-rule his wishes and make decisions about his welfare for him; however, in many cases, it was far from clear whether the social worker’s or the child’s view of what was best was the wiser.

The teenagers interviewed were not at all convinced by the idea that adults knew best and could legitimately over-rule children’s wishes. Steven believed passionately that the social workers had got it wrong every time:
All the trouble in my life has been caused by social services. Me brother getting sent down is the fault of social services. They dumped him in this children’s home. He ran away. They put him back. He ran away several times. Isn’t it obvious that a child does not want to be there? So when he runs away he has no money – he has to eat – he’s forced to find ways and means of getting food, then he gets arrested. It’s social services that caused that.

When one looked at the dismal history of Steven and his brother, in care since they were toddlers, with a string of disrupted placements behind them, one could not escape the conclusion that some poor decisions had indeed been made by the adults responsible for their care. Munro’s comment seems apt:

When one considers the depressing evidence on outcomes for looked after children in adult life, humility about our ability to know what is in children’s best interests seems to be the appropriate emotion. (Munro 2001, p 135)

Feelings and therapy
There was another respect in which the social workers’ view differed from that of the young people: while it was unusual for the young people interviewed to admit that private emotions were a legitimate area for social workers’ enquiry, effective ‘listening’ for the social workers required them to find out and explore children’s feelings. In this they were reflecting the legislation that requires them to elicit feelings as well as wishes. There was a strong belief among the social workers in an underlying level of emotion beneath the surface presentation, that was in some sense more ‘real’ and something they should ‘tune into’. Helping the child to bring these feelings to the surface and express them was seen as a key aspect of their role. For example, Anna’s social worker said he was convinced that Anna was reticent about ‘a huge slice of pain and rejection’ that she kept carefully concealed. He criticised Anna’s previous social workers because there had been ‘no in-depth discussion with her about what her feelings were, no evidence of any particular challenging or exploration of her feelings’.

Helping children to express and ‘work through’ feelings was given a high priority by almost all the social workers and was viewed as an integral part of ‘listening’. This is common in much social work literature (Crompton 1980; Fahlberg 1994; Brandon, Schofield and Trinder, 1998), but none of the workers made any reference to a theoretical base; it seemed just to be taken for granted as practice wisdom.

The children’s view was different. Several complained that social workers were ‘nosy’ and that young people’s feelings were none of their business. There was a strongly expressed view that good listening should not involve interrogation and that social workers were too inclined to be intrusive:

They just jump in and bombard you asking loads of questions, and pry really. (Tammy)

This reflects Bell’s research with children involved in child protection investigations that found ‘the most common criticism was of questioning experienced as being invasive and threatening’ (Bell, 2002, p 4). While they wanted social workers to listen to what they had to say, the young people felt they were entitled to set the agenda for their conversations themselves. Much of their experience and feelings were private and personal and they wanted them kept that way. Exploring these intimate areas was not seen as a legitimate part of the social worker’s role. Twelve-year-old Patrick did show some understanding of the rationale for bringing feelings out into the open, though he had limited enthusiasm for the process:

I did things like family trees and sort of the history of my life and we got in touch with people, and the memories that I had. I did do some of it, but some of the things I didn’t really want to talk about because it upset me . . . I’ve thought about it for a while, as in, trying to accept problems, and not fear anymore, and there’s no point keeping it to yourself and that sort of thing. But I haven’t really talked about it much.
Only one of those interviewed, Robert (14), said he had found therapeutic work helpful:

*It just helps you to relax . . . you become more open about things, you don't just bottle everything up inside.*

However, it is interesting to note that those children where the most extensive efforts to do direct work and elicit feelings had been undertaken when they were younger appeared to be the most settled and were among the ones making the best educational and social progress.

The Children Act 1989 is unequivocal in its insistence that social workers should elicit children’s feelings and the accompanying Guidance and Regulations (Department of Health, 1991) make it clear that looked after children with emotional difficulties require therapeutic help. However, social workers attempting such interventions with any of the youngsters in this sample, once they reached adolescence, struggled to convince them it would be helpful.

**Respect, empowerment and competence**

When we look at the ways these respondents understood the concept of ‘listening’, it becomes clear that although there was some overlap, there was a qualitative difference between the way children and adults used the term. The children judged whether someone was listening to what they said by how they acted in response, in particular whether they carried out their wishes. The adults felt they demonstrated listening simply by being there for the child, hearing them and empathising; in particular they stressed tuning in to the unspoken undercurrents of emotion. It was therefore not surprising if the two groups of informants disagreed as to whether listening had taken place.

What is interesting is that the ‘child’ and ‘adult' view each corresponds roughly to two of the strands of the working definition of ‘listening’. The more receptive view of the adults concentrates on communication and consultation – that is conversing, building up a good relationship, providing information and explanations, finding out how the child feels about his or her experiences and what he or she wants to happen. Its focus is on offering options, with someone who listens being someone with a respectful attitude. The action-oriented view of the children fits better under the headings of participation and redress: they wanted to influence the decisions that affected their lives and they wanted a concrete response when they had a grievance.

There is a parallel here with how the two contrasting views perceived the social worker’s role. The social worker was an important person to the young people: they wanted their social workers to be available and reliable and, crucially, not to patronise them. The young people’s view of the social worker’s role did involve an element of emotional support (they wanted them to be ‘friendly’), but it was essentially practical: the young people had little time for a counsellor or therapist, they wanted their social workers to sort out concrete, day-to-day problems for them. This view accords with that found in a number of studies of service-user views. For example, the classic study *The Client Speaks* (Mayer and Timms, 1970) quotes a service user saying:

*All the lady wanted to do was talk . . . She was trying to help and it made me feel good knowing someone cared. But you don’t solve a problem by talking about it. Something’s got to be done!* (p 1)

The social workers, on the other hand, while not dismissing the young people’s need for practical assistance, laid much more emphasis on helping them resolve emotional difficulties. They clearly saw their role as in no small degree a therapeutic one. We can see here a dichotomy between the views of social worker as enabler and as therapist that have coexisted in the literature for half a century (Stephens, 1947; Winnicott, 1964).

If we look behind these views to the underlying value base, it becomes clear that the two groups saw different social work values as paramount. Issues of autonomy and self-determination surfaced repeatedly in the young people’s testimony. It is clear they were primarily seeking empowerment. The social
workers’ view on the other hand put much more stress on respect. While both empowerment and respect are fundamental social work values (British Association of Social Workers, 2003), the contrast between them is significant. Power is the central issue at stake: more power to the service user implies less power to the professional. Where young people sought and were denied more autonomy, in many cases this was justified on the grounds of their lack of competence to decide the issue in question whereas lack of resources could be the important factor.

Individuals are often described as being or not being competent as if competence were a personal attribute, but Thomas (2002) argues it should rather be viewed as situational: a child may be more or less competent in a given situation, depending on how well prepared and supported they are, how much knowledge and understanding of available options they have, and how the situation is structured. He observes:

*History offers . . . many examples of [powerful groups] justifying their power by reference to the needs, the dependence or the incompetence of those subject to them.* (Thomas, 2002, p 199)

However, it is possible for adults to enable a child to become more competent. For example, children with chronic illnesses can learn to manage their own medication (Christensen, 1998); teenagers armed with knowledge about policy can successfully challenge policy-makers (Cairns and Brannen, 2005); disabled young people can participate effectively in project management (Spicer and Evans, 2006); and children of primary school age can play a constructive role in decision-making (Thomas, 2002). Munro presents evidence to support the claim that:

*Helping to empower [young people] is not just an ethical requirement but equally a developmental task . . . children with positive feelings of self-esteem, mastery and control can more easily manage stressful experiences.* (Munro, 2001, p 134)

It could therefore be argued that where young people do not appear competent to have a say in a given decision, it should be the social worker’s task to assist them to become so, and that this might in effect constitute a therapeutic intervention. This approach fits with the spirit of current government guidance, with its stress on long-term outcomes including ‘be healthy’ and ‘make a positive contribution’ (Department for Education and Skills, 2003, p 14), but it should not be underestimated how time-consuming such work is: when one is rushed off one’s feet, it is faster and simpler to make a decision for a young person rather than to build the conditions where it can be made with them.

**Conclusion: is a synthesis possible?**

This research started from the legislation: the requirement in the Children Act 1989 that social work staff elicit children’s wishes and feelings. The wording of the Act reflects a dichotomy similar to that thrown up by the data: wishes – what the child wants to happen – versus feelings – the child’s emotional response to events: the practical versus the subjective. But perhaps it is not helpful to think in terms of dichotomies. Emotion is inextricably linked with action, they are not separate entities. (Morrison, forthcoming). While constructs such as autonomy/dependence and competence/incompetence help us clarify our thinking, real life is messier and less clear cut. Kjørholt et al (2005) argue that we should reject dichotomies and think instead of a continuum, with individuals of all ages fluctuating between vulnerability and independence, competence and incompetence. Compromises are often the only solutions to complex issues and in the case of ‘listening’, the truest understanding may be one that embraces both respect and empowerment. Indeed it can be argued that the one implies the other. Thus to provide effective help, a social worker will have to operate simultaneously as enabler and therapist.

For the social workers I interviewed, the implication of this view would be to give a higher priority to empowering the young people they worked with. While no
one could sensibly argue that children should be allowed self-determination at all times, the evidence from this research, borne out by other studies (Aiers and Kettle, 1998; Thomas, 2002), suggests that social workers may tend to be more cautious than is necessary in limiting the autonomy of looked after young people and making decisions on their behalf. This may be because of the pressures of operating in a risk-averse society (Munro, 2001), in an organisation geared to business efficiency (Bell, 2002), of having an excessive case-load or inadequate training (Gilligan, 2000), or may spring from a view of children as incompetent (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2000). There is a substantial body of evidence now demonstrating that young people, given adequate information, preparation and support, can make wise and responsible decisions and that adults do not always know best (Thomas and O’Kane, 1998). If we start from the assumption that acceding to the child’s wishes is the first choice outcome, the onus will then be on workers to provide the evidence and argue the case for doing anything else. This requires clear thinking and transparency about the theoretical base they are coming from, which would make their view more open to challenge for the child or her/his advocate. For example, if proposing therapeutic work, the worker would be expected to justify its rationale and be clear about the research base for its effectiveness, and the child’s refusal could be better informed and accepted as ‘a legitimate exercise of their participation rights – the right to choose not to participate’ (Schofield, 2005, p 40).

Giving children a more central role in decisions affecting their lives does, however, involve social workers taking risks and so requires support from line management (and ultimately, for local authority employed staff, from local councillors.) The work is also time consuming if it is to be done effectively and so requires staffing, which has implications for resources. A change in approach therefore has repercussions beyond the front-line worker. Enabling young people’s meaningful participation in decisions affecting their lives is not a quick, easy or always comfortable alternative to making decisions on their behalf, but it is likely to assist them to become more mature, responsible and resilient. It is also more likely that they will feel they have been heard.

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