A Child’s Eye View

Looking at Early Years Experiences
From Children’s Perspectives

Bristol City Council
Childcare Sufficiency Assessment 2010

Consultation & Report
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Abstract

This consultation report endeavours to capture young children’s thoughts and feelings about their early years provision in Bristol. The children consulted were from a wide variety of early years settings. The sample visited was chosen to represent the voluntary, private and maintained sectors citywide. The main criteria were that settings should reflect the different kinds of childcare provision available as well as be representative of the diverse areas of the city.

Observations and conversations were the primary method of consulting young children. This involved making observations of groups and individual children and recording children’s comments, within a rights based framework that also took account of the four themes of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). In addition, in a majority of settings, children used cameras to capture and reflect different aspects of their provision. The qualitative data from the observations is delivered in four chapters corresponding to the themes of the EYFS as well as children’s rights. Children’s photography provides both quantitative and qualitative data that has been considered in relation to the question ‘what do children take pictures of?’ This is included in a fifth chapter and offers an insightful view of children’s experiences and ideas. The main purpose of this consultation was to consider the question ‘What does it feel like to be a child here?’

An analysis of the findings of both the observational and photographic data shows that a majority of participating children appear happy in their early years settings. They all appear to have friends and playmates and a broad range of activities and opportunities are typically available to them. Many children have opportunities to voice their ideas. However, a question is raised in the final chapter of this report about children’s viewpoints and their entitlement to be properly heard, identified within the scope of this consultation. Finally, three recommendations are made, which are based on observations of good practice during the consultation as well as recognising the benefits of using cameras with children to help adults understand their view of their world.

October 2010
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Portrait by a child
Acknowledgments

It would not have been possible to undertake this consultation without the full cooperation of the practitioners, parents and, of course, the children in the settings which were visited – grateful thanks to them all.

Most of the photographs in this report were taken by children from the early years settings in Bristol involved in the consultation and included with kind permission of parents, children and practitioners. There were so many amazing and beautiful photographs it was a difficult task to select the ones for inclusion in the report. It is important to add that none of the children’s photos’ have been edited or manipulated in any way! Hopefully, those that have been included illustrate and reflect children’s perceptions more generally. An especial thank you to the child who captured the beauty of their outdoor mosaic so well, pictured on the front of this report. An artist indeed!

The terms practitioner and setting are used throughout this document and refer to all adults who work with children and the different places in which they work.
Contents

Abstract 2
Acknowledgements 3

1. Introduction 5

2. How the children told us what they think 6
   2.1 Scope of the consultation
   2.2 Methods used in the consultation
   2.3 Children involved in the consultation process
   2.4 Limitations to the consultation

3. Observations – Unique Children 10

4. Observations – Positive Relationships 14

5. Observations – Enabling Environments 16

6. Observations – Playing & Learning 18

7. Analysis of Observations 20
   7.1 Unique Children
   7.2 Positive Relationships
   7.3 Enabling Environments
   7.4 Playing & Learning
   7.5 Key Findings from observations

8. Children’s photographs 24
   8.1 Limitations to analyses of photographs
   8.2 Analysis of photographic data – people
   8.3 Analysis of photographic data – places
   8.4 Analysis of photographic data – things

9. Final Thoughts 34
   10.1 Recommendations
   10.2 Conclusion

References 37
1. Introduction

This report was commissioned by the Children and Young People’s Service of Bristol City Council in May 2010 to inform the Childcare Sufficiency Assessment (CSA). The CSA involves consultation with parents, childcare providers, community groups and employers throughout the City and was undertaken between July and October 2010. The CSA audits the availability, affordability and quality of childcare for parents, either working or training, to inform the planning of children’s services.

Bristol City Council wanted to ensure that the voices of children and young people were heard as an integral part of the CSA. It was considered essential that the thoughts and feelings of the children and young people accessing provision were taken into account when developing and supporting good quality early education and childcare provision. The participation of children in matters that affect their lives is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1991). In order to capture the views of a representative sample of children, the consultant was asked to work with early years settings as well as out of school settings from different geographical areas in Bristol.

This report endeavours to express young children’s feelings and ideas in the context of their early years provision in Bristol. The methods used to find out what children think were observational recordings, conversation and comments as well as an interpretation of children’s photographs. Research shows that even very young children are competent and capable in expressing their opinions and views about matters which affect their lives (Clark et al, 2003; Lancaster & Broadbent, 2003). This report captures children’s abilities to express themselves in different ways but particularly as competent and expressive photographers; using one of the many languages identified by Loris Malaguzzi (cited in Edwards, Gandini & Foreman, 1998), to help adults see the world from their point of view.

A game of hide and seek
2. How children’s views were sought

2.1 Scope of the Consultation
The statutory guidance for local authorities to undertake Childcare Sufficiency Assessments stipulates that as children and young people are the main beneficiaries of childcare services they should be given an opportunity to express their views about both the positive aspects of their provision and their needs and concerns (DfESa, 2007).

Children participating in this consultation used many different types of provision, including pre-schools, playgroups, private nurseries and nursery classes in the statutory and independent sectors, children's centres and childminders. Due to the difference in settings, children were observed in both indoor/outside environments or just indoors. Thirty two settings were visited; 2 child minders, 3 nursery classes, 2 nursery schools, 9 playgroups & pre-schools, 6 children’s centre and 10 day nurseries. A two hour visit was allocated to each setting. As far as possible an equal number of settings were visited from the ten localities across the three areas of the city (South Bristol, North Bristol and Central & East Bristol). A majority of the settings were visited in June and July. However, 8 were visited in September and October when some children were new to their setting.

2.2 Methods used in the consultation
Three methods of consultation were used to find out what children think:
- Observations;
- Children’s voices;
- Children’s photographs.

Children’s rights underpin the ethos of this consultation especially Article 12, which states:
*‘Children have the right to say what they think should happen when adults are making decisions that affect them, and to have their opinions taken into account’* (UNICEF, 1991)

Three further articles of the convention were also felt to be particularly relevant to this consultation and have been linked to the four themes of the EYFS:
- Article 14
  *Children have the right to think and believe what they want as long as they are not stopping other people from enjoying their rights;*
- Article 15
  *All children have the right to meet with other children and young people;*
- Article 31
  *Children have the right to relax, play and join in a wide range of activities.*
In addition, a fifth article was considered, that reaffirms the impact of adults on children’s experiences:

**Article 3**

*All organisations concerned with children should work towards what is best for them.*

**Observations**

Observations of children were framed in the context of children’s rights linked to the four themes (two slightly adapted) of the *Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) (DCSF, 2008) with areas of focus in the themes identified. Links were also made with *Every Child Matters* (DfESb, 2007):

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<th>Article 14</th>
<th>Article 15</th>
<th>Article 31</th>
<th>Article 31</th>
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<td>Unique Children</td>
<td>Positive Relationships</td>
<td>Enabling Environments</td>
<td>Playing &amp; Learning</td>
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<td>• Individual &amp; inclusive opportunities</td>
<td>• Respecting each other</td>
<td>• Developing confidence</td>
<td>• Playing &amp; exploring</td>
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<td>• Physical &amp; emotional health</td>
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*Table 1- Observation context*

It is important to recognise that as the purpose of the consultation was an attempt to reflect children’s feelings of their experiences the statutory obligations of settings, in relation to learning and development requirements were not a focus. Children understood and used the terminology of ‘playing’, which is why it has been chosen in preference to the adult constructed term - ‘development’.

**Children’s Voices**

Children’s conversations and comments were recorded on the observation pro-forma under ‘Children’s comments’. These reflect children’s conversations with each other and adults, and in some cases a commentary on their photography. During the process of developing the New Zealand Te Whariki early years curriculum Carr (2001) encapsulated the arguments for including children’s voices, within the context of their provision, as a fundamental right. Research in the UK further acknowledges the value and significance of listening to children (Clarke, Trine Kjorholt & Moss, 2005). It was considered essential for this consultation that children’s own words were incorporated into the report.

*Children’s voices*
Children’s Photographs

‘Photography is the most perfect medium to enable children to give expression to their personal, unique view of the world’

(Pace & Holmes, 2010; 6)

Giving children cameras to capture their view of their setting and their experiences was a powerful tool and provided a wealth of interesting data for interpretation, some of which went beyond the scope of this consultation. For the purpose of this report children’s photographs were analysed taking into account whether the focus appeared to be ‘people, places or things’. People were separated into children and adults, while places were both indoors and out. ‘Things’ encompassed a range of activities or resources that were photographed but also included some more abstract concepts in relation to reoccurring themes that became evident as the project progressed. It was often not possible to have discussions about the subject matter as the camera was passed back and forth between children with little adult supervision. This means that an adult interpretation has been ‘put upon’ the children’s photographs, which may not always reflect their original intention. However, the pictures often appear to provide a unique insight into children’s perceptions of the world around them.

‘Even very young children can go beyond documenting what is in front of them to using the camera expressively’

(Pace & Holmes, 2010; 6)

Discovering my shadow  Garden art

2.3 Children involved in the consultation process
To support this consultation, simple data was gathered in relation to the participating children’s age, gender, ethnicity and ability status (see Table 1). The range of settings visited meant that not all children, who may have been the subject of observations, were entitled to funded pre-school provision. All children attending sessions on the day that the setting was visited were included in the figures in Table 1. This information was a collective total from the lead practitioner in each setting. BME includes children who had English an additional language and dual heritage children.
It is important to comment that as far as it was possible to determine, children’s experiences in their settings were not affected adversely by individual ethnicity or ability. Where differentiation was observed it was enabling and beneficial for children.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total number of children</th>
<th>Number of children under 3 years</th>
<th>Number of children 3 years and over</th>
<th>Number of BME children</th>
<th>Number of disabled children</th>
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<tr>
<td>609</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>518</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>35</td>
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Table 2 – Total number of children in settings

2.4 Factors affecting consultation

Any research undertaken must always be subject to scrutiny for imperfections that are both unavoidable and unintentional. Factors affecting this consultation are listed here:

- The ability of children to use their own cultural capital across a range of experiences and that this is different for all children;
- For a percentage of children (19%) their experience of their provision began in September 2010;
- The limited experiences of some children in relation to care away from home;
- Analysis of photographic and observational data is subject to adult interpretation; and
- Time constraints - observations are literally ‘snapshots’ of children's experiences on one particular morning or afternoon.

It is hoped that, despite these limitations, this report captures the essence of children’s feelings and thoughts about their experiences in their early years setting.

Using cameras in the consultation
3. Observations – Unique Children

Article 14
‘Children have the right to think and believe what they want as long as they are not stopping other people from enjoying their rights.’

Children are all unique because of the many varied facets that make them who they are, from family life to racial and cultural heritage. Every child has their own self-identity, which will have been shaped by individual traits as well as their experience of life. Children have their own ideas about what they believe is important to them and their unique views of the world should be respected and valued.

The following are examples of opportunities and experiences that were observed and heard. They are listed under the sub-headings of ‘often’, ‘sometimes’ and ‘seldom’ depending upon frequency:

3.1 Individual and inclusive opportunities

**Often**
- Children are confident conversationalists;
- They make connections between home and their setting;
- Children are able to negotiate with each other and solve problems;
- And they are able to offer ideas to adults;
- Children are asked for their ideas;
- Children can choose to take out resources that they are interested in;
- And they are able to choose how to use resources;
- Children are listened to by adults and other children;
- Children can choose to be indoors or outside;

**Sometimes**
- Children are able to have familiar objects from home with them to support transitions (September visit);
- Children are able to negotiate with adults;
- Children have opportunities to recognise future transitions with each other and adults;
- Children are able to move resources from the inside to the outside;
- Children must be either indoors or outside.

**Seldom**
- Children have an ongoing visual display of their families through digital and/or other pictures;
- Children are able to sing the same song more than once at singing when different children chose it;
- Children have their good ideas acted upon swiftly;
- Children can choose to move resources from the outside to the inside;
- Children have to wear aprons that are too big or too small for them making it hard to access an activity.
3.1b Children’s voices

Children had the most to say about themselves, their families and their lives at home despite telling them that the visit was to find out what they thought about being in their setting. The comments captured here are a small sample of what children actually said. Common themes were children’s perception of their age (size) and providing lots of information about immediate and extended family members, houses and cars. In the June and July visits children were also preoccupied with moving on to ‘big school’.

- ‘I’m nearly big, I’m 3, I’m up to F……’s eye – this eye’ points to her left eye.
- ‘I’m a big girl’
- ‘I’m going to big school’
- ‘I won’t be here in September’
- ‘My birthday is soon’, uses fingers to count;
- ‘I’ve got pink nails’
- ‘These are my new sneakers’
- ‘When myself itches, I scratch it’
- ‘I do my mum’ about picture in sand, ‘I do my Dad too’
- ‘I’ve got a puppy at home’
- ‘I’m playing with my Mummy and Daddy and Charlie. Charlie is my dog.’
- ‘I’ve got a baby sister – she’s called N……’
- ‘I had a cake yesterday with J…’.
- ‘At the beach, my house is at the beach’
- ‘My brother’s tooth fell out and he got a bike’
- ‘I went to the seaside yesterday and my dad got me an ice cream’
- ‘Do you know I went to a big, big, big cinema’
- ‘My mum drives too fast!’

Choosing how to play together and alone
It is also important to recognise some of the comments that relate to children’s experiences while in their setting. Typically, when children vocalised ideas about their provision, these were about what was actually happening during the visit and the opportunities available during that time. More rarely, children used recollection to explain some favourite activities although they were not actually experiencing it on the day of the visit.

- I know what ice is made of, it’s made of water’;
- ‘There’s some glue, over there’ pointing to it’
- ‘I’m just pretending I’m Batman’
- I like that best’ pointing at the swimming pool;
- ‘I like diving in from the steps’
- ‘It’s special tea time’ about ‘Leavers’ tea.
- ‘I haven’t had a turn’
- ‘This is our pirate ship, we’re turning it into a pirate boat’
- ‘I’m going to go on the see saw’
- ‘I’m J…, I’m just pretending to be a monster’
- ‘We just love gluing, don’t we E… We’re going to make loads of stuff’;
- ‘Do you know N…… I can count to 10 in French’ and does;
- ‘I can’t do it’ about cutting out;
- ‘I want to go outside’;
- ‘This isn’t working’ about hole punch;
- ‘I need a big bucket, full of water in it’;
- ‘S……, S…… I did a whistle’ to adult;
- I’m not drawing yet because I need to think about what I am going to draw’.

Physical and emotional health are essential to children’s well being – the following examples capture some recurring themes:

3.2 Physical & emotional health

Often
- Children recognise physical attributes of their own bodies;
- Children have opportunities to sit quietly and to run around;
- Children are smiling and laughing;
- And share jokes together;
- Children are considerate of each others feelings;
- And able to negotiate rules with other in their play;
- Children are able to manage their own feelings in response to minor mishaps;
- They ask and answer each others questions;
- Children can choose from alternatives at snack time;
- Children approach adults for comfort;
- Children can access water independently throughout the visit.

**Sometimes**
- Children have opportunities to run around or be otherwise physically active indoors in their everyday play;
- Children are encouraged to find solutions to conflict;
- Children have access to food for all or most of the visit.

**Seldom**
- Children appear to be sad or upset for a prolonged period of time without adult support.

### 3.2b Children’s voices
- ‘I’m a bit floppy today’
- ‘I’ve got a good idea’ to other children;
- ‘Hey, don’t wipe my name off’ to another child about own name on ‘helpers’ card.
- ‘I’m going to miss H…….’ about a child who is leaving setting to go to school;
- ‘That song - that’s my happy song. And it makes everybody happy’
- ‘Can I come in’ to other children to join in with their play.
- ‘I choosed races’ about playing outside;
- ‘Can I help’ about collecting cups
- ‘Yummy water’
- ‘I want it big’ about having more milk in his cup’
- ‘I hate marshmallows because they burn in my mouth’
- ‘I don’t like pear’
- ‘I love pear’ second child in response;
- ‘Oh, my favourite’s gone, I wanted apple’ happily more is forthcoming;
- ‘I washed my face with water’
- ‘Have we got seconds’ about fruit
- ‘But I didn’t even go to the toilet yet’ when his name was called out for snack’.
4. Observations – Positive Relationships

Article 15
‘All children have the right to meet with other children and young people.’

Children’s relationships with each other as well as with the adults who care for them, and to whom they are most attached, are central to children’s well being. Positive, respectful relationships will help simulate children’s empathy and self-awareness, support the development of their capabilities and are, in fact, essential for healthy human development (NSCDC, 2004).

The following themes were observed and heard in children’s interactions with each other and adults.

4.1a Respecting each other

Often
- Children know each other names;
- And they know adults’ names;
- Children hear each others names being used by adults;
- Children help each other and show each other how to do things;
- And are able to share and take turns independently;
- Children are supported to take turns in adult led experiences;
- Children cooperate with each other and work together well;
- They share jokes with each other and with adults;
- Children are affectionate towards each other and adults;
- Children are supported by adults in making decisions;
- And they respond positively to requests for help from adults;

Sometimes
- Children engage adults in their play and adults join in;
- Children entering into conflict over a particular resource or activity (often bikes);

Seldom
- Children needing and getting one to one adult support to cope (child new to setting);
- Older and younger siblings can spend time together;
- Children appear to be sad or upset for a prolonged period of time without adult support.

4.1b Children’s voices
- ‘You’re my friend;’
- ‘I’m E…….’s friend;’
- ‘Will you let me play?’
- ‘Take a picture of me’ to friend;
- ‘I pictured you, I pictured you’ about using the camera;
- ‘I’ve left my friend in there’ pointing to the bushes;
· 'I’m going to K…‘s house today’ pointing to friend;
· ‘J…… isn’t here today, J……’s on holiday’.
· ‘Say cheese F……‘ to adult as he takes her picture
· ‘Is my baby fine?’ goes over to her baby sister and hugs and kisses her;
· ‘It’s D……’s hat but I’m borrowing it’
· ‘I’m going to aim at M……’ about taking a picture of an adult;
· ‘I’ve got a good idea, maybe we can both go in’
· ‘I see a friend on there’ when looking at the pictures on the camera;
· ‘Maybe only the children who are behaving should have it’ about cake and an interesting reflection of adult modelling perhaps!

Some perspectives on relationships!
5. Observations – Enabling Environments

Article 31
‘Children have the right to relax, play and join in a wide range of activities.’

Children’s needs and interests are as unique as each of them. Children should have opportunities to have fun, test their skills, show their knowledge, take risks and develop competence. Children will experiment in different environments using all their senses and creativity. Children’s interactions with and in their environment are recognized as elemental to their development (Brown, cited in Brown & Taylor, 2008)

The following themes were identified that show children’s experiences of being independent and autonomous within their environment.

5.1a Developing confidence

Often
- Children know where to look for different equipment;
- Children are confident to begin looking;
- Children know what to do to get ready to do different activities;
- They know what to do to clear up spilt water, paint or other mess;
- Children are able to choose where to play;
- And they can access a majority of resources independently;
- Children understand the setting’s routines;
- They are confident to make suggestions and offer their own ideas;

Sometimes
- Children are able to help themselves to food and drink when they are hungry or thirsty;
- Children are able to access toilets independently outside the room base;
- Children are helped understand what happens next through visual and/or audio clues;
- Children use sand timers to monitor themselves and each other with some turn taking activities;

Seldom
- Children have opportunities to use real equipment for specific tasks e.g. metal knives to cut apples;
- Children access labels with their names on to put on their own pictures or models;
- Children can choose how they listen to a story – lying down if they want to;
5.1b Children’s voices

- ‘I can do it’ about pouring water into cup at snack time;
- ‘There’s three allowed here’ about water play looking at label, ‘That’s OK there’s three’;
- ‘I don’t know where the thingy is’, (hole punch), looking for it on the trolley, ‘Ah, here it is’;
- ‘We can do that ourselves, all we need is pots of glue and some...’ thinks and then goes to the drawer and takes out some tissue paper;
- ‘I can make the best sandwich in the world’;
- ‘Watch this, I’ll show you how to do it’;
- ‘I finding it easy’ about balancing on one leg and ‘I try again’ when his foot goes down;
- ‘I’m going to write your name’ and proceeds to mark make;
- ‘In there’ to another child about where the scissors are;
- ‘Do you know, I’m making a bed now’;
- ‘It’s the wrong way’ to adult about sleeves on coat;
- ‘I can write my name myself’ and puts pen to paper;
- ‘I’m going to do something’ goes to collect some junk materials, ‘I’m going to make a bus’;
- ‘I’m going to wash my hands now’ taking herself to bathroom;

What we can do by ourselves
6. Observations – Playing and Learning

Article 31
‘Children have the right to relax, play and join in a wide range of activities.’

Children need to play – research suggests a connection between brain development and play; mammals with bigger brains play more (Brotherson, 2005). Children appear to be able to play anywhere and utilize whatever is available to them, with amazing feats of imagination. Play helps children to make sense of their world but ‘above all, play is fun and it makes learning fun’ (Ashton & Lewis, 2002).

The following themes were observed in children’s play opportunities and captured in their comments.

6.1a Playing & exploring

Often
- A wide range of opportunities/experiences available to the children both inside and outside;
- A mix of child initiated and adult led activity – with an emphasis on child initiated;
- High concentration levels when children become really involved in their play;
- Children have access to grass outside;
- Being interested in the natural world (e.g. insects);
- Children are able to pedal bikes fast.

Sometimes
- Free flow access between indoor and outdoor environments;
- Children are able to pedal bikes to pedal up and down ramps;
- Children are able to play ‘rough and tumble’ games;
- Children playing imaginary games;
- Children able to play in bushes and shrubs in outside environment;
- And they have ongoing access to a water outside by using a water butt;
- Children able to jump off slides or high apparatus;
- And can slide down head first;
- Children investigate independently by taking objects apart;
- Children who are fidgety when sitting still for long periods (adult led);

Seldom
- Older and younger siblings can play together;
- Children have access to trees and/or bushes;
- Children are able to engage in play where they get muddy and/or wet;
- Children appear overwhelmed or confused by questions that adults ask.
6.1b Children’s voices

- 'I like all the things at nursery’ in response to a question;
- ‘Watch this, I’ll show you how to do it’ about hula hoop;
- ‘This is my tree house;’
- ‘I want to go bump down’ about being on the see saw;
- ‘I can hear the sea’ holding a plastic cup to her ear;
- ‘Look what I found, a fir cone;’
- ‘Look what I found – a ladybird;’
- ‘We have to crack it’ about egg into cake mix;
- ‘That’s all my hard work’ about picked up paper;
- I’m going to make a sandcastle and I need lots and lots of children to help me;’
- ‘There’s four girls and four boys’ looking at children on table with her;
- ‘Watch me’ throwing two balls in the air;
- ‘I’m a witch now;’
- ‘Now I’m matching up the clock’ holding a picture of a clock face towards the clock on the wall;
- ‘I know where eggs come from – chickens’ following a conversation about buying eggs at the shop with an adult;
- ‘Best of all we love writing;’
- ‘And we love playing;’
- ‘It’s making a river’, ‘It’s going around my shoes’, ‘We probably need to put the bucket back’ and ‘It’s probably getting deeper’, one child providing a commentary on his experimentations with water.

'Unpotting' plants
7. Analysis of Observations

It is really important to acknowledge that these observations were just a ‘snapshot’ of some children’s experiences of their early years settings in Bristol. In addition it is essential to remember that a wide variety of settings were visited, from child minders homes to church halls to purpose built buildings, and understand that opportunities for some children may have been recognized as ‘sometimes’ or ‘seldom’ due to the limitations of the duration of the visit. It should also be recognised that some of the children, where visits took place in September and October, had not been in their setting very long.

The information from the observations and children’s voices will be considered in relation to the Articles of the UNCRC identified for each theme, in an attempt to determine whether children’s rights are fundamental within their early years provision. It is important to state that children’s rights are recognised as a ‘special case’ by UNICEF (1991) because children are dependant on adults for many of their entitlements. The purpose of this consultation was to try and understand children’s experiences of life in their setting and not to make judgements about the quality of the provision.

7.1 Unique Children
Observations took account of individual and inclusive opportunities for children as well as aspects relating to their physical and emotional well being. Articles 12 and 14 of the UNCRC were felt to be particularly relevant in the context of this theme. Children’s right to be heard in areas that affect them and also to think and say what they feel needs to be recognised as the essence of what makes each child unique.

- It was evident that a majority of children feel confident to speak freely and share ideas about themselves and what they are doing. There was evidence of ongoing dialogue between children and with adults in the settings.
- The importance of what happens to children in their own lives came through strongly and there were lots of opportunities for children to be heard in this respect.
- Children’s conversations and comments about themselves and their families show that this is most important to them. This remained constant regardless of how long children had been in their setting and is rooted in the essential concept of self identity.
- Typically children were good at negotiating ideas with each other. However, fewer opportunities were observed for children to enter into meaningful negotiation with adults and to have their ideas acted upon.
- Typically, children were well equipped for specific activities or opportunities. However, on some occasions the tools children had were not fit for purpose (blunt scissors and hole punches, missing puzzle pieces) and it is also necessary to consider the impact of wearing aprons, or other garments, that are a bad fit, on individual children’s play.
7.2 Positive Relationships
Article 15 of the UNCRC, which recognises children’s right to be among and play with other children, needs to be considered in the context of positive and respectful relationships both with other children and with adults.

- Children’s friendships and relationships with each other are clearly very important to children. This is born out by the number of photographs children took of each other (more than of anything else) discussed in Part 8 of this report.
- The importance to children of their families was clearly identified previously in section 7.1. There appear to be few opportunities for different age siblings to spend time together if they happen to be in the same setting.
- Children’s relationships with adults are also obviously significant to them. It was particularly good to see evidence of reciprocal affection, humour and exuberance in a majority of children’s interactions with adults.
- On some occasions conflict between children was observed. More typically this was helpfully supported by adults, encouraging children to think through the issues and find solutions. However, sometimes there were not opportunities for children to resolve their own problems effectively if adults made quick decisions about what should happen.
- Occasionally children appeared disengaged with the opportunities available.
- Very rarely children were observed as upset or sad for longer periods of time during the visit with little evidence of adult support to help them resolve their feelings. It is essential to consider the impact of this on children’s well being regardless of the initial cause.

7.3 Enabling Environments
Early years settings should have stimulating environments that help children to develop confidently. Article 31 of the UNCRC recognises children’s rights to have access to different environments that provide a range of opportunities.

- A majority of children appeared confident in their environments. Children were able to find and use resources independently, knew where things belonged and in settings where there was access to both the indoors and the outside, they moved freely between these.
- Children were typically familiar with the routines of their setting and where children were new to their setting some useful strategies were observed to
support children’s knowledge and understanding about what was going to happen next.

- Autonomy was supported when children had the freedom to move in and out of their nursery rooms into other indoor areas and where children had opportunities to go by themselves to the toilets.
- Risk taking opportunities were observed in some settings where children had opportunities to pedal bikes down ramps, jump off large apparatus or choose how they could come down the slide.
- Sometimes children had the opportunity to choose when they ate snack. However, sometimes lengthy ‘snack times’ were observed and this often resulted in some children becoming fidgety and restless.

Feeling comfortable

7.4 Playing and Learning
Play underpins the Early Years Foundation Stage, while Article 31 recognises children’s right to play and to have experiences across a wide range of activities. Children’s play is their work and children have the potential for really effective learning to take place when they are deeply engrossed in their play.

- Children had a wide variety of choice in their environments. Typically there were between 12 and 15 activities or opportunities to choose from; including water, sand, drawing, construction, large and small blocks, computers & other ICT, puzzles, home corner, role play, small world toys (dolls house, cars, trains, dinosaurs, castles, farms), playdough, gluing & sticking, painting, book corner, gloop; and children were typically free to access other resources from shelves and cupboards;
- Children had opportunities to play and explore outside in a majority of the settings visited. In a minority of setting children had free flow access between indoors and outside. In some settings children had controlled free flow access, when adults made decisions about the time the door was opened. In other settings, children had to play either inside or outside, the times decided by adults. It is important to recognise the constraints for some settings relating to proximity of outside space to inside, the area of the outside space compared to number of children in the setting and staff ratios.
• Some children had opportunities to explore and take risks in their outside space including hiding in bushes, climbing, jumping off high apparatus and experimenting when coming down a slide;
• Children had opportunities to initiate the majority of their own play across the settings visited. In some settings child initiated play was well supported by adults’ commentary and/or involvement. In some settings children appeared to be left to play while adults watched;
• Occasionally children appeared disengaged with the opportunities available;
• Many children had opportunities to do an adult led activity as a small group with their key person in the setting. These varied in relation to effectiveness, some small group times provided excellent opportunities to capture and share children’s ideas and thoughts but sometimes children were over-questioned and appeared confused or became silent.

Different opportunities
8. Children’s Photographs

‘In allowing children to distil the essence of their experience through the lens of the camera, we can gain real insights into their ideas, interests, feelings, schematic behaviours, friendships, preoccupations and more’

(Pace & Holmes, 2010; 6)

Cameras were used by children in 27 of the 32 settings visited. The cameras were used both indoors and outside in a majority of the settings – in 4 settings the camera was used only indoors. The camera was offered to children on a ‘take it in turns’ basis and typically all children who wished to participate had the opportunity to take some photographs. However, the number of pictures taken by individual children was not identified, which means that preferences will be weighted towards children who took the most pictures. The photographs were scrutinised following each visit to ensure that only photographs of children with permission were saved for possible inclusion in the report. However, all recognizable photographs were counted. The photographs were separated into three broad categories initially; people, places and ‘things’ with the following results overall:
- People – 1446 recognizable photographs;
- Places – 383 recognizable photographs;
- ‘Things’ – 944 recognizable photographs.

The term recognizable has been used to encompass photographs where images were blurred or partially captured pictures (e.g. half of the slide). Approximately a further one third of photographs were classified as unrecognizable. This included blank images as well as some that were impossible to put an interpretation on. The subjectivity involved in adult interpretation of the photographs must be acknowledged. However, discussions with some children, while they were using the camera, meant that information was anecdotally gathered relating to their intentions, which could be applied more generally.

A specific example of this was photographs of children’s feet, which initially was thought to be accidental. As the consultation progressed observable behaviours as well as children’s dialogue showed that they were intentionally taking pictures of their own feet. These photographs have been counted in the category ‘people’ then ‘child’.

‘I’m takin’ my boots’
The three categories of photographs were scrutinised again and it was felt relevant to define ‘people’ in relation to the number of photographs of children compared to adults. The category of ‘places’ was generally ascribed to a picture where the focus was very general e.g. a large portion of the room or garden. It was felt necessary to sub-divide the ‘things’ category into the activities or resources that were captured on camera. The tables below show this contextual data for the photographs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘People’</th>
<th>‘Places’</th>
<th>‘Things’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children: 971</td>
<td>Adults: 475</td>
<td>383</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3 – Photograph categories**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity/resource</th>
<th>No. of pictures</th>
<th>Activity/resource</th>
<th>No. of pictures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bikes/cars/scooters</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>Nature (e.g. trees, flowers)</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buggies/prams</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Sand</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large play equipment (e.g. climbing frames, large slides)</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Small play equipment (e.g. small slides, see saws, hoppers)</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loose parts (e.g. hoops, balls, cones)</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Water</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mud/earth activities</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Outside ‘Things’**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity/resource</th>
<th>No. of pictures</th>
<th>Activity/resource</th>
<th>No. of pictures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aeroplanes</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Musical instruments</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Other small world (e.g. dolls houses, dinosaurs)</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameras</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Painting</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cars/Garage</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Play dough</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer/whiteboards</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Puppets</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction (large &amp; small)</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>Puzzles</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crafts (e.g. sticking, cutting)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Role play</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dens</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Sand</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Single purpose plastic toys</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farms</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Threading</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Games (e.g. cards, dice)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Trains</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home corner</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Vegetable tray</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large dolls &amp; prams</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Water</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live animals</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Inside/Outside ‘Things’**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity/resource</th>
<th>No. of pictures</th>
<th>Activity/resource</th>
<th>No. of pictures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall total for inside/outside things:</td>
<td>444</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall total for outside things:</td>
<td>431</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>875</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4 – Breakdown of ‘Things’ category**
The remaining 69 of the 944 photographs depict children’s fascination with pattern. Initially, when considering what children were taking pictures of it was thought that the pictures of fence panels, paving slabs and other patterns were ‘places’ of interest to them. However, a recurring theme became evident as the consultation progressed, which was supported by conversations with some children and how they identified what they were going to photograph. Some of the pictures taken by children, which have been categorised into others areas, especially construction, might also represent children’s fascination with pattern and shape.

Intriguing patterns

8.1 Limitations to analysis of photographs
It would be a mistake to draw conclusions about children’s preferences, in their early years settings, simply by recognising the quantity of photographs corresponding to any category. Recognition of children’s fascination with pattern and shape as well as nature is significant. It was felt that the following factors also influenced children’s choices:

- Individual use of the camera – some children took just a few picture while others had second and third turns during the visit;
- Maturity of children in relation to use of camera – it was more usual in settings with higher numbers of children under 3 years that more pictures were classified as unrecognizable;
- Access to and availability of resources on the day of the visit – typically a majority of children did not seek out resources or activities that were not obviously available to them;
- Children’s previous knowledge and skills in relation to cameras – typically where children stated a knowledge of taking photographs more recognisable pictures of ‘things’ were taken.

Despite these limitations in relation to the data, it is of interest to consider some specific ideas.

8.2 Analysis of photographic data - people
It is clear from the number of photographs that children take the most pictures of people, and of that number took more of each other than adults. In all of the settings where cameras were used children took pictures of each other and in all but three settings the ratio of approximately two thirds children to one third adults was the typical result of the total number of pictures taken in the ‘people’ category. When children took photographs of their friends these often
tended to be very close up shots compared to the photographs of adults. This was typical across the different settings.

![Friend's faces](image)

**Friend's faces**

Perhaps the most important idea to deduce from this information is that children's friends, and the children they come to know while in a setting, are extremely important to them. The importance of being connected with other children is recognised in Article 15 of the UNCRC. Friendships support children's sense of well being and feelings of belonging. Children have opportunities to develop their physical and emotional health in the context of their relationships with each other in their setting's environment.

Despite the limitations recognised in section 8.1, it is interesting to compare this data with that gathered from older children in out of school play provision during this consultation. Those children also took more pictures of other children when compared with adults and actually stated 'playing with friends' or 'being with my friends' as the best thing about their play setting. A correlation between these ideas across the age groups could therefore be suggested.

Secondly, the number of pictures taken of adults is also of some consequence. More pictures were taken of adults (475) than of any of the individual activities or resources ('things') that children chose to photograph during the consultation. The significance of adults in children's lives cannot be over emphasised.

![And the adults are important too!](image)

**And the adults are important too!**
The final thought in relation to ‘people’ is the number of times that children deliberately took pictures of the parts of themselves that they could see. Unlike older children, who understood that holding the camera at arms length meant that they could take a picture of their own face, younger children took pictures of their more obviously available feet and sometime legs or hands (62 pictures). This was often a cause of excitement and humour for children when they realised that they could capture themselves in a photograph. Children often requested to specifically review these pictures. The premise for this could easily be rooted in the importance of self identity to children. The term is not one that children would use to describe why it was important to take pictures of their own feet but positive feelings about oneself are central for self esteem and confidence.

8.3 Analysis of photographic data - places
‘Places’, was the category with the least number of photographs according to the interpretation. Pictures were put into this category when the content of the photograph was too broad to identify a specific choice of activity or resource and ‘people’ appeared incidentally. The pictures are of both the inside and outside places that children played in.

More pictures were typically taken in outside environments where children had either free flow access or were specifically offered opportunities to play outdoors. There is a similar ratio difference to the ‘people’ category, with a two thirds; outside environment, to one third; indoors environment, split. It could be inferred from these numbers that children have a preference to be outside but much more specific research would need to be done in these settings to confirm this possibility. However, wider research does recognise the unique relationship that children have with outside spaces and the importance of natural environments for children (Lester & Maudsley, 2005; Tovey, 2007)
A second preference for subject content in photographs was identified from this category. Children often took pictures of their access to drinks and snack, particularly where this was offered in an ongoing way for all or part of the visit. Snack bars, spaces and tables cropped up regularly in the children’s places pictures.

Food and water, of course, are fundamental to health and well being and are also recognised as a right for all children in Article 24 of the UNCRC (UNICEF, 1991). It was not felt relevant to specifically use Article 24 in the context of this consultation because England is a developed and wealthy country, without starving populations. However, it is appropriate to acknowledge the importance of food and drink in children’s own lives, which has been reflected in their choice of ‘places’ to photograph.

8.4 Analysis of photographic data - ‘things’
Similarly to the two previous categories, and perhaps especially with this category (where photographs have been attributed to specific resources or activities), it is important to recognise the limitations of the data and not interpret the numbers too literally. However, despite this the numbers do raise some interesting questions.

Bikes and other transporters that children use in the outside environment would appear to be particularly fascinating to children. 97 pictures of bikes, just over 20% of all outside pictures of things, were identified from 13 of the settings visited and were not all consecutively taken, indicating that different children took these pictures. However, it is also interesting to reflect that some bikes and other ride on objects in outdoor spaces were observed as a noteworthy cause of conflict between some children on a number of occasions. This raises the question of whether children prefer bikes to other resources or do they simply take more pictures of them because they are preoccupied by coping with the emotions of waiting for their turn?
Large play apparatus was another surprisingly often photographed resource in outside environments, amounting to just under 20% of the pictures taken out of doors. A question this raised was; do children prefer large and typically fixed equipment to other resources outside or whether, because it was large and fixed, it became an obvious photographic choice? More research would need to be done with these children to determine the answer. However, children did take pictures of other children using this type of equipment, which were typically categorised as ‘people’ due to the close up nature of the photograph.

Swinging down the slide

Less surprising perhaps, was the quantity of pictures taken of smaller, moveable play equipment and open ended resources that children accessed in their outdoor environments such as balls, hoops, cones, boxes and wooden blocks. Loose parts have been described as flexible elements in children’s play environments or ‘the fuel that feeds the fire of children’s imaginations and playful intentions’ (Children’s Scrap Store – Bristol, 2009).

Loose parts
The number of pictures that children took of their natural environment is also worthy of comment. These pictures, totaling 137, amounted to approximately 35% of all recognizable pictures taken outside. This supports the idea of children’s affinity with the natural world. A few of these pictures were actually taken from the inside, looking through windows, to the outside; showing the scope of children’s interest even when indoors. Trees and flowers were specifically photographed where children had access to them. A connection could also be made with children’s fascination with patterns and shape, in the close up views of tree trunks, leaves and shadows.

Pictures of the outside world

Indoors, the numbers of photographs taken of different resources and activities were typically more similar. The exceptions were construction (69 pictures) and drawing (32). However, it was evident from some of the pictures children took (see p16 for examples relating to construction) of ‘things’ indoors that there could be a significant overlap between this and their interest in pattern and shapes. It also might be argued that drawing materials (pencils, crayons, wax crayons, chalk, felt pens) were more readily accessible to children, than other pattern making resources such as paint, in a majority of settings. It is important to recognise the possibility that many photographs could translate into more than communicating a preference for a particular activity or resource but rather show evidence of how children enjoy learning.

Close ups
Children’s evident interest in pattern, shape and sequence became a clear theme in photographs from across the different settings. Research suggests that patterning is an essential skill for supporting early mathematical development (Waters, circa 2005). Te Whariki (1996), the New Zealand early years curriculum, recognises that children need to understand the concept of pattern to help them explore and make sense of the world. Children reinforce this idea through their continually evolving schemas, or patterns of repeated behaviours, that make their learning visible to adults (McGrath, 2010). Play can provide ideal opportunities for children to engage with rich and sophisticated mathematical concepts, providing these experiences are appropriately and meaningfully connected to their world (Fox, 2005).

1. Noticing patterns & shape in everyday places

2. Noticing patterns in size, sequence & shape in everyday experiences
And finally, the following sequence of photographs was taken by one three year old in the outdoor environment of their setting in early October 2010.

1, 2, 3,
4, 5, 6,
7, 8 and 9

It is impossible to remain unimpressed by the knowledge of and fascination with pattern, number and sequence so clearly displayed. Despite it being harder to interpret 4, 5, 6 and 7 in the individual photographs, the pattern that emerged from the group of consecutive pictures was clear. It is essential to acknowledge when this visit took place and recognise that the greatest influence on this child’s interest and understanding of pattern, shape and sequence to date, must be their family and life at home.

While a very brief consideration has been given to what can be understood from children’s photographs in relation to their mathematical interests and schematic behaviour, this is really beyond the scope of the consultation. However, the significance of each child’s cultural capital must not be underestimated and this should prompt reflection in relation to the experiences and opportunities that are offered to children in their early years settings.
9. Final Thoughts

There are a number of interesting ideas to contemplate in relation to the findings of this small scale consultation. Firstly, it is clear that most of the children visited had positive experiences of their early years provision but useful also to acknowledge how much young children relish the experience of being with other children, and speculate that the opportunities for this engagement provided by settings is fundamental to children's positive experiences. In other words, nearly all of the children appear to be happy because they are playing and involved with other children.

Another perception that needs consideration is the role of adults in early years settings. This consultation was not about making judgements or measuring statutory requirements relating to practice or children’s outcomes. However, as the consultation was framed in the context of children’s rights and UNICEF (1991) recognises that children’s entitlements to these are very dependant upon adults wanting what is best for children, it is important to say something about what adults do. Sometimes adults in some settings appeared less confident in understanding their own role when children were initiating play. Occasionally, some children’s experiences appeared less than purposeful or dull. Warm, sensitive and responsive relationships with ‘listening’ adults who promoted autonomy in their environment were central to the most positive experiences for children, and were the most helpful in fulfilling adult obligations in respect of children’s rights.

Finally, the depth and breadth of all children’s unique cultural capital is something that must not be underestimated. Children’s awareness of their own life experiences is fundamental to this and should be obviously valued in an ongoing way. In addition, children’s opportunities to show each other and adults their good ideas, their creativity, their interests, their knowledge, their skills, their own particular view of the world; nurtures and shapes children’s enjoyment and gain from their early years experience. Children do have a right to think and believe what they want, providing this does not interfere with others enjoying their rights and early years settings are well placed to find out exactly what children do think is important, in their earliest years.

Comparing hands
10.1 Recommendations
Three recommendations have been made that reflect the analyses of the materials gathered for this consultation.

Recommendation 1
A recurring theme in children’s dialogue was identity, family and home life, across the range of settings visited. Recommendation 1 suggests the following good practice observed in a minority of settings:
- Children’s use of transitional objects;
- Pictures of children from home on display;
- Pictures of children’s family members on display;
- Siblings of different ages spending time together in the setting.

Recommendation 2
Children who were the most confident and happy were children with high levels of independence nurtured by adults. Recommendation 2 suggests the following good practice that was observed in varying degrees of frequency:
- Water butts outside for children to access by themselves;
- Use of sand timers by children to monitor their own time with popular resources;
- Independent access to water and food;
- Children able to prepare their own food;
- Children able to make their own decisions about how resources can be used.

Recommendation 3
Children’s photography has played a large part in this consultation. Not only has it provided children with opportunities to capture some of their experiences in their provision, it has also offered an insight into children’s worlds through their eyes. Recommendation 3 is that cameras are made more available for children’s own use on a regular basis as this currently varies from setting to setting. Practical ideas from settings where children have used or will use cameras include:
- Taking a picture of each child sequentially before they use the camera so adults know which child has taken which pictures;
- Using children’s commentary about their photographs in children’s assessments;
- Using children’s photographs to engage in conversations with children about what they think and know;
- Using children’s photographs to show parents children’s ideas and perceptions in the setting.
10.2 Conclusion
For a majority of children in the settings visited during this consultation their experience of their early years provision is largely happy and enjoyable. Children are typically offered a wide variety of opportunities within their settings, including having friends and playmates, which for them is extremely important. Play and learning experiences within their environments does recognise and value children’s cultural capital as well as help them to develop confidence, independence and self esteem. However, when considering children’s provision in the context of their rights, it is important to reflect upon whether and how this happens.

Some of the identifiers for effective rights based experiences or opportunities for children were listed as ‘sometimes’ or ‘seldom’ seen. Equally, and happily for children, the same was true for the experiences where children’s rights were less obviously considered or met. Children’s right to be with other children and have access to a wide range of activities were clearly evident. However, the situation is more ambiguous when considering whether all children are routinely consulted about their knowledge and their opportunities, and if their views and ideas are acted upon. For some children, this is their experience, but not for all.

It is important to reflect again upon Article 3 and recognise that children can only be fully in receipt of their rights, when the adults with them focus on what is best for children. The starting point for this is to return to the question identified at the beginning of this consultation report:-

‘What does it feel like to be a child here?’

What does it feel like to be a child here?
References


Clark, A., McQuail, S. & Moss, P. (2003) *Exploring the Field of Listening to and Consulting with Young Children*; Nottingham: DfES.

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