



## University of Dundee

'Can you hear me?' An exploratory study investigating the representation and impact of children's views in multi-agency meetings

Mitchell, Kerry L.; Colville, Tracey

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## Title Page

**Title:** 'Can you hear me?' An exploratory study investigating the representation and impact of children's views in multi-agency meetings.

### Abstract

The study explored parent and professional perceptions of the representation of children's views in multi-agency meetings in Scottish schools. Online survey (134 responses) and educational documents provided data sources that were subject to thematic and documentary analysis. The findings highlight the importance of professional beliefs around child capacity and their understanding of what constitutes a competent view. In turn, they influence the extent to which professionals find representations of children's views worthwhile. Implications for practice include raising professional awareness of evolving ontologies around the representation of children's views in multi-agency meetings in line with policy and legislation.

### Keywords

Child's views, professional views, participation in multi-agency meetings

**Authors:** Kerry L. Mitchell  
Dr Tracey Colville

#### Author Contact Details:

- Kerry Mitchell
  - [kerry.mitchell-bs@fife.gov.uk](mailto:kerry.mitchell-bs@fife.gov.uk)
  
- Tracey Colville
  - Email: [tcolville001@dundee.ac.uk](mailto:tcolville001@dundee.ac.uk)

#### Author Biographies:

- Kerry Mitchell is in her third year of training as an Educational Psychologist. This article is based on her year 2 research thesis for qualification in MSc in Educational Psychology at the University of Dundee (2020). Current focus of her practice includes implementation of Nurture approaches in secondary schools. She has been commissioned to deliver a workshop on pupil voice to senior education managers.
  
- Dr Tracey Colville has 30 years' academic and practice experience in education and psychology. She is currently a Lecturer in Teaching and Research and Co-Director of

the MSc in Educational Psychology at Dundee University. Current academic research focuses upon Cultural-historical activity theory in educational and work settings. A key focus of her practice-based work has been the development of strengths-based multi-agency meetings in schools in Scotland and Copenhagen, Denmark. Public research profile/ORCID link: [orcid.org/0000-0003-1887-7962](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1887-7962)

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There are no sponsors or conflicts of interest with this study.

This study was designed with adherence to the British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics and Conduct (2018) and the approval of the University of Dundee School of Education and Social Work Ethics Committee.

The participant information sheet and consent form are contained within the survey

**Data Availability:** The full data set cannot be shared publically in view of its sensitive and confidential nature but anonymised details of the qualitative data are archived and available from the first author.

# **‘Can you hear me?’ An exploratory study investigating the representation and impact of children’s views in multi-agency meetings.**

## **Abstract**

The study explored parent and professional perceptions of the representation of children’s views in multi-agency meetings in Scottish schools. Online survey (134 responses) and educational documents provided data sources that were subject to thematic and documentary analysis. The findings highlight the importance of professional beliefs around child capacity and their understanding of what constitutes a competent view. In turn, they influence the extent to which professionals find representations of children’s views worthwhile. Implications for practice include raising professional awareness of evolving ontologies around the representation of children’s views in multi-agency meetings in line with policy and legislation.

## **Keywords**

Child’s views, professional views, participation in multi-agency meetings

## **1. Introduction**

*Theoretical aspects of children’s rights, participation and voice*

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1990) declares that children have a right to be heard in decisions which affect them. Within academia, childhood studies and other related disciplines have focused research upon children’s rights, particularly around voice and their participation in matters that affect them (Lundy, 2007; Tisdall, Davis & Gallagher, 2008). This research, often conducted with children and young people (C&YP) as co-researchers (Kellett, 2010) tends to be situated within epistemological, theoretical, and philosophical/ontological narratives around concepts of children and childhood (James & Prout, 2015).

However, in their review of children's participation rights literature, McMellon and Tisdall (2020) refer to a poor level of critique of UNCRC despite 'narratives' and 'tropes' over 30 years that claim to challenge the traditional view of children. Similarly, Lundy (2007) argued that 'voice' in the broadest sense has minimal impact on outcomes for children as it is often used in a tokenistic fashion. This is captured in what is described as a 'chicken soup' effect; while it may make some people feel positive to have gathered children's views, they are not then given due weight as per article 12. Lundy (2007) devised an illustration which better explores the wider concepts regarding children's voice.

For Lundy (2007), voice has four interrelated concepts: voice, space, influence, and audience (figure 1). Children must firstly have the opportunity to share their view (space), they must receive support to give that view (voice), their view must be listened to (audience) and finally, actions must be taken as a result of the view (influence). The decision around capacity is a topic of contention.

Indeed Hart (2008) and Lundy (2018) caution against an 'all or nothing' approach to participation that limits opportunities for children and young people who need support and adjustments to do so. Lundy (2007) argued that it is important to not focus on the age and maturity of a child, often associated with a child's deemed capacity. The important element is an ability to form a view at all, not on whether this view is mature. That said, it is apparent even within legislation that age, complexity of additional support need and disability are considered important factors around capacity to express a view.

### *Adult core beliefs*

With focus now upon the diversity of lived experiences of children (Tatlow-Golden & Montgomery, 2021; Cooper, 2017) and the materiality of childhood (Sutterlüty & Tisdall, 2019), questions are now asked regarding the extent to which children really do have agency, capacity, and autonomy in research activity with academics and in interactions with adults in general (Lundy, 2012; Canosa & Graham, 2020; Spyrou, 2019). Current debates around the concept of agency focus upon its use in discourse as normative (and romanticised as empowering children as competent individual beings) as opposed to a socio-cultural perspective (Abebe, 2019; Edmonds, 2019) wherein agency is locally situated in dynamic, often contradictory ways that reflect the relational, social, political and material aspects of children's lives (Abebe, 2019; Esser et al, 2016; Mizen & Ofosu-Kusi, 2013). Dialectically, both children and adults shape and are shaped by the interactions that may enable or constrain everyday experiences. Abebe (2019) refers to this as a 'dual dimension' of agency, reconceptualising it as a continuum and as socially negotiated rather than an individual attribute. For example, although children may experience some form of agency in the playground exercise of it more generally is constrained by adult power and authority within the broader school culture (Sirrko et al, 2019).

More generally, there are calls within childism movements to challenge the persistence of adultism (Walls, 2019). Childism has been described as a 'critical movement' aimed at challenging normative assumptions in society around constructions of child-adult relations (Walls, 2019; Cosma & Soni, 2019).

Although critiques of adultism focus on issues such as imposed adult agendas and views on children (Kellett, 2010), especially around mental health and well-being (Legghio, 2016;



Cooper, 2017) there remain methodological challenges around operationalising concepts around children's rights, voice and participation and evaluating the impact of this on children's lives (Tisdall et al, 2014), whereby assumptions are made that children contain "*message-like thoughts*" that they can share and will match the situations and intentions imposed by adults (Komulainen, 2007).

The core beliefs of adults and their power to impose those beliefs may influence their judgements about children's competence or capacity to express a view (Moran-Ellis & Tisdall, 2019; Spyrou, 2019). Some adults may view children as lacking understanding and knowledge (Walsh, 2017), incapable of meaningful reflection, or too 'vulnerable' to know what is best for them (Frierson, 2016; Sutterlüty & Tisdall, 2019). More fundamentally, what an adult articulates as their truth, reality or ontological position, along with understanding the knowledge they possess and what that means to them, may impact on their view of a child to form and express a view regardless of relative capacity, competence and ability.

Ontology is a philosophical term exploring the nature of reality, or what individuals perceive as being true or real (Smith, 2012). In relation to childhood studies, some writers argue that childhood and adulthood are two separate constructs (Spyrou, 2019) while others such as Prout (2005) focus on the outcome of all individuals (child or adult) through the interplay with various elements of their environments. This latter position is often reflected in collaborative working in children's services influenced by eco-systemic approaches and cultural psychology (Kelly et al, 2017; Edwards, 2017; Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Bronfenbrenner (2005) emphasised the 'time and place' or situated, material aspects of children's experiences across cultures, communities and periods of historical time. Professionals working in children's services consider the influences and impact of various

nested systems around a child and the dynamic interactions between them (Kelly et al, 2017). An example of this is the Getting It Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) national practice model in Scotland within which practitioners are guided to consider both individual (e.g. age, health, ability) and systemic/relational factors (e.g. school, family and community) affecting a child's well-being and how they interact in specific ways at particular moments in time. It is within this context that adults aim to involve children in co-constructing solutions to identified needs (Scottish Government, 2016, 2010).

Children, including those who have Additional Support Needs (ASN), may be invited to express their views to inform collaborative assessment and action planning in GIRFEC child planning meetings (Colville, 2013; Alexander & Skedd, 2010). The need for support may be of a temporary nature or more long-term. Within the GIRFEC framework, a child's plan (Scottish Government, 2016) is based on collaborative assessment of need around eight well-being indicators that includes a section to tick regarding whether children's views have been sought. However, the extent to which this model of *good* practice is translated into *actual* practice may be variable (Mitchell, 2020), especially for those children who, with increasing complexity of need, comes the requirement for enhanced levels of support.

The Education (Additional Support for Learning) Act (2009) states that "*the education authority must seek and take account of the views of the child (unless the authority are satisfied that the child lacks capacity to express a view).*" This prompts several questions: Who decides, and when, if a child has capacity to express a view? Also, what criteria guides such judgements? Who decides if a child will be invited to participate in a meeting that will discuss matters affecting them? What is the purpose of the invitation to participate?

In Scotland, practitioners such as teachers, educational psychologists (EPs) and social workers are often tasked to gather the views of C&YP prior to attendance at a multi-agency meeting and in some circumstances, facilitate participation in a meeting. There is a range of methodologies and tools currently to support this practice (Cooper, 2017). For example, the Mosaic approach (Clark, 2011), and various adaptations of it, has been used by practitioners and researchers (Rouvali & Riga, 2019; Rogers & Boyd, 2020). However, with increasing complexity of need, adults may consider that a child does not have capacity to express a view.

As early as 2003, Bennet Woodhouse outlined prerequisites to children expressing a view effectively which included: being given time to fully understand the issues, having access to a child-friendly version of the information, support from their organisation to build capacity to provide a view and additional training for professionals to improve their ability to involve children. These factors continue to be highlighted in more recent publications (Mayes, 2019; Spyrou, 2019, 2011; Cooper, 2017). Whilst many educational psychologists support children's participation using strengths-based, solution-oriented approaches in meetings (Harker et al, 2017; Colville, 2013; Alexander & Skedd, 2010; Harding & Atkinson, 2009; Hobbs et al, 2000) and professionals and parents are becoming increasingly more creative and inclusive in finding ways to gather, represent and record children's views, a challenge nevertheless remains around tokenism and the relative weight given to children's views in terms of impact on decision-making (Tisdall et al, 2014).

### **The Current study**

The current study was undertaken in a Scottish educational context to explore adults' perceptions and experiences of hearing children's views being expressed and how they believe they impact on decision-making about children's home and school experiences. The

range of methodologies/technologies used to support the gathering and sharing of children's views via analysis of available documents from Scottish local authorities was also explored. Terms such as pupil voice, sharing and expressing a view via participation and representation are used in reference to language reflected in educational legislation, policy and practice. Indeed, in practice they may often be used interchangeably. The data collection methods were designed to address three research questions:

1. How frequently are children's views represented in meetings?
2. Does hearing the child's view impact on the focus, then subsequently the outcomes of a meeting?
3. Is there a preferred method of gathering and representing children's views, including participation in meetings?

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Participants**

Participants were recruited through a convenience sampling method (Lunneborg, 2007) across several platforms including email groups or the online platform 'Facebook'.

The key criterion for inclusion was that respondents had experience of multi-agency meetings. The survey received 134 responses from a range of professionals and parents over a large geographical area. The majority of the respondents were teachers, completing 36% of the sample. From the 'other' option given, respondents included parents, early years practitioners, community learning and development workers and youth workers. The graph below shows the spread of the sample. Not all participants provided their job role, so figure 2 represents the job roles from 131 respondents.

## 2.2 Design

Two methods were used to collect data to answer the research questions.

1. A questionnaire was designed to explore the views of multi-agency professionals around the gathering of children's views to inform meetings. It was designed to elicit open-ended responses and so the data was qualitative in nature to enable deeper exploration of these experiences and opinions.
2. In addition to this, the data was triangulated with outcomes of a documentary analysis. This entailed examination of a sample of school inspection reports from across Scotland at all levels. A documentary analysis was selected as an appropriate methodology to explore how schools and professionals *formally* report how they support the gathering of children's views in practice.

## 2.3 Method

The survey was delivered through the online survey platform, Microsoft Forms. The survey had four questions that required participants to reflect on their experiences of hearing and/or sharing pupil views, particularly in the context of a multi-agency meeting.

The sample for the documentary analysis included reports from two early learning and childcare settings, 24 primary schools, six secondary schools and two special schools. These were triangulated with a sample of 10 Educational Psychology Service (EPS) Validated Self-Evaluation (VSE) reports. The objective of this was to explore examples of good practice highlighted via national external inspection, regarding the gathering and representation of pupils' views. Finally, the Education Scotland (2019) document 'Making a difference to

excellence and equity for all: The future of educational psychology services in Scotland' was accessed to compare its commentary on EP practice around children's views with emergent themes from this study. The study focused upon EP practice because in Scotland they are key stakeholders in promoting children's views in GIRFEC meetings and in the training of practitioners to facilitate child-centred approaches.

## **2.4 Approaches to data analysis**

The survey data was analysed using a template analysis approach. This is a type of thematic analysis which also utilises a coding technique in response to qualitative data but implements a greater degree of structure in its analysis (Brooks, McCluskey, Turley, & King, 2015). Template analysis explores six key stages of analysis as detailed by King (2012).

1. Familiarisation with the data set.
2. Conduct preliminary coding of the data.
3. Emerging themes organised into clusters and define relationships between them.
4. Define an initial coding template.
5. Utilise the template to analyse more of the data and modify as differences arise.
6. Finalise the template and apply to the full data set.

## **3. Results**

### **3.1 Survey Analysis**

#### **3.1.1 Descriptive Statistics**

From the sample who answered 'yes' to having experience of hearing children's views at a meeting, 37% of respondents answered that they believed children's views did impact on

discussion and subsequently influence action. 10% answered that they did not feel that children's views impacted discussion or action. Therefore, 53% of responses gave an answer that they sometimes impacted discussion and influenced action. From those who agreed that children's views did have an impact, most respondents were teachers, followed by parents. A visual illustration of the statistics is provided in Figure 3.

### **3.1.2 Summary of qualitative analysis**

Four key themes emerged from the template analysis are in Table 1; and Figures 4 and 5.

Documentary analysis themes are in Table 2.

### 3.1.3 Template Analysis

Four key themes that emerged from the data are presented in figures 4 and 5 below.

#### *Theme 1: Adult Power and Relationships*

This theme focused on the idea that adults have the power to decide on whether children are afforded the opportunity to provide or share a view, and the extent to which it is considered in a meeting. There were 24 different responses that related to this theme. It is suggested that much of this power goes unnoticed and is not a result of the intentions of practitioners. The quotes in Table 1 indicate that practitioners sometimes do observe adult power at play, with some explaining that adult ontology accounts for reasons in which children's views will or will not be represented.

Some responses focused on the large number of participants in multi-agency meetings (six responses) which may be experienced as an intimidating environment for children whilst

others highlighted the importance of adult-child relationships in meetings (five responses).

This was often in relation to who was best placed to capture and represent their views:

*“it is difficult to ascertain what children want, unless there is a relationship  
between professional and child”,*

The challenges for children raising issues were highlighted in terms of change/damage to relationships and the potential consequences of this:



*“when the adults around the table represent significant attachment figures there is a fear of speaking out in a way that would potentially change the nature of the relationship (good or bad)”.*

*“There could be more serious concerns which need to be addressed (e.g. fear of disclosure, fear of embarrassment/shame, fear of reprisal).”*

Aspects of the survey data centred around adult representation of a child’s view in meetings. Many responses suggested that common practice involves adult engagement with a child prior to the meeting to gather views which is then either shared on the child’s behalf, or the child participates for part of the meeting, sharing views themselves. A range of professionals were mentioned as being key to sharing the child’s view, as well as parents often being strong advocates for their child. In some cases, very young children’s views were represented via adult report of their observations of, and interactions with, those children.

### *Theme 2: Tokenism*

Many codes were generated for this theme with a range of synonyms for tokenism or ‘tokenistic’. For example, there were 14 instances of the phrase ‘tick-box exercise’ in reference to gathering/sharing children’s views. Some of the responses indicated that children’s views were perhaps not given the attention they deserve or that professionals did not perceive them as particularly meaningful (six responses). Indeed, some responses indicated that views shared in meetings may not be necessarily reflective of the child’s own thinking.

### *Theme 3: Capacity*

This theme linked to adult power and beliefs about children's capacity to provide a view. The predominant codes were in relation to age (22 responses) or physical ability (5 responses). There was a range in perception around the age of capacity, with many references to a contrast between primary and secondary school children: *"young people rarely attend from primary schools. More do in secondary,"* with discussion of this possibly being centred around the school structure. Many professionals often referred to children as 'too young' to fully express a view, alluding to individual differences around capacity and confidence.

In terms of enabling children, external and advocacy agencies were cited as sources of support for gathering/sharing children's views. Also, one respondent described use of a pre-recorded video, while another talked about providing children, parents and staff with the same questionnaire at multiple points in the year, allowing for triangulation of views over time.

### *Theme 4: Practitioner beliefs and motives around gathering children's views*

The commitment of some respondents to gathering children's views was apparent: *"This is something I feel strongly about"*. This perhaps highlights the importance of adult ontology; a practitioner's belief or motive can influence the practice of gathering children's views. This theme emerged particularly around discussion of children's views only sometimes impacting discussion and influencing action. Where this was stated, a caveat was typically provided, for example: *"depends on the school and depends on the chair of the meeting."* Meetings can be difficult for children as they can be intimidating, overwhelming and at times, distressing. Also, there can be too much information given for the child to successfully manage. Importantly,

where a child has not had sufficient preparation for a meeting, this can have implications on their agency to participate and contribute to discussions.

### **3.2 Documentary Analysis**

Four themes were identified via analysis of three document types (Table 2). Each one is addressed in turn.

#### *Theme 1: Lack of explicit reference to children's involvement around partnership working*

Of 34 inspections analysed, seeking children's views was mentioned in 14. Reference to children's views was alluded to more in nurseries and primary schools than in secondary schools. This is contrary to the survey data. Inspection reports subject to analysis did not appear to look explicitly for evidence of good practice in the gathering/sharing of children's views. However, where it is mentioned, there was frequently a call for improvement around 'pupil voice'.

#### *Theme 2: Consultation with children- evidence of impact?*

Analysis of documents around EP practice indicates that EPs work within the GIRFEC framework with 27% of EP time spent with professionals out with education such as social workers. 38% of EP work focused on individual children or families in partnership with other professionals. Even so, there is limited evidence of EP work directly with children and YP; where it was mentioned, it was through consultation. There was no mention of explicitly gathering children's views. Despite the focus in legislation and policy on children's views and

participation via GIRFEC, this aspect of EP work was not captured explicitly in Psychological Services inspection reports.

### *Theme 3: Pupil Participation*

Analysis of school inspection reports showed that some schools had greater detail around the methodologies used to gather pupil views. For example, a nursery setting provided children with 'learning books' which was an opportunity for a child to spend time with their key worker to share their interests and ideas. A primary school reported the implementation of 'Making a Difference' groups which were centred around providing children with the opportunity to contribute to the improvement of the school. In addition to this, several other in-school groups were identified as methods of providing pupil voice. Various groups and committees such as the Pupil Council and 'Rights Respecting Schools' group all detailed similar purposes. Individual roles were also created, such as the implementation of 'learning champions'. Further to this, several reports referred to the use of the GIRFEC wellbeing indicators as a method of enabling children to reflect on and articulate their own strengths and needs.

### *Theme 4: Lip service to the gathering and sharing of children's views*

In the school inspection reports, there was reference to universal school forums within which there may be 2 or 3 child members but clearly these are not accessible to most children. Similarly, in the EP inspection reports a range of specific interventions aimed at building capacity of school staff are cited but no direct reference to how these might promote the gathering/sharing of children's views. This could be because practitioners assume inclusion of

this practice is inherent or embedded across a range of school and multi-agency activity. Even if this is so in practice, it appears that the gathering and sharing of children's views may not have been a key focus in the reporting of more recent inspections of schools and psychological services by government agencies who promote GIRFEC child-centred collaborative working with child voice and participation at the centre.

## **4. Discussion**

### **4.1. Research Question One**

*How frequently are children's views represented in meetings?*

Results suggest that there is variable practice around representation of children's views with 53% of responses recording 'sometimes'. Several responses suggested that the representation of a child's views depended on which professional chaired the meeting, implying power over not just children but also other adults to make those judgement calls. This is an interesting finding because it is contrary to the key principles underpinning GIRFEC that centre around a collaborative approach, keeping the child at the centre of assessment, planning and intervention. This may reflect not only individual practitioner belief around the importance of pupil voice (Spyrou, 2019; Moran-Ellis & Tisdall, 2019; Lundy, 2007) but also level of practitioner skills and confidence to facilitate multi-agency meetings (Norwich et al 2006).

A frequent response centred around consideration of a child's age and capacity to express a view which is consistent with findings in the literature (Lundy, 2018; Hart, 2008). Many of the 18 responses focused on the child's age as a key factor for being assessed as capable of providing a view but this is misleading as competence and maturity is not always age-

dependent (Gillett-Swan & Sargeant, 2019). The caution expressed by Lundy (2018) and Hart (2008) around an 'all or nothing' approach is apposite here in consideration of the responses given by participants. It is important, therefore, to explore the range of methodologies and technologies for seeking or representing children's views and the extent to which they are aligned to the ability, competence and maturity of the child or young person.

Several responses highlighted the importance of safety and welfare of the child as reasons for non-participation or representation of children's views. This finding indicates that some participants may view children as vulnerable and in need of protection or as lacking agency/ability, therefore they need to be made safe (Sutterluty & Tisdall, 2019; Frierson, 2016). It is as though welfare concerns somehow 'trumps' the opportunity for children's views to be heard or for their direct participation in meetings. If this idea has traction, then it aligns with findings from some studies where children who are viewed as vulnerable or disadvantaged tend to have fewer opportunities to express a view or exercise agency (Moran-Ellis & Tisdall, 2019). The very children who perhaps need more experience of it are denied the opportunity to do so. Indeed, it may be that with increasing complexity of need, a child's life is changed significantly via decision-making in which they do not contribute (Tisdall et al, 2014).

The findings presented here may also reflect a contradiction in practice whereby practitioners and parents sense some type of hollowness or superficiality in activity around the gathering and sharing of children's views. Lundy's (2007) chicken soup metaphor is helpful to understand the participants' responses in this study. It is perceived as a positive thing to do but they know the views carry limited weight in discussion and have minimal impact on actions, interventions and positive outcomes. This may be explained by Tatlow-Golden &

Montgomery (2021, p.7) who refer to the limiting, circular and self-perpetuating nature of children's agency suggesting the need to 'decentre the child and move beyond a fixation with children's voices, agencies and perspectives and explore children's everyday experiences in relation to others... across diverse socio-spatial and political contexts'. Similarly, Spyrou (2018, p.1), refers to 'the constructed, agentic, knowing child...regularly enfolds back on itself, often reappearing as the solution to the problem it poses'.

More generally, the ontology underpinning respondent views may influence the extent to which child's voice is prioritised in practice. A large number of responses (n=24) detailed that the reasons for not representing the child's voice included: the ontology of adults chairing a meeting or perceptions of adult views being more important. This is in alignment with Spyrou (2019), who detailed a common adult ontology, that childhood and adulthood are two separate entities. Given that adult views in this study frequently implied that professional opinions were of greater value, it could be suggested that this ontology is very much representative of current practice.

## **4.2 Research Question Two**

*Does hearing the child's view impact on the focus, then subsequently the outcomes of a meeting?*

A key finding centred around parents' views about children's ability to influence discussion in meetings and the impact of their contributions to action planning and longer-term outcomes. Of the parent's response rate (n=4), three indicated that they believe their child's voice impacted the discussion of the meeting and subsequent action. However, this is a very small

sample size so could not be suggested as representative of all parent views in general. Interestingly, practitioners were less certain about impact of children's views. This may indicate that it is not prioritised in practice, or that there is minimal impact in practice or lack of process to gather information that may demonstrate impact. However, it may also be a function of how the question was asked in the questionnaire.

### **4.3 Research Question Three**

*Is there a preferred method of gathering and representing children's views, including participation in meetings?*

Examples of methodologies to seek children's views methods were included in inspection reports, many of which were unique to individual schools and services. However, most practice examples referred to the eight GIRFEC wellbeing indicators as the preferred method of gathering views together with tools such as the resilience matrix, well-being wheel, and a range of proformas for gathering views. Several local authorities and individual schools have adapted these or developed entirely new tools. This finding was also supported in the survey responses.

Respondents described the use of more elaborate tools/methods to gather views at key points of transition. However, there was limited reference in both the survey and documentary data to any specific tool or approach to gathering views and facilitating participation in both the survey and documentary data. Whilst practitioners may be aware of methodologies/technologies to gather/share children's views, they are perhaps not prioritised because of not being time-efficient or skills-dependent. Or perhaps if gathering



views and participation is really viewed as tokenistic, then it is not surprising that practitioners do not make time for effective approaches. This is something that perhaps needs to be explored to a greater extent around influences of adultism/childism narratives (Walls, 2019) and the privileging of adult views in meetings. Also, despite the development of new ways of recording children's views, there is still the challenge of giving these views weight. The findings in this study reflect this: children's views are sometimes represented in meetings, but they are not regarded as being influential in action planning.

It may be important to consider the functionality of a GIRFEC/multi-agency meeting as a forum to discuss the challenges around supporting some children and families. If this has traction, then again it is not surprising that the meeting is not viewed as a key tool to promote child participation or to hear their views. A study examining processes in GIRFEC meetings in schools found that a meeting was viewed as a forum for professional 'venting' with participants describing this as a 'safety net' and safety valve' to vent frustration and uncertainty rather than to share children's views (Ocarra, 2017).

#### **4.4 Limitations of Study**

The study relies on self-report of participants which is problematic in terms of unconscious, or conscious, bias (Stone, Bachrach, Jobe, Kurtzman, & Cain, 1999). Therefore, participant responses may be based on their own feelings as opposed to answering objectively about practice, potentially to present an ideal version of themselves (Savaya & Gardner, 2012). It is possible that some responses to this questionnaire were the result of social desirability response bias. Van de Mortel (2008) explains this phenomenon as people tending to present themselves in a positive light. It is not impossible that the results of this questionnaire were

subject to social desirability response bias as promotion of children's rights generally, and seeking their views specifically, is value-driven within a social justice context.

### **4.3 Implications for Practice**

Training may need to focus more on professional views around what constitutes a view and children's capacity to express and share a view. Findings highlighted a strong response where professionals linked children's capacity predominantly to age and an expectation around children being able to articulate a reflective and well thought out view in order for it to be accepted as an account of their needs (Hart, 2008, Lundy, 2007, 2018). More specifically, there may be a need to make more explicit the impact of power and status of adults on children, and in terms of the dominant narratives/stories that may quieten or even silence children's voices.

Instead, practitioners need the skills to promote the power of story-telling and narrative approaches to support children to express views and participate more equitably in meetings. Professionals need to be able to empower children to tell their own more preferred story that focuses upon their strengths, skills, competencies and resilience. This, in turn, may quieten the dominant adult stories about weakness and vulnerability (AUTHOR) and may go some way to show how rights can be actualised, tokenism challenged and impact on decision-making enhanced (Tisdall et al, 2014). Also, the idea of agency may need to be considered as relational rather than aligned with the individual (child or adult) in collaborative working practices (Abede, 2019; Edmonds, 2019; Edwards, 2017) as well as greater understanding of the impact of narratives, world views, and the power dynamics at play.

The development of good practice might also include the gathering of children's views on a more regular basis, enabling practitioners to triangulate views to provide a richer picture of

children's experiences. Gathering views frequently would develop confidence and skills to do so. Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development which captures independent skills and those developed with support is useful to consider in terms of methodologies/technologies that could be used for all children, regardless of age, capacity, and level of need. It is the job of the adults supporting children to express a view to scaffold that activity appropriately to meet the changing needs of children over time. Consultation with the child and family about their preferred method of inclusion or contribution to the meeting may need to be further developed in practice together with methods to evaluate impact of sharing children's views (Colville, 2013; Alexander & Sked, 2010).

#### **4.4 Implications for Future Research**

Regarding children's participation in multi-agency meetings, much of the research has focused on adult views but perhaps a focus on children's views and the development of more inclusive adult ontologies is required. The development of practice using a range of methodologies and technologies would also serve as good research tools used by education practitioners working directly with children and young people. Recent publications call for a move away from child voice and agency; instead exploring everyday experiences of children across a range of socio-cultural and political contexts (McMellon & Tisdall, 2020). In Scotland and the UK, with increasing diversity in schools these are important factors to consider for new research activity.

## **Conclusion**

The study explored parent and professional perceptions of the representation of children's views in multi-agency meetings in Scottish schools. Online survey (134 responses) and

educational documents provided data sources that were subject to thematic and documentary analysis. The findings highlight the importance of professional beliefs around child capacity and their understanding of what constitutes a competent view. In turn, they influence the extent to which professionals find representations of children's views worthwhile. Implications for practice include raising professional awareness of evolving ontologies around the representation of children's views in multi-agency meetings in line with policy and legislation.

Embedded into the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act (2014) and the UNCRC is the importance of children's rights and having their views heard. In addition to this, GIRFEC has been implemented into Scottish schools to enhance child centred and holistic practice, which again includes pupil participation. What the findings of this study suggest, both through the questionnaire and the documentary analysis, is that the voice of the child and the gathering of children's views, emphasised in policy and legislation, may not translate easily into practice.

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Table 1: Table detailing summary of results of a priori themes from template analysis with number of references to each theme provided in brackets.

Key themes	Sub-themes (number of instances)	Key Quotes					
		Teaching staff (+ students)	EPs (+ TEPs)	Social Workers (+ students)	Early Years Practitioners	Parents	Other
<b>Adult Power</b>	1. Adult ontology (24) 2. Relationships (5) 3. Challenge of meetings (6)	"It is often more important to make decisions based on evidence and professional opinions."	"It is difficult to ascertain what children want, unless there is a relationship between professional and child."	"Dependent on who makes the decision. Some people appear to place a large weighting on children's views informing decisions, where others do not."	"I have noticed the decisions seem to be led by the professionals."		"Most meetings are overloaded with staff"
<b>Tokenism</b>	1. Tick-box exercise (14) 2. Lack of meaning (6)	"Sometimes we have gathered pupils' views and it's been a pointless exercise that we've not put into practise."	"...seemed like a 'tick box'... e.g. the child comes in at the end of the meeting, after the action points have been decided upon."				"I found professionals sometimes don't really hear what the child is saying."
<b>Capacity</b>	1. Age (22) 2. Disability (5) 3. Advocacy (8)	"Depends on age and stage of learner- can they sufficiently communicate their views "	"Depending on the child's age there are times when they are present and present their own views and other times when they are not."	"Children who do not have the ability to talk (due to age, disability). Many people consider them 'unable to give their views'."	"Due to the age of the children I work with (3 & 4 year-olds) or additional support needs they may have their voice is not included in meetings."	"My child's view is mutually based on our (family) and professionals perception because of his learning disability"	"I feel if I have delivered a child's views on their behalf I've been more influential as been able to advocate for them more than if they had delivered their views themselves."
<b>Practitioner beliefs</b>	1. Individual passion (4) 2. Good practice (10)	"This is something I feel strongly about when I am representing children in meetings"	"Everything felt more considerate as the young person was there."		"It is vital to me that the meeting discussion is person centred."		

Table 2: Table detailing summary of results with identified themes from documentary analysis of three key sources

	School Inspection Reports	EPS Inspection Reports	Education Scotland Report on psychological services (2019)
<b>Lack of explicit reference to children’s involvement around Partnership Working</b>	“Partners also provide professional learning for staff, which helps enable them to continue to support children well.”	Inclusion of parents and young people would strengthen and enhance self-evaluation. Partnership working with children’s services colleagues, partner agencies and voluntary agencies.	Keep working in partnership at every level.
<b>Using consulting with children- evidence of impact?</b>	“The majority of young people feel that their views are taken into account during school consultations.”	Working with individual children and young people to provide a consultation service. The need to explore the impact of consultation on improving outcomes for young people.	“38% of work is delivered at the individual level. Individual level work includes, for example: –psychological advice and consultation”
<b>Pupil Participation</b>	“In the school, staff have increased opportunities for pupil participation.”	A number of issues for further investigation emerged from the recent survey of EPs. These centred on several themes including... pupil voice.	
<b>Lip service in gathering and sharing of children’s views</b>	‘Making a Difference’ groups Pupil Councils ‘Rights Respecting Schools’ group Individual roles including ‘learning champions’. SHANARRI wellbeing indicators.	Supporting the implementation of peer mentoring programmes. Person Centred Training How Nurturing is our School? Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS)	“The profession also needs to continue to improve how they evidence the value added of direct work with children and young people.” “Almost all services struggle with the balance between working with individual children and young people and building capacity in the education system.”