

# Scotland

## Beyond expected roles

Young children as social actors

Linda Kinney, Head of Early Childhood, Stirling Council Children's Services

*Central to Stirling Council's approach to early years education and childcare, family support and community-based daycare for vulnerable and other children is that it gives children the opportunity to move beyond their expected role as recipients of services to become social actors entitled to impact on the decisions affecting their lives.*

In Stirling we believe that children are giving us very powerful messages. We see and hear them as small babies as they gurgle and cry, and we observe the way they move and how they 'listen' to the world around them with all their senses. We see in our young children the many and varied ways in which they engage with each other and with the adults around them, we hear them talk and laugh, we watch them explore, we witness their curiosity and also how they 'listen' to the world around them with all their senses.

Spending time with young children has led us to the belief that as adults we have a great deal to learn from our youngest children, about children themselves, about the world around us and about ourselves.

It is this belief and the opportunity to share inspirational practice with our colleagues in Scandinavia and Reggio Emilia<sup>1</sup> which encouraged us to think about the ways in which we listened to children in Stirling and about how to go further.

Although many of our nurseries in Stirling were actively engaged in listening to children and consulting with them, we began to explore more formal consultation methods. The point was to make the processes and outcomes of consulting with children – and the impact of their participation –

more visible, both to the children and to the adults. As a result of this, a range of techniques to elicit the views of our youngest children and to encourage their participation began to develop. One technique was small group discussions, using pictures or samples of equipment, to make decisions on a range of topics. The example from practice below shows how this technique was used.

### Purchasing new resources

Children (3–4 years olds) had asked if the nursery could have more musical instruments so that everyone in the group could have one each. In small groups, the children were shown samples of available musical instruments from a catalogue. The instruments were discussed and there was lots of talking between children and staff and explanations of the different types of instruments and the possible options. The children were then invited to choose from a particular range. One instrument in particular caught their eye: they were very excited by the possibility of having a large drum. Faced with the choice between buying several small instruments or one large drum, the majority of children decided that they would choose the drum, although they understood that this meant there would still not be enough musical instruments for everyone in the group.

The impact of these discussions with the children was significant both for the children and the staff:

- some children had difficulty in accepting that the decision of the majority of children did not match their decision;



Selecting and discussing items from a catalogue

- some staff had difficulty in accepting the decision of the children;
- some staff were concerned that it may adversely affect those children who found it difficult and for some staff this led to a dilemma. What should they do for the children who 'lost out'? How best should they deal with the children's emotional response?

These outcomes of what appeared to be initially a straight forward formal consultation with children about nursery resources led the nursery staff into the following:

- dialogue and reflection around professional and personal values, including the role of staff in supporting children's choices;
- their responsibility for, and feelings about, individual children's reactions;
- consideration about the democratic process, in particular the differences between what may be in the best interests of the individual and the group;
- further consideration about adult-child

relationships, in particular the recognition of the adult-child power base and the implications of changes in this.

The impact of engaging in more formal consultations with children and making their voices heard also had implications for the wider service. As a result, children's voices are more visible in the nursery; changes are taking place in the planning for children's learning and the organisation of nursery space to more readily accommodate the children's interests; and adults are gaining valuable insights into children's early learning as well as their own learning.

Listening to young children has become a way of thinking as well as working in Stirling. We are currently engaged in researching and exploring approaches that will support this new way of working and thinking; and we are documenting the outcomes and impact of listening to children on our early years policy and practice.