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How to cite:

Kellett, Mary (2009). Children as researchers: issues, impact and contribution to knowledge. In: Counting Children In! 2nd International Conference of Child Indicators, 3-5 Nov 2009, Sydney, Australia.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

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Children as researchers: issues, impact and contribution to knowledge

Keynote paper presented at International Conference of Child Indicators *Count Children In!* 3rd November 2009

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featuring an original research study by young people J. Bradwell, D. Crawford,
J. Crawford, L. Dent, K. Finlinson, R. Gibson and E. Porter**

Abstract

This paper explores the concept of children as researchers, positioning this from a rights perspective. It begins by tracing the historical context of children's research before establishing a rationale for this new paradigm. Consideration is given to methodological and theoretical issues pertaining to research *by* children and set within a context of participation and empowerment. The author acknowledges the importance of child voice, the uniqueness of insider perspective and the valuing of original contribution to knowledge that research *by* children can bring to our understanding of childhood and children's lives. The paper draws on the pioneering work of the Children's Research Centre at the Open University, UK – a centre solely dedicated to supporting research by children and young people – and features an example of original research by young people. Impact factors are examined along with how we value and position research by children in policy and practice contexts.

Historical context

Children are a special nation. Children are not national and religious leaders. They are a nation that has never carried out any revolution or counter-revolution, nor has started any wars. Children are not the question of the class or nation: children are the question of all questions. (First Children's Embassy in the World, Newsletter 35, 2009)

The involvement of children in research is nothing new but the *mode* of their involvement has evolved significantly over recent decades. For the majority of the twentieth century children were treated as objects of research (Hendrick, 1997). Their role was entirely passive. In the developed world, compulsory schooling and urbanisation brought large numbers of children together in townships and provided fertile research territory for developmental psychologists. In this positivist era, the focus of childhood research was on children's development and stages of learning with a proliferation of scientific testing and measuring. Theoretical frameworks of child development were based on adult-referenced norms in which children's growth and well-being were measured against standards of competence, normality, deviation and pathology (Woodhead and Faulkner 2008). During this dominant period of developmental psychology, researchers were positioned as experts on every aspect of children's lives: how children think, reason, communicate, even on the affects of their

personality and environment. Research was 'done' to children in a manner that frequently violated their human rights and at times strayed into the realms of abuse. An example is the 1960s Bernard separated twin study (see Schein and Bernstein, 2007). This was conducted on identical twins, living in New York, who were put up for adoption by their mother when she was suffering with a mental illness. Bernard, a prominent American psychologist, persuaded the adoption agency to separate the twins and send them to homes in different parts of the city without telling the respective adoptive parents that each child had an identical twin. She covertly followed the twins' progress to investigate whether they would forge better individual identities if they were separated. Bernard (1963) infamously wrote that the study "provides a natural laboratory situation for studying certain questions with respect to the nature-nurture issue and of family dynamic interactions in relation to personality development." The study was never completed but one cubic foot of data was collected about the twins without their consent. It was not until the death of Bernard in 1998 that information about the adopted children was revealed - 35 years before the twins, Elyse and Paula, were informed that they each had an identical twin living in the same city.

With the impetus of the UNCRC (1989), the first legally binding document to accrue human rights directly to minors, children began to be seen as 'subjects' or 'participants' rather than 'objects' of research (James et al, 1998). This realisation of children as social actors in their own right, agents in their own worlds provided the momentum to propel agendas towards research 'with' children and to the gradual acceptance that children could be more than participants in research, they could be co-researchers (Nieuwenhuys, 2001; Jones, 2004). This new era was accompanied by a greater emphasis on listening to and consulting with children although criticism was still levelled at the tokenism of the participation and adult manipulation (Sinclair, 2004). Unequal power-relations persisted and research 'with' children was still an adult dominated activity. Adults framed the research questions, chose the methods and controlled the analysis. For the most part, children were unequal partners and programmes were still inculcated with representations of children as 'adults in waiting' and of childhood as a preparation for adulthood.

Pressure began to be applied by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, set up to monitor how States were implementing the UNCRC (1989). States which signed up to the Convention (all but USA and Somalia) were required to furnish regular reports to this Committee on how they were instigating the 41 articles. The United Nations Special Summit on Children's Rights (United Nations General Assembly, 2002) criticised governments for not doing enough to enact articles relating to children's participation and not stating explicitly how this was being achieved. This helped to move children's participation on apace and the presence of children on steering groups and decision-making forums began to mushroom.

From this point we have been moving towards a new paradigm in relation to children's involvement in research (Kellet, 2005a) which takes us beyond children participating in research to a position where children lead their own enquiries. Research *by* children and young people - where they set the agendas, determine the foci for exploration, choose the methods of investigation and actively disseminate the findings - has announced itself on the world stage. The adult community is tasked with accommodating this new body of knowledge and, crucially, with valuing it.

The rationale for children as researchers in their own right

It has been established earlier in this paper that children have a *right* to be involved in decisions which affect their lives. Some of that decision-making is informed by research. From a rights-based agenda, the perspective of children as social actors places them as a socially excluded, minority group struggling to find a voice. This suggests an imperative to engage with children at an active rather than a passive level, what Christensen and James (2000) refer to as ‘cultures of communication’. Much adult-led research about children is undertaken in settings where there are ready-made population samples, notably the ‘captive audiences’ made available in schools (Alderson and Morrow, 2004). Here, the balance of power is heavily skewed towards adults and, arguably, schools are locations where children are *least* able to exercise participation rights. Adults control their use of time, occupation of space, choice of clothing, times of eating - even their mode of social interaction. Concern has been voiced about the validity of some school-based research (Alderson and Morrow, 2004). Alternative models are needed that emphasise research with and by children as members of their school community. Whether in school or community environments, sharing power with children and engaging them in consultation should not threaten nor destabilise society. Rather, it should lead to enhanced understanding and the creation of more effective policies.

Children observe with different eyes, ask different questions – they sometimes ask questions that adults do not even think of - have different concerns and immediate access to a peer culture where adults are outsiders. The research agendas children prioritise, the research questions they frame and the ways in which they collect data are quintessentially different from adults. Child-child research generates nuanced data which provide valuable insights into our understanding of childhoods. This is unlike other kinds of research where they are participants or co-researchers. There are some obvious benefits in children designing and leading their own research in that we can get closer to their lived experiences and illuminate their insider perspective. There are also many challenges and barriers.

Critical issues

Competency

A principal barrier to children undertaking their own research is their perceived lack of competence. Age is commonly used as a delineating factor within the competence debate. This perspective, primarily from the dominant developmental psychology era referred to above, has been robustly challenged (Kellett, 2005b; Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008), replaced by the principle that social experience is a more reliable marker of maturity and competence and that children’s competence is ‘different’ from adults’ not ‘lesser’ (Solberg, 1996; Alderson, 2000; Christensen and Prout, 2002). The fallacy of seeing age as a barrier to participation in research has been demonstrated by the imaginative ‘mosaic’ approach (Clark & Moss 2001) where very young children actively participate in data collection. Clark (2004) describes how she used a variety of different methods to explore what three to four-year olds felt about the environments in the early childhood centres they attended. She explored

methodologies that played to young children's strengths rather than weaknesses and cast herself in the guise of 'inexpert' so that she could listen and learn from the children. Clark used a variety of different tools including the familiar adult methods of observation and interview alongside child participatory techniques such as single use cameras, drawing and child-guided tours of their environments.

Knowledge

Another barrier commonly cited is the belief that children do not have sufficient knowledge and understanding to investigate subjects in any depth. Undoubtedly many adults have greater knowledge than children in many areas of life but with regard to childhood itself - in the sense of what it is like to be a child - it is children who have the expert knowledge (Mayall, 2000). If the research areas that interest children emanate directly from their own experiences and perspectives then no adult, even the most skilled ethnographer, can hope to acquire the richness of knowledge that is inherent in children's own understanding of their worlds and subcultures. The adult ethnographer cannot entirely bridge the divide and 'become a child again' however invisible she or he attempts to be in the ethnographic immersion process. This is not to devalue the many excellent research studies carried out by adults (e.g. Thorne, 1993; Corsaro, 1997; Punch, 2000) nor to suggest that research *by* children should replace or compete with adult studies, rather that the two are viewed as complementarities.

Skills

Reflecting on the skills needed to undertake research it is apparent that these are not synonymous with being an adult, they are synonymous with being a researcher, and most researchers undergo some kind of formal training. Many, perhaps most, adults would not be able to undertake research without training. A barrier to empowering children as researchers is not their lack of adult status but their lack of research skills. The notion that this is a deficit within the child simply does not stand up to close scrutiny when one examines the quality research undertaken by children as young as nine (see Kellett et al, 2004). It is common for adults to design a project and not involve children as participants until the data collection phase. Equally common are situations where adults analyse data generated by children on the premise that analysis is too difficult for them. In recent years more children have been invited on to steering committees and advisory groups but this is often after the study has been conceptualised rather than involving children in shaping the original drivers and contributing to research agendas.

Empowerment

None of the barriers referred to are insurmountable and it is entirely possible to empower children and young people to lead their own research (Sinclair, 2004; Kellett 2005a). Empowerment goes beyond recognising children's rights and acknowledging their expertise. It involves providing opportunities for meaningful participation and the creation of virtuous circles where the more experienced and competent children become through participation, the greater their empowerment as their participation becomes more effective. Lansdown (2002) discusses a range of benefits that children link with increased participation such as acquiring new skills,

building self esteem and contributing to making the world a better place. Training children in research process gives them the tools they need to achieve all three of these.

The Children's Research Centre at the Open University (CRC) offers children the opportunity to be trained in empirical research methods by university staff. Several years of pilot work (Kellett 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005b) led to the construction of a differentiated teaching programme to make research processes accessible for children without compromising the core principles of good empirical research, namely that the research should be systematic, sceptical and ethical. An 18-hour training programme takes children through the rationale for, and types of, research, the process of framing a research question, data collection techniques, analysis and dissemination skills. Once trained, children embark on research studies of their own choosing about aspects of their lives that concern or interest them. The CRC focuses on optimal ways to develop children's research knowledge and skills and support children to undertake their own research. It aims to minimise adult filters by shifting the balance to *supporting* rather than *managing* children's research (see <http://childrens-research-centre.open.ac.uk>). At time of writing the website is host to more than a hundred original research studies by children and young people.

Some children choose to research topics that impact on their daily lives such as their school experiences, consumer incidents or family matters others undertake social research about issues that overlap with adult worlds e.g. racial discrimination, poverty, crime and social exclusion. This is happening on an international scale and there is a growing body of research by children and young people from around the world. A few examples include:

- A seven-European country project known as CARIPSIE (Children as researchers in primary schools in Europe) which ran for 3 years until early 2009 and piloted a system of children doing their own research as part of their school curriculum.
- Hungary, where children have a choice of seven national curriculums, one of the seven curriculums has research methods as a core element. Over 50 schools in Hungary have opted for this option.
- Cyprus, where a recent bi-communal project brought together Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot young people to research some of the cultural issues in their politically divided country.
- Africa, many examples of participatory action research facilitated by Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) where young people have substantial input into the design of the studies (e.g. *Phila Impilo!* (www.icpcn.org.uk/core/core_picker/download.asp?documenttable=libraryfiles&id=49) [accessed 04/04/09]; Participatory Action Research in the Majority World (Nieuwenhuys, 2004); World Vision (www.worldvision.org.uk); Save the Children (www.savethechildren.org.uk); UNICEF South Africa (www.unicef.org/infobycountry/southafrica.html).

Research relationships

When we consider research undertaken by children themselves, we are looking at two kinds of relationship: firstly the relationship between child researcher and adult supporter and secondly the relationship between child researcher and child participant. The adult role is to support the child researchers, not to control or manage

them. It is an empowering process that negotiates access with gatekeepers and provides training and resources, not one that closes down options or imposes adult norms. Getting the balance right is not easy as is demonstrated in Table 1.

Getting the balance right	
support	management
enabling: promoting the idea that children can undertake their own research	influencing: allowing adult interest/agendas to influence what children research
sustaining: training children in research process including data collection and analysis methods	limiting: only teaching children certain skills thereby reducing their ability to make informed choices
supporting: paving the way for children with gatekeepers	judging: suggesting that a child's idea is not worthy enough to research
helping: helping children with some of the leg work rather than the design work e.g. transcribing interviews, number crunching, report writing frameworks	controlling: controlling access to participants e.g. in a school not allowing children to observe or interview certain peer groups or staff
empowering: actively seeking dissemination platforms for child researchers	hijacking: hijacking the content of children's research and/or the ownership of the research

Table 1: Getting the balance right

Nor is it necessarily easy for children to relate to adults in this way when they are conditioned to seeing adults in authoritarian roles. This can be a particular issue when working with children in school contexts.

The relationship between child researcher and child participant is new territory and some positioning still needs to be worked out here. The aim is for power relations to be neutral in child-child interactions, especially when collecting data. But this is not always the case. There are many sets of circumstances where power dynamics are at work, not unduly dissimilar to society at large:

- Older children with younger children
- Popular with less popular children
- Articulate with less articulate children
- Rich children with poor children
- Children deemed to have an 'official status' such as prefect, sports captain, club leader etc with children who have none.
- Typically developing children with children who have a learning disability

- Able-bodied children with disabled children

And it works both ways. It is not always the child researcher who is in the position of power. Some child researchers feel overawed at the thought of interviewing an older or a more popular child, of being ridiculed as a ‘geek’ or the subject of jealousy for being given ‘research privileges’. Research relations need to be addressed as part of the training of child researchers, exploring how potential power relations can be neutralised. Recreating the much criticised mediated adult researcher accounts of children’s experiences in mediated child researcher accounts is not in the least desirable. The power of child-child research should be that it transcends power dynamics and propagates authentic insider perspectives.

Impact

Research outcomes

While we may undertake research for different purposes, what is common in all our research is that it generates data. The data generated can be used in different ways, e.g. to raise awareness, increase our knowledge and understanding and provide evidence to support hypotheses. Sometimes data might relate to matters of political governance, environmental significance or jurisprudence and can influence the formation of policy. Research on global warming, for instance, has influenced policies on carbon emissions. Research by children can and should inform policy since it generates new knowledge from children’s perspectives that adults might not be able to access in the same way. However, influence brings responsibility. There is a responsibility to undertake reliable and valid research. Children, like adults, must expect their findings to be critically scrutinised. This is why it is so important to give children quality research training and help them develop valid research methods that stand up to independent scrutiny. The scale and size of children’s research is clearly important for any potential influence. It may be that a small study can raise some awareness but a larger study is needed to provide convincing evidence.

A concern I have is that we do not raise unrealistic expectations in children that their research is going to change the world. There have been some high profile examples of children’s research influencing change – e.g. Shannon Davidson’s research about what it is like for children living with a thyroid disorder (see Davidson, 2008 at <http://childrens-research-centre.open.ac.uk>) influenced policy and practice at Great Ormond Street hospital, UK, – but not every piece of child-led research is going to have this kind of impact. Managing child researchers’ outcome expectations is one of the responsibilities of adults who support them. Nonetheless, the targeted dissemination of valid research by children can raise awareness about issues and, in best circumstances, influence change.

Political literacy and agency

There is an important link to political literacy and the notion of child researchers as advocates and protagonists (Kellett and Ward, 2009). This emerges from the two conceptual arenas of power and emancipation. These paths have been well-trodden by feminist, ethnic minority and disability research groups. Power issues relate to whose interests the research serves, who owns the research and whom the research is for. Emancipatory elements challenge the legitimacy of research which does not empower

groups (in this case children and young people) who are either invisible or oppressed. Hence the interests of children and young people, as a relatively powerless group, are served when they set their own agendas and lead their own research. 'Those who have in the past so often been the mere objects of investigation, themselves become the agents of their own transformation' (Fielding, 2004, p. 306). Historically, research has been based on an adult way of looking at the world and the ensuing knowledge generated is in the adult experience. The legitimacy of research into children's worlds and children's lived experiences where the research is conceived wholly from an adult perspective is open to challenge. The research agendas children prioritise, the research questions they frame and the way in which they collect data are substantially different and space has to be made to accommodate them. Moreover, evaluation data suggests that children's engagement in research process, particularly when this is about issues of concern to them, results in an augmentation of agency in their own and other children's lives (Davies and Ryan-Vig, 2004; Kellett, 2007).

Can research by children inform policy?

Research can and does inform policy in a variety of contexts. Research on global warming, for instance, has influenced policies on carbon emissions. There is no reason why research by children can, and should, inform policy since it generates new knowledge from children's perspectives that adults cannot access in the same way. However, we must be careful not to raise unrealistic expectations in children that their research is going to change the world. There have been some high profile examples of children's research influencing change – e.g. Shannon Davidson's research about what it is like for children living with a thyroid disorder (see Davidson, 2008 at <http://childrens-research-centre.open.ac.uk>) influenced policy and practice at Great Ormond Street hospital in the UK – but not every piece of child-led research is going to have this kind of impact. Managing child researchers' outcome expectations is one of the responsibilities of adults who support them. Nonetheless, the targeted dissemination of valid research by children can raise awareness about issues and, in optimal circumstances, does influence change. Influence brings responsibility. There is a responsibility to undertake reliable and valid research. Children, like adults, must expect their findings to be critically scrutinised. This is why it is so important to give children quality research training and help them develop valid research methods that will stand up to independent scrutiny. The scale and size of children's research is clearly important for any potential influence on policy. It may be that a small study can raise awareness but a larger study is needed to provide convincing evidence.

Contribution to knowledge

Arguably, the biggest impact of research by children is the contribution it makes to our knowledge and understanding of childhood and children's worlds. The number of child-led studies is growing steadily. The report that follows (2008) is authored by a group of young people in the UK care system who researched issues about their care review processes. The language, style and format of the report are their choice and have not been changed. The strength of the study is its insider perspectives. Young person to young person data were generated from within a peer culture where adults are outsiders. It is a fitting way to conclude a paper aiming to stimulate scholarly discussion on the concept of children as researchers in global societies.

How looked after children are involved in their review process

J. Bradwell, D. Crawford, J. Crawford, L. Dent, K. Finlinson, R. Gibson and E. Porter

1. Introduction

Have Your Say is a group of young people who are currently, or have been in care. We are keen to make sure that looked after children have their say in every aspect of their lives and the review process is an ideal way for them to do this. We know that there are a number of ways that young people in care can have their voices heard but we are specifically looking at the review system as it covers all looked after children and young people and is specific to their own situation. At the moment, there is no consistent way for looked after children and young people in North Tyneside to record their views confidentially before a review meeting.

We decided to do this research to try and improve the way looked after children have their views and opinions heard in the review system. We felt that many looked after children do not attend their review meetings as they think they will not be listened to and if they do go, they feel like they are talked about and not talked to. We also wanted to find out how involved they are in the organisation of the meetings and find ways for looked after children and young people to take a more active lead so that they feel like they have more control.

2. Literature Review

As part of our research we did a literature review to find out what evidence there was to support our decision to research the looked after children's review system. The North Tyneside Looked After Children's Charter was created to ensure that young people in the care system have the same treatment and opportunities as any other young person in North Tyneside. One of the pledges states that: "***We will support, inform and involve you in the choices and decisions that affect all aspects of your life.***" This pledge refers to things such as the review system and their promise to make sure that you are happy and comfortable enough to give your views, opinions and have your say on decisions that are made during your reviews. The Your Rights Your Say Placements, Decisions and Reviews: A Children's Views Report highlights a number of issues that young people across the country have with their reviews such as: -

- Who attends their review meeting?
- The young person being talked about as if they are not there
- Not having their views and opinions understood

North Tyneside Council's Corporate Parenting Strategy has a lot of information about how looked after children and young people can have their views heard but there is no specific reference to the review system. Prior to our research, a task group of staff from North Tyneside was formed to look at the review system and they pinpointed some of the areas and issues in the review system that may need improving such as: -

- Making sure review meetings are a good experience and that young people feel comfortable
- creating a high quality consultation paper, which is available in different age related versions. This should also be available in electronic form
- encouraging young people to meet with their IRO on their own, prior to review meetings and have more time to spend with their social worker to prepare for the meeting.
- Making sure that everyone involved is clear about the purpose of the review process.

3. Research Aims

We hope that our research will improve the way the looked after children's review system works in North Tyneside, by improving the way adults listen to looked after children and finding better ways for young people in care to get their views across.

Our research questions are:

- a) Who controls the review process?
- b) Are children and young people's views listened to in the review process?
- c) How can looked after children and young people contribute to the review process?

4. Methodology

a. Research Design

Stage 1 - We sent out information to all young people in care aged 10-17 who live in North Tyneside, inviting them to take part in one-to-one semi structured interviews with the aim of involving 40. The questionnaire was sent to those young people who said that they would like to be involved but could not attend an interview. Information was also sent to Social Workers of children and young people who are living outside of North Tyneside to give them the opportunity to take part. We ran a staff awareness raising session for key staff to make sure that they knew about our project and could encourage young people to take part as well as sending information out via email. We also put information into the foster carer's newsletter so that they knew about our project. Interviews were scheduled to take place in August at the Riverside Centre. We planned to run focus groups to gain further information and to ask follow up questions.

Stage 2 - Questionnaires were to be given to young people when they left their review meetings so that we could find out how they felt immediately after the meeting. Similar questionnaires were to be given to Social Workers and Independent Reviewing Officers so that we could compare their perceptions and to gather information about review meetings where the young person did not attend. As the Independent Reviewing Officers co-ordinated the completion of the questionnaires at this stage, we met with an IRO to explain the process to them and detailed information was given to all of their team.

b. Research Participants

During Stage 1, 14 young people took part in total:

- 9 young people took part in one-to-one interviews
- 5 young people completed questionnaires. 3 of those young people live in residential units, 1 outside of North Tyneside.

During Stage 2, we gained information from the reviews of 22 young people:

- The young person was present in 12 of the review meetings and completed the questionnaire.
- Information was gathered from the Independent Reviewing Officer and Social Worker in all 22 reviews.

Overall, we gathered data relating to the review meetings of 36 looked after children and young people, with information coming directly from the young people in 26 of those cases.

c. Research Ethics

As our research project involved looked after children, we had to be extra careful that they felt safe and protected when they took part. The young people needed to be confident that they could talk freely about their experiences without worrying that what they said would be passed on to anyone. All information gathered was only seen by Have Your Say and members of staff who supported them directly. To make sure that everything was kept anonymous, we gave each young person a number so that what they said could not be linked to their name. All information gathered was stored securely using North Tyneside Council systems and will be destroyed when the research project is completed. During the interviews, Rachel Gibson and Jennifer White were around to support the interviewer in case any difficult issues were discussed. We had very clear procedures in place to deal with disclosures. These were explained to all participants before their interview and they signed an agreement to say that they were happy to be recorded on a Dictaphone. All of these recordings have been deleted.

d. Research Procedure

Despite publicising our project with a large amount of staff, the number of young people who responded directly to our initial letter was very low. Letters were sent to 90 young people but only 9 responded initially. We contacted the Social Workers for those young people who lived too far away to attend an interview to find out the best way to get them involved. After follow up work, 14 young people took part in Stage 1. Due to the low response, we decided not to run the focus group sessions – we also felt that we had gained enough information from the one-to-one interviews and questionnaires. Stage 2 of the research covered 22 looked after reviews taking place in September. All of the young people who took part in their reviews (12) completed the questionnaire, as did the social workers and IROs. This means that:

- We gathered information about the review meetings of 33.5% of our target group.
- 13% of our target group took part in stage 1 of the research.
- 11% of our target group took part in Stage 2 of the research
- 24% of our target group contributed directly to the research across both stages.

All of the young people who took part were sent a voucher and thank you letter.

5. Analysis

A) Who controls the review process?

During the first stage of the research, we asked the young people whether they think it is important to be involved in the planning of their reviews – **65% felt it was important.** We asked young people across both stages how involved they are in the planning and the results are shown below.

Where you asked where you wanted your meeting to be held?

31% - yes; 65% - no; 4% - not sure

Were you asked at what time you wanted the meeting to take place?

35% - yes; 57% - no; 8% - not sure

Where you asked who you would like to have at your meeting?

35% - yes; 61% - no; 4% - not sure

We also asked young people in stage 1 whether they felt some adults should only attend parts of the review meeting relevant to them and **65% said yes**.

B) Are children and young people's views listened to in the review process?

We asked all of those who attended their most recent review meeting about whether they felt listened to in the meeting.

- 76% felt that that they could say what they wanted to say at the review meeting.
- 76% also felt that the adults at the meeting listened to them.

We asked young people in stage 1 whether they had been asked for their views before their review meeting.

- 57% said yes but 36% said no.
- Of those who were asked for their views, 88% felt those views would have been passed on.

C) How can looked after children and young people contribute to the review process?

We asked young people whether they were asked if they would like to speak to an Independent Reviewing Officer before their review meeting. The results are shown below:

Were you asked if you would like to talk to your Independent Reviewing Officer before your meeting?

54% - yes; 38% - no; 8% - not sure

In stage 1 of our research, we asked young people questions about how they can contribute to the review process and asked about some of the methods suggested by the Review Task Group.

- A majority of the young people said they would be happy to complete a good quality consultation form either on paper (71%) or electronically (57%).
- Only 14% would like to keep a diary to record their views while 36% would write a statement to be used in their meeting.
- 71% said it was important to actually go to the review meeting

6. Research Findings

From our analysis, we have found the following:

A) Who controls the review process?

- Young people in care feel it is important to be involved in the planning of their review meetings.
- Children and young people in care do not have control over the planning of their review meetings and in many cases are not even involved.

- Adults are controlling the review process and not involving young people in decisions about where and at what time the meeting should take place, or who should be at the meeting.

B) Are children and young people’s views listened to in the review process?

- While more than half of those involved said they were asked for their views before the meeting (57%) a large amount said they were not (36%).
- A large majority of those asked for their views (88%) felt that those views would have been passed on.
- Although many looked after children and young people are not involved in the planning and do not attend their meetings, they are listened to by adults when they do attend their meetings (76%).
- Most of those who do attend their meetings feel that they are able to say what they want at the meeting (76%).

C) How can looked after children and young people contribute to the review process?

- More than half of the review meetings covered by the research did not have the young person present even though a large number of the young people involved (71%) thought it was important to attend the meeting.
- Around half of the young people said they were not asked whether they wanted to meet with their IRO before the meeting and this is supported by information from Social Workers.
- Young people would like a way to have their views recorded before the meeting other than talking to their social worker or carer.

7. Conclusions

We feel that children and young people who are looked after in North Tyneside do not feel that they are fully involved in the review process. Many are not asked about where and when they would like the meeting to take place and one said

‘The social worker just decides’

Most know that they should go to the meetings

‘It’s my meeting so I should go’

but often do not have the best experience.

Some of their comments include:

‘I didn’t want myself to be there to be honest. I don’t like going to them but I can’t not go to them because otherwise you don’t get told what is happening.’

I don’t like going to meetings and sitting in front of loads of people’

‘I don’t want to hear any thing bad I just get embarrassed’

When asked what would encourage them to attend, one young person said:

‘Nothing I don’t like people talking about me when I can hear it’

Some young people have positive reasons for not attending their views. This could be because they are happy for their carer or social worker to pass on their views, or that they see themselves as part of a family and not 'in care'.

'if you are settled you only need to talk on the phone'

On the positive side, a number of young people were very happy with their review meetings. One stated that nothing could have made the meeting better while one said

'Most of my reviews are good'

Young people felt that in general they are listened to when they attend their meetings and that any views they have will be passed on

'I put my views across and they would listen'

although one person said that in meetings, the adults *'seem to talk amongst themselves'*.

We need to make sure that young people in care have a comfortable and positive experience in their review meetings. However, we know that some young people will never enjoy attending review meetings.

8. Recommendations

We wanted our research project to achieve the following:

- Raise awareness amongst looked after children and young people on their rights related to the review system
- Make the review system more young people friendly
- Encourage staff to be more consistent in the way they work within the review system
- Change people's behaviour so that they make sure children and young people are listened to and encouraged to share their views and opinions

We also wanted to know what is going well and keep those parts.

In order to achieve this, we recommend that the following happen:

- A checklist should be devised which social workers go through with a young person before the review meeting, to discuss and agree details. This would make sure that young people are asked for their views on the time and place of the meeting, who should be there and whether they would like to meet with their IRO. This could also cover whether certain adults should only attend relevant parts of the meeting, such as teachers.
- Looked after children and young people should be given clear information about the roles and responsibilities of those involved in the review process. While most had a good idea about what the review meeting is for, many were not clear about the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer. They also need to be clear about their own rights and responsibilities.
- There should be an ongoing opportunity for young people to evaluate their review meetings immediately afterwards. This could be done using a short questionnaire, similar to the one used in our research. If the Independent Reviewing Officer knew that a young person was not happy with the meeting, they could make sure it was better for them the next time.
- Looked after children and young people should be given opportunities to be involved in the process at different levels if they choose to. Young people who are

confident are more likely to get involved – we should find ways for those who are not very confident to be involved as well if they want to be.

- We would like to see a consistent way for young people to record their views confidentially. This should be a high quality consultation booklet, with different versions depending on age and ability. This could also be made available in an electronic version. This will mean that young people, who choose not to go to their review meeting for whatever reason, still have the opportunity to get their views across.

The most important thing is that children and young people who are in care are given choice over how they are involved. If young people are given more control over their own reviews, they are more likely to contribute and have their views heard. Our research has shown that when they have the chance to give their views, they feel that they are listened to. This is the most positive thing which came out of our project and is a good, strong foundation for the looked after review system to built upon.

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