

March Newsletter (2011)

Dear Parents and Friends of Cowgate,

As I look out the window the sun is gleaming through the trees, I can see the snowdrops delicately sitting beneath the trees and I begin to feel winter leave us. And it is a nice feeling.

Quote of the month...

Angela, Sam's mummy told me this today...

Hi Lynn

I asked Dan [Sam's older brother] what he thought of Sam's new nursery after he picked him up with me for the first time and he thought it was a brilliant place for kids, just like a home that has been given over to children.

have a good day

Angela

Both Angela and I thought this was a lovely thing to say...so we wanted to share this with you ☺

This newsletter brings an invite to our Spring Garden Day; news about Willow Cottage; renaming our Inspiring Emotional Harmony policy; what we are doing for Fairtrade Fortnight; news from Maureen regarding the 'Investors in Children Award'; news from Karen regarding lunchtime routines; thank you from Mel and thank you to Marie.

Spring Garden Day – 26th March

Teresa and Donna would like to invite you all to a 'spring garden day'. A day of planting and preparing gardening 'experiences'. Teresa will provide the refreshments. Please can you let Teresa / Donna know if you can come – all welcome ☺

Willow Cottage

My Davy came in last weekend to fix Willow Cottage roof. The children were sending lots of messages that they wanted back in. For example, last week they tied rope around the lock and tried to open the lock!

As you know work is going on regarding having a living roof, but in the meantime ensuring the roof was water tight enabled us to

open it again. This 'listening to children' stimulated the chapter for reading this week.

When Anita went into Willow Cottage on Monday morning, she turned and gave a beautiful smile to her friends, beckoned them in, then shut the door!

Inspiring Emotional Harmony – renamed

As you know we have been working on this policy (thank you to everyone who has contributed their thoughts so far). Everyone has agreed on the new name 'Cultivating Emotional Harmony'. Thank you so very much for this wonderful suggestion. The writing can now begin 😊

Fair Trade Fortnight

We are celebrating Fair Trade Fortnight. What are we going to do?

- We will have a selection of the most wonderful home baking and fair trade products for sale*
- We will be hosting visits from other nurseries to share our fair trade practice*

- *The children have asked for fair trade fruit to be on offer to all children. So we are planning to write to the relevant people, i.e., The Scottish Parliament, The City Chambers and so make our request.*

Investors in Children Award

Dear all,

We would like to take this opportunity to make all of our children and families aware that as a community Cowgate would like to put ourselves forward for the Investor in Children Award. This is an award that is given in recognition of settings which respects the right of children to be listened to, and through this bring about changes. Below is a brief outline from Liam Cairns, Director of Investing in Children, about the award and what it will involve for Cowgate.

“Our Membership Scheme is very simple. There are two criteria: evidence of dialogue, and evidence of change. The important thing about the process is that the evidence must come from children and young people themselves. Its non-bureaucratic - we visit, talk to staff and children, write a report (in terms that are accessible to the children themselves), come back and check with the children that we have got it right, and if endorsed by the children, the Award is made. This is valid for one year, and then re-evaluated. There are c 400 IiC Members in England, ranging from schools (including nurseries) to youth clubs, from GP practices to Oncology wards, from leisure centres to youth clubs - anywhere that provides a service to children and young people is eligible to apply.”

It is intended that Dr. John Davis from Edinburgh University will visit and carry out the talks with children and staff and write a report based on his findings. At present no date has been set for this to take place, but we will keep you informed. It is very exciting that Cowgate could be the first to achieve this award in Scotland and for us as a community would represent an important and ongoing commitment to respecting our children as valued members of our community. As part of this ongoing commitment we are also currently exploring UNICEF’s Rights Respecting School award; this would be a long term commitment to disseminating information on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to all members of our community, staff, parents and children and to ensure that all practice and policies within Cowgate meet the standards set out in the convention.

We hope that you will agree that these are exciting times for our community and that through a continued focus on listening to our children as people with rights we all have much to learn. We will keep you informed of our progress, mostly through the newsletter. If you have any questions that you would like answered, please ask. At the moment Lynn McNair and Maureen Nicol are involved in the Investing in Children Award, while Karen, Michelle and Maureen are exploring UNICEF’s Rights Respecting School Award, any of these people will be happy to answer any of your questions. As we progress we will need to involve all members of the community to

some extent so we will welcome input from anyone with a particular interest on the rights of the child.

More information on Investing in Children can be found at <http://www.iic-uk.org/>

Further information on UNICEF's Rights Respecting Schools can be found at <http://www.unicef.org.uk/rrsa>

Warmest regards
Maureen Nicol

A message from Karen

"Let life be the basis of the curriculum"

Colonel Parker whose philosophy of education was akin to Froebel's.

Recently I was helping out during lunch time in Sala Infantil, I was with our older children in the corridor. It was a sunny February day and the sun flooded from the large windows into the corridor. There was some activity in the garden that caught the children's attention. A squirrel was the object of their curiosity. I enjoyed watching them with their friends chatting among themselves.

Later that day reflecting on my time with the children, watching and listening to them at the dinner table took me back to my own childhood. I have memories of helping out in the kitchen, preparing food with my Grandmother. I lived in a beautiful Georgian flat with a large, square traditional kitchen. The tall ornate window showered the room with natural light. The kitchen really was the hub of this family home. A large heavy rectangular table set out in the middle was the gathering place of all visitors and hosted all sorts of interesting activities to a wee girl looking on.

I loved being involved in this hustle bustle with people coming and going. It was particularly exciting if there were to be visitors. My Grandmother was a wonderful cook and would prepare food so pleasing to the eye it was almost criminal to eat. My particular favourite was melon boats with little sails. It was a very social house. I have happy memories of sitting at the big table amid hilarity and laughter. Not only sharing food together but also sharing what I found to be fascinating, colourful stories of people and places. There was a warm feeling in that room, I know now that it was the feeling of companionship.

I have also been influenced recently by the most beautiful of books; Lileen Hardy's Diary of a free kindergarten. Hers was the first kindergarten to open in Edinburgh in 1903 a stone's throw from our own centre.

Lileen was also influenced by Froebel. She wanted her nursery to 'be a home, theirs and mine'. We have a child at Cowgate who refers to Cowgate as her 'Nursery house'. And why not, after all we aspire to create a home-like environment. 'The interconnectedness of home should be reflected in the interconnectedness of the nursery'. *Liebschner* Lileen sets the scene at meal time in the nursery with 'table-clothes being spread'. Again I began to consider our lunch times here at Cowgate. I could imagine our tables set with clothes and fresh flowers in front of the big windows of the corridor overlooking the garden. I have a vision of a convivial gathering time. A time of bonding, connecting and sharing news, where our children can learn about social etiquette quite naturally.

Research indicates that mealtime is more effective in building children's vocabulary than nearly any other activity, including reading together. The amount of time spent in family meals during a child's early years is related to the level of achievement in vocabulary and reading. (Snow & Beals, 2006)

I would like our children to experience a little bit of what I experienced as a child growing up surrounded by loving adults in a traditional, home like environment.

I knew that at least one of our children can find the lunch time gathering a bit too loud for their liking. I also became aware from my observations that some children seemed to prefer a more leisurely lunch. They enjoyed having some fresh fruit at the end of their meal. They liked to remain at the dinner table with friends chatting to me as I cleared up. I felt this was a little of the companionship I experienced as a child growing up. I believe this is a home like experience.

Some children would prefer not to join their friends in the Croilean (old name music room) for a story after lunch. One child told me "I'm not a fan of the Music Room". Going to the Music Room for a story after lunch has been the lunch time routine for some time.

Another child would much prefer to go to the garden after lunch. I felt compelled to help the children create a new lunch time routine. A lunch time that was theirs and not adult imposed.

I asked Jane if she would set up a Mind Mapping session to gather the children's feeling about their lunch time at the centre.

Here are some of the children's comments;

Raphael "I like the mixing up, everyday I want to sit with people who are quiet like Robert, Rory and Mia".

Sophie "What about if lunchtime was comfortable? If we put cushions on the chairs".

Felicity "I don't like chairs being hard".

Amelia "I don't like the chairs".

Archie "I don't like my chair because it's not got a cushion on it".

Elliot "I don't like bad things to eat. I like pizza. I like to sit beside Ben and Archie".

Ben "I like eating spaghetti at my home".

Rory "How about we do different lunches at different times? Sometimes the younger children have their lunch the first time. Sometimes the older children go first".

Natalie "I like sitting with Milena".

Anita "I like my food when I'm in the corridor. I sometimes eat a little bit slow, and sometimes a bit faster.

Rory "I like being together".

Sophie "Gentle music".

Natalie "Too sparkly". (sunshine)

Anita "Use a blind".

The following thoughts came from a conversation Teresa had with the children during a recent lunch time. The children were reflecting on how

they are when they eat with their family at home or out to a café or restaurant. The children decided that each table should have a name;

Ella "Butterfly Café".

Josh "The welcome to your café".

Robert "Victoria Café".

Mia "Elephant Café".

Lily S-C and Robert would also like menus on the tables.

So based on the thoughts and opinions of our children we are now going to implement some changes to the lunch time routine in Salla infantile. We will indeed have menus, table names, cushions and gentle music. We will continue to consult with our children empowering them to shape their own nursery environment.

Warm wishes

Karen

Thanks from Mel

Mel has asked us to thank you for all the clothes you have handed in... they are being used already 😊

Thank you Marie

Raphael's mummy, Marie has, again, very kindly baked for our fundraising. Thank you so much Marie, delicious as

always...perhaps you should open your own little cake shop...you are such a gifted lady.

And...what about Fiona's sparkly cakes ☺

Thanks to Sam for the snowdrops...they are beautiful.

Until next month

Warm wishes

Lynn and the Cowgate team

Reading this month

This month the children tied rope around the lock on Willow Cottage. In a united fashion the children took turns to pull the lock off. Worryingly we realised we had not been listening to them. They wanted back in! As you know we plan to create a living roof, but in the meantime my Davy came in over the weekend to repair the leak. Today (Monday) Willow Cottage is open. A little reflection and a little reading about listening to the children stimulated the chapter this month 'Beyond Listening.' As always you can choose at this point whether to read on or not.

Beyond Listening: Children's perspectives on early childhood services

Edited by Alison Clark, Anne Trine Kjørholt and Peter Moss

Introduction (pages 1-13)

Early childhood is increasingly institutionalised, and part of a wide historical process affecting children of all ages (Nasman, 1994). More children from earlier ages spend more time in some form of early childhood service, whether it is a centre of one type or another (nursery, kindergarten, nursery school, playgroup) or family day care. Like any other major social changes, this creates both new possibilities and new risks. It also places new responsibilities on adults who, for a variety of reasons, have brought about this change to childhood. Not only do we, adults, need to understand the possibilities and risks, we also need to open up to the experiences and perspectives of the young children who live their everyday lives and large portions of their childhoods in early childhood services. We need, in short, to listen.

This book is about listening to young children, and in particular their perspectives on early childhood services and what goes on in them. (By young children we refer in this book to children below compulsory school age, which in most countries is around six years.) It brings together authors from a number of countries – Denmark, England, Italy, New Zealand, Norway and Scotland – who have been working in this field, to share their experiences and understandings, their hopes and concerns. Through their contributions we consider the rationales for listening to young children, not only the issue of responsibility but also listening as a means of enhancing children's participation in shaping their own lives and environments and listening as a principle and practice in learning. We show how practitioners and researchers have been finding innovative ways to listen to young children – and in the process question the distinction between 'practitioner' and 'researcher'.

But although we look at different approaches to listening to young children, the book is not a handbook on 'how to listen'. We do ask 'why?' and 'how?', but we also ask other questions that arise from entering into a committed but critical relationship to the concept and practice of 'listening'. Two are particularly important. What do we mean by 'listening'? Can it be dangerous? Seeking answers to the former question will take us beyond a narrow idea of listening as hearing one form of language, that is, verbal communication, to an understanding that encompasses relationships, dialogue, interpretation and the hundred languages of children. The latter question makes for uncomfortable, but we believe necessary, confrontation with power relations between children and adults, relations that even the most benign and caring adult cannot stand outside.

But before developing these questions further in this introduction, we want to set this discussion in its historical context. Why is there today a growing interest in listening to children, young and old? Why do we talk so much about it?

Why so much listening?

The impulse to listen more to children of whatever age is coming from several quarters. An international impetus for change has been the rising profile of children's rights. Or, to be more precise, children's voice and participation has come to occupy a central place in the children's rights movement, which was traditionally concerned with child protection: "the modern children's rights movement is distinctive in its emphasis on the child's participation and perspective and the emergence of a number of relatively new organisations to advance their rights" (Foley et al, 2003, p 109).

Kjorholt (2001) reminds us that “children’s active participation in learning processes has long been a central theme in progressive education” (for example, Dewey and Freire), but identifies a major recent turn in participation discourse: “during the last fifteen years the emphasis on children as social and political actors holding special rights in decision-making processes at different levels has been overwhelming” (pp67, 68).

This turn to a dominant discourse of voice and participation is epitomised by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, in particular Articles 12 and 13:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child...

The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and 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 rights as participation has intersected with other socio-political concerns, notably about citizenship (Roberts, 2003) and the need to combat a perceived alienation with mainstream institutions. As part of this rights and citizenship discourse, many governments have instigated a search for new practices to involve people, old and young, as citizens and in their communities, including policy initiatives at a national level to promote children’s participation. One example, referred to in the chapter by Brit Johanne Eide and Nina Winder (Chapter Five), is the requirement in the Norwegian framework curriculum for *barnehager* (kindergarten) staff to take the children’s point of view into account in planning and evaluating their work (Norwegian Ministry for Children and Family Affairs, 1996). Another example is the ‘Core principles of participation for children and young people’ published by the English government in 2001 (CYPUP, 2001). These principles are intended to apply across all government departments and all agencies delivering government-funded services. In addition, children and young people’s participation has been an explicit element in a wide range of national initiatives and policies in England such as New Deal for Communities, the Children’s Fund, Children’s Services Planning Guidance and Connexions (Kirby et al, 2003).

A parallel development has occurred in the academic world, or at least a part of it, in particular a shift in how children are viewed within sociology. A new sociology of childhood, or childhood studies, has been taking shape in recent years. From this disciplinary perspective, children are seen not as “becomings” but as “beings” whose ideas, approaches to life, choices and relationships are of interest in their own right (James and Prot, 1997): interest shifts from what children will become later in life to their childhoods here and now. Recognising children’s competencies, that children can be considered experts in their own lives (Langsted, 1994), can help adults reflect on the limitations of their understandings of children’s lives (Tolfree and Woodhead,

1999). Researchers are increasingly interested in children's perspectives and committed to children being active participants in research itself (Christensen and James, 2000; Lewis and Lindsay, 2000). This academic turn has contributed to a wider change of perception: that children have to be involved in decision making, that children form a social group, and that children make a valued contribution to society (Kirby et al, 2003).

A third driver has been economic change, which has emphasised the primacy of the consumer, and values such as choice, individualism and customer satisfaction. In this context, the construction of the 'participating child' emerges not only from the rights movement and new academic perspectives, but also from the discourse of consumerism, as "children are today increasingly being drawn into economic markets as both consumers and workers" (Kjorholt, 2001, p.75). Children have begun to be seen as customers and consumers, both of products (such as clothing and toys) and services. In England, for example, early childhood services aimed at working parents, termed 'childcare', have been viewed in policy terms as private commodities to be purchased by consumers (parents). The state's role has been to regulate the market, to inject funding in cases of so-called 'market failure' (that is, poor families and poor areas that cannot access the market) and to support market development (Cohen et al, 2004). 'Childcare audits', a policy initiative in the late 1990s for this latter purpose, were expected to include user views, including those of children, on the improvement of childcare services.

Such developments can be seen as surface manifestations of subterranean and seismic shifts in social, economic and political relations. The turn, from the late 1970s, to new (or rather reconfigured) forms of liberalism – advanced liberalism politically, neoliberalism economically – has called for a new subject, discussed by Anne Trine Kjorholt in Chapter Nine: autonomous (in the sense of being not dependent) and self-regulating, flexible and problem solving, ready and able to participate as a consumer in the market and to manage his or her own risks, operating within a network of individual responsibilities and rights, with self-realisation as an overarching value. While established political forms, including identification with mass political parties based on class interest, and confidence in representative democracy have been in decline, other forms of political engagement have emerged, including new social movements and human rights campaigns. A discourse of rights, participation and empowerment has provided a political context for these movements and campaigns and for repositioning many social groups as active subjects rather than passive dependants: not only children but also, for example, people with disabilities.

Young children's participation

Most work on listening to children to date has been concerned with older children and young people. For example, in a recent review of English projects involving children and young people in policy development, service planning, delivery and evaluation the most common age group was 12- to 16-year-olds (Kirby et al, 2003). Or to take another example, this time from Norway, a survey in the late 1990s of participatory projects in Norwegian local authorities found that half reported such projects, but very few were addressed to children under 10, let alone under school age; 60 per cent involved children and young people aged 14 or more (Kjorholt, 2002).

There are several reasons for the under-representation of young children. Lansdowne (2004) has pointed out that many of the key players in the debate on the Convention on the Rights of the Child have been non-governmental organisations (NGOs) whose involvement is predominantly with older children. She further suggests that the lives of young children are managed by a combination of parents, other carers and professionals who have tended to be less engaged and proactive in debates on children's rights. The focus, too, on this youngest age group tends to be promoting development rather than promoting rights.

The dominance of the paradigm of development in early childhood policy, provision, practice and research has a further significance. It produces an image of young children that is not conducive to listening: as a becoming, at the beginning of a process of linear progression from the incompleteness of infancy to the maturation of adulthood, with the value (and feasibility) of listening presumed to increase commensurately. This image, too, is far from the liberal subject of rights and participation, the autonomous citizen and active consumer, rational and calculating. Indeed, as O'Neill (1994) argues, the child is missing in liberal theory, unable to participate in its central mechanism of the contract, which assumes relationships between independent individuals.

Similarly the dominance of certain languages – in particular verbal and written languages – privileges listening to those who are more fluent in these languages. Rinaldi (2005) relates how the development in Reggio Emilia of the theory of the “hundred languages of childhood” (discussed further in Chapter Two) grew out of a ‘wider political and cultural debate, for example the debate about how privileging these two languages (verbal and written) were, how in some way they supported the power, not only of certain knowledge, but also of certain classes’ (p. 193). Listening to young children requires of adults some revaluing and relearning of other languages, which takes time and effort and presupposes a willingness to be multilingual. It is, in short, difficult for those who by adulthood have lost many of the hundred languages of childhood.

However, to differentiate rationales in this way may be misleading. The work with young children reported here and elsewhere does not necessarily fall neatly into one or other of these categories. For example, research methods may be applied to decision making, while learning and research may also be connected.

More fundamentally, it seems to us that much work on listening, however it may be labelled, is motivated by a broader, underlying approach to early childhood services – and indeed to relationships and life in general. In these cases, listening can be understood as more than just a tool or instrument; it can also be understood as a culture or an ethic, a way of being and living that permeates all practice and relationships. Langsted (1994) made this point some time ago in his groundbreaking study of Nordic children's views in life in kindergarten. Structures and procedures, he argued, are important but:

...more important is the cultural climate which shapes the ideas that the adults in a particular society hold about children. The wish to listen to and involve

children originates in this cultural climate. This wish will then lead to structures and procedures that can guarantee the involvement of the children. (pp 41-2)

Carlina Rinaldi (personal communication) takes up the same theme, that listening cannot be neatly confined to particular tasks or procedures but is an approach to life, when she comments that:

...listening is not only a technique and a didactic methodology, but a way of thinking and seeing ourselves in relationship with others and the world. Listening is an element that connects and that is part of human biology and is in the concept of life itself...[It] is a right or better it is part of the essence of being human.

Hanne Warming in Chapter Four of this book refers to listening as a 'democratic ethos of giving voice'. Continuing this line of thought – listening as a culture or ethos – listening has also been understood as the defining feature of an ethic: 'the ethics of an encounter' (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). This approach to ethical relationships is associated with the work of Emmanuel Levinas (1906-95), a Lithuanian Jew who made his home in France. Largely ignored until the mid 1980s, today Levinas is considered one of the greatest French philosophers of the 20th century (Critchley, 2001). The ethics of an encounter emphasise the importance of relationships, which respect the alterity (otherness) of the Other and resist attempting to make the Order into the Same. 'Grasping is Levinas's vivid term for this attempt: it expresses the violence involved in reducing the particularity of the Other when the Other is 'grasped' and placed in the totalising system of the knowing subject by, for example, applying the knower's prefabricated system of understandings, concepts and categories.

Dahlberg and Moss (2005) have argued that the ethics of an encounter opens up for a new and quite different idea of education, learning and pedagogical practice, for "to think another whom I cannot grasp is an important shift and it challenges the whole scene of pedagogy" (Dahlberg, 2003, p 273). Listening is the ethic and method at the heart of this idea of education. Readings (1996) defines the condition of pedagogical practice as 'an infinite attention to the other' and education itself as 'drawing out the otherness of thought' or 'listening to thought'.

To listen to Thought, think beside each other and beside ourselves, is to explore an open network of obligations that keeps the question of meaning open as a locus of debate. Doing justice to Thought, listening to our interlocutors, means trying to hear that which cannot be said but that which tries to make itself heard. And this is a process incompatible with the production of (even relatively) stable and exchangeable knowledge. (p 165)

Dahlberg and Moss (2005) suggest that an example of education as listening to thought, based on the ethics of an encounter, can be found in the pedagogical theories and practices of the municipal preschools in the northern Italian city of Reggio Emilia. Here has developed what the educators in Reggio call 'a pedagogy of

listening', understood as an openness to the other's thought and to the question of meaning:

If we believe that children possess their own theories, interpretations, and questions, and are protagonists in the knowledge-building processes, then the most important verbs in educational practice are no longer 'to talk', 'to explain' or 'to transmit'...but 'to listen'. Listening means being open to others and what they have to say, listening to the hundred (and more) languages, with all our senses. (Rinaldi, 2005, pp 125-6)

The pedagogy of listening, and the understandings of 'listening' on which it is based, are the subject of Chapter Two.

Reggio is not an isolated instance of listening, in its many forms, being the expression of a culture or ethic. There are other examples in this book, but also elsewhere, of how listening to young children permeates every aspect of the life of particular early childhood services. The significance of such listening – listening as a culture or ethic – goes far beyond these services. We might even say it is potentially revolutionary, for it challenges the whole scene of life and all human relationships. Nothing that Readings or Rinaldi say above can or should be confined to young children.

We should end this section with a note of caution. There is much innovative work on listening to young children, as this book demonstrates. But it is, for the moment, more of the exception than the norm; as already noted, most work on listening has been with older children and young people. Awareness of the importance of listening, and competence in doing so, is patchy among those many organisations and individuals involved in early childhood services. Some professions, for example, are only just beginning to take such ideas on board; while, where there is more familiarity with the idea, there are still many gaps between rhetoric and practice. Policies may be contradictory: promoting listening on the one hand, while at the same time requiring standardisation of practice and outcome that runs counter to listening as a process of openness to thought and difference. It is difficult to see, for example, how listening understood in this way is compatible with detailed and predetermined goals and targets, which are more akin to grasping the child.

Listening to young children has also made little headway in much of the research undertaken on early childhood services, in particular in the English-speaking world where such research has been dominated by one particular disciplinary perspective: developmental psychology. As Bloch (1992) observes, "with rare exceptions, [American] early childhood educators who fail to frame their research or research methods in the largely positivist traditions and theories of child development or developmental psychology find themselves marginalised in their own field" (p. 3). Here we still see much research that is on, rather than with young children, in which judgements are made about children's experience in early childhood services based on standardised measures and without any attempt made to listen to young children themselves. Given the global dominance and influence of American research, the absence of an American contribution is perhaps the most worrying omission in this

volume – although this may say as much about gaps in our knowledge of the American scene and the absence of transatlantic networks as it does about the early childhood research culture of the US. (We do recognise some important relevant work by William Corsaro and Vivian Paley, referred to in a number of chapters in this volume.)

What do we mean by ‘listening’?

‘Listening’ is one of those zeitgeist words (others include ‘quality’ and ‘excellence’) that get bandied around until it seems to crop up everywhere. Everyone, from banks to politicians, wants to be perceived as listening. But few, or so it seems, want to consider what meaning the word may have. ‘Listening’ is used as if its meaning and value were self-evident and incontestable.

Several contributors to this book raise questions about meaning. Rinaldi in particular, in Chapter Two, goes deeply and quite openly into the concept of listening and its meaning in a ‘pedagogy of listening’. She understands listening as part of a way of relating, just as Langsted saw it as part of a wider culture and Dahlberg and Moss treat it as part of an ethic. She foregrounds listening as emotion and reciprocity, interpretation and meaning making, and openness and sensitivity to connections, difference and change, the importance of doubt and uncertainty. She emphasises, too, that listening involves many senses and many languages: “listening to the hundred, the thousand languages, symbols and codes we use to express ourselves and communicate, and with which life expresses itself and communicates to those who know how to listen” (see page 20, this book).

The question of meaning leads to the relationship between listening and participation. Are they one and the same thing or do they differ in meaning? Participation in the liberal rights discourse is usually associated with influencing change and decision making. Kirby et al (2003) conclude: “it is important that participation activity is undertaken with the specific purpose of enabling children to influence decision making and bring about change” (p 30), while Lansdowne (2004) argues that to be meaningful and effective, children’s participation requires four key ingredients including “an on-going process of children’s expression and active involvement in decision-making at different levels that concern them” (p 15).

Listening as a method could form part of participation as involvement in decision making. But they are not entirely coterminous. Participation understood in this way may require conditions and methods that go beyond listening, such as voting rights (for example, discussions about reducing the voting age) or the exercise of sanctions (for example, withdrawing labour or taking other industrial action); or, to take a more specific example, the court that the Polish children’s rights pioneer Janusz Korczak established in his orphanage in inter-war Warsaw, where children acted as judges (Halperin, 2004). Listening, too, can go beyond this understanding of participation, when defined as a way or ethic of relating to others that, as we have already suggested, is more than just about decision making, but extends into every aspect of life itself.

Perhaps listening as an ethic sits more comfortably with a rather different understanding of participation, as feeling part of a community and having a sense of belonging (Rinaldi, 2005), an understanding that is less individualistic and more relational than participation as involvement in decision making – it is more ‘I want to be part of this’, less ‘I know my rights’. We want to avoid adopting a dualistic either/or approach; listening can be both a method and an ethic, participation can be both about having influence over what concerns one and about being part of a larger network of relations. But there is at the same time some tension present, between the autonomous subject and the social participant, between listening as self-expression and listening as reciprocity; some of this tension surfaces in Chapter Nine.

Listening is dangerous

The French social thinker Michel Foucault (1926-84) once observed that everything is dangerous. By this he meant to draw our attention to the impossibility of neutral and value-free relationships and practices, and the impossibility of individuals being able to stand outside power relations offering disinterested and benign knowledge and opinions:

...in human relations, whatever they are – whether it be a question of communicating verbally...or a question of a love relationship, an institutional or economic relationship – *power is always present: I mean the relationship in which one wishes to direct the behaviour of another.* (Foucault, 1987, p 11; emphasis added)

What sort of risks does power introduce into listening? Here the field of postcolonial studies, in particular critiques of participatory approaches in Majority World development projects, can inform the field of listening to children. There are useful points of similarity, while the former field has been subject to more critical discussion.

One area of risk concerns the distorting effect of listening without taking account of power relations and their inequalities. One result may be to gain an elite perspective and affirm the agenda of the more powerful, for example by favouring elite languages and by not hearing the voice of the marginalised. Inequalities may be hidden behind a mask of apparent unity...

MacNaughton (2003) expresses concern that too much emphasis on the ‘voice of the child’ in early childhood services may put children with the least power at a disadvantage, “privileging the voices and meanings of the powerful” (179). She points to examples, including how “in mixed gender groups girls may feel inhibited...[while] children who have experienced racism may have poor self esteem and believe their contribution will be ignored or dismissed by the group” (MacNaughton, 2003, p 179). In Chapter Four of this book, Warming also shows how listening can empower some children and marginalise others.

The question of whether the effects of power relations can be eliminated to achieve equal participation has been one of the controversies surrounding Habermas’s concept of communicative ethics, involving the public negotiation of difference and the formation of consensus. This is premised on the possibility of rules that enable all to

participate equally in discussion. But this premise, the possibility of creating a genuinely level playing field, has been questioned as being implausible, as has the desirability of consensus. Mouffe, for example, argues that Habermas, by envisaging a well-ordered democratic society without exclusions or antagonisms, cannot grasp the crucial role of conflict and its integrative function in a pluralist democracy: “taking pluralism seriously requires that we give up on the dream of a rational consensus which entails the fantasy that we could escape from our human form of life” (Mouffe, 2000, p 98).

A second area of risk concerns how the process of listening itself may become a means of supporting, rather than subverting or resisting, power. Listening may, for example, be used as a political or managerial tactic for currying favour or for gaining support for some unpopular move or for hiding the realities of power. In such cases, the language of participation, empowerment and listening becomes a ploy for “masking a real concern for managerial effectiveness” (Cooke and Kothari, 2001, p 14) Listening (‘I hear what you say’) may, thus, be a substitute for contestation and conflict (which, as Mouffe argues above, can be seen as signs of a healthy democracy), a means of reducing pressure by ‘letting off steam’, ‘getting things off your chest’.

Listening can also be a tool of management through focusing attention on some issues and diverting it away from others, helping to define what can and cannot be spoken about. The question here is what bounds listening is kept within, and what is not spoken about and not listened to...Listening becomes a surveillance and confessional technique for knowing and grasping otherness and managing conduct more effectively through governing the soul. Fendler (2001) describes how Foucault uses “the term ‘soul’ to refer to aspects of humanity that were previously sacrosanct but that have recently been constructed as objects of psychological and regulatory apparatuses...the innermost qualities of being human...[such as] desire, fear and pleasure” (p 123). Listening can provide a window into the soul, rendering “the innermost qualities of being human” more manageable or governable by making them visible and audible.

A fourth area of risk is again the subject of Chapter Nine: how listening and participation may become means by which the child is created as a particular sort of subject. This is the normative subject of advanced liberalism and neoliberalism, whom we have already introduced: the autonomous, calculating individual for whom self-realisation is the highest value. Listening is not the only technique that contributes to creating the ideal liberal subject. Fendler (2001) has argued that other pedagogical methods widespread today, such as ‘whole child education’ and ‘developmentally appropriate practice’, contribute to creating a subject who is not only autonomous but flexible and problem solving. This risk seems to us to be very great when listening is too closely bound to a rather narrow, rights-based participation discourse, where the emphasis is on the individual asserting their rights, their autonomy, their self-realisation.

A fifth risk, raised in Chapter Four, concerns the authenticity of voice, the claim that there is a decontextualised reality that can be transmitted without mediation from one individual to another: the essentially technical challenge is to capture this objective reality (‘I hear what you say’). The problem with this claim in its denial of the interpretive element in any communication, the listener claiming to have heard and

grasped the authentic voice of the person listened to, this giving authority to the listener; power relations are ignored. But the problem with authenticity claims runs deeper, in the failure to recognise how the experience of the person listened to is constituted within particular contexts and discourses, and as such is a work both complex and in progress.

Such reasons lead Hanne Warming in Chapter Four to argue that “there is no essential or authentic children’s perspective; rather children’s perspectives must be approached as multiple and changing, as well as being contextualised socially, culturally, historically and biographically. This theoretical approach denies the authentic child voice”. This is not an argument for dismissing voice and listening, but for acknowledging the provisionality of voice and the complexity of listening in which the listener is an active participant...

To say that listening is dangerous does not mean abandoning listening, throwing the baby out with the bath water. Rather it means being prepared to recognise the risks we run when listening, and the impossibility of being free of power and of escaping power relations by somehow being able to stand outside of them. It means being aware of power through thinking critically about the meaning, process and consequences of listening. Thinking critically has been described by Rose (1999) as:

...partly a matter of introducing a critical attitude towards those things that are given to our present experience as if they were timeless natural, unquestionable: to stand against the maxims of one’s time, against the spirit of one’s age, against the current of received wisdom. It is a matter of introducing a kind of awkwardness into the fabric of one’s experience, of interrupting the fluency of the narratives that encode that experience and making them stutter. (p 20)
