Conversations between child and family professionals and children: what shapes the adult's ability to hear children's perspectives?

Marilyn Casley

Abstract

Purpose – *Many professionals who work with children champion the concept of child participation. However, professionals' attempts at listening to children to understand their perspectives and include them in decision-making are often difficult or missing. This paper aims to report on a study that examined the lived experiences of child and family professionals and children, aged five to nine years, to understand what happens in their everyday conversations and interactions and what is needed to prepare pre-service professionals to uphold children's right to have their views heard and considered in decision-making.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Narrative Inquiry was used as the methodology for this study as it is a useful research methodology for developing interventions for practice. Narrative Inquiry methodology allows the researcher to learn from their participants, and to validate them as knowledgeable in their own lives and as contributors to change.*

Findings – *The findings indicated that everyday conversations and interactions that take place between professionals and children influence an adult's ability to hear a child's perspective. The key findings indicate that for adults to hear a child's perspective and include them in decision-making, there is a need to build trust and acknowledge how power plays a role in having meaningful conversations with children.*

Originality/value – *To better prepare the child and family practice workforce, they will need theoretical knowledge and practice skills in developing self-awareness about how children are viewed, building reciprocal relationships with children and creating safe spaces for conversations to take place.*

Keywords *Child participation, Child–adult conversations, Children, Child and family professionals, Workforce preparation, Narrative Inquiry*

Paper type *Research paper*

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Introduction

The child's rights agenda proposed in response to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child United Nations (1989) has influenced governments to consider the voice of children in decision-making, where children are seen as citizens and have a right to be heard. This article proposes that to move this agenda forward there is still a need for developing knowledge and practice skills for child-facing professionals on how to engage effectively with children and to do so in a manner that brings about change.

Specifically, citizen rationale states that citizenship in its legal formation is fundamental expression of membership and is based on the relationship between an individual and the state (Rubenstein and Field, 2013; Wyness, 2018). Assumptions made about children's capacity for participation are often seen as incompatible with this citizenship rationale and

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have recently become a much contested aspect of a child's legal status (Wyness, 2018). The Convention on the Rights of the Child does give children rights to participation that are relevant to children's citizenship and have the intention of engaging children in civic and political function. However, as children have no political rights, which in general are viewed as the key feature of citizenship (Rubenstein and Field, 2013; Wyness, 2018), leads to ambiguity and often stops us from moving forward.

The literature also suggests that there are several challenges to child participation, as noted by Bessell (2011); Diaz *et al.* (2019); Hart (1992); and Lundy (2007). In their attempts to develop models for child participation have collectively made distinctions between consultation and decision-making with children. They suggest for children to be part of decision-making time to build relationships, create safe spaces for shared decision-making and sharing power in the decision-making process is necessary. However, the literature on the progress of child participation in decision-making indicates we still have not reached what could be seen as genuine participation in decision-making with children (Lundy, 2018; Diaz *et al.*, 2019).

We also know that relationships between children and adults have changed over time and context. As a result of rapid changes in contemporary society, the way child–adult relationships are viewed requires different ways of thinking about children and childhood. Qvortrup (1999, 2008, 2011) argued that to understand children we must firstly consider that childhood develops as a structural form irrespective of children themselves, therefore, only to ask children about their opinions is not sufficient for their voices to be heard.

Even though the recognition of children's rights has evolved over time, children are often overlooked as they are still perceived as too young to have their views taken seriously. To listen to children's voice for the purpose of understanding their perspective and include them in decision-making, it is important that we are attuned to the forces that construct and reconstruct childhood for them (Davies *et al.*, 2023; Cassidy *et al.*, 2017; Rubenstein and Field, 2013; Qvortrup, 1999, 2008, 2011). Choosing to ignore the minority status of children renders the notion of hearing children's perspectives potentially impossible. Change in the child–adult relationship is not static; therefore, it is possible to think and act differently towards children and the way adults think about childhood. Thinking and acting differently can be made possible by uncovering the way children see themselves as individuals and as a social group and their aspirations for change (Cassidy *et al.*, 2017). A project undertaken by Cassidy *et al.* (2017) children from several countries and across five continents were asked about their perception of being a child, childhood and how they see their place in society. Children's responses clearly indicated children see themselves as having a lower status to adults and did not necessarily see themselves as part of the wider society. As discussed by Cassidy *et al.* (2017), listening to children about how they view childhood gives us some insights to critically reflect on to take children's views seriously the "politics of difference" must be addressed, how we communicate with children is paramount.

Communication with children has been recognised as an important aspect of professional practice across many disciplines and in different contexts (Lundy, 2007, 2018; Mannion, 2007; Wall *et al.*, 2019). In reviewing the literature on communication between professionals and children, there is an interest in how professionals communicate with children, as well as an interest in listening to children's voices (Clark and Moss, 2001; Fitzgerald and Graham, 2011; Lundy, 2007; Mannion, 2007; Mason and Danby, 2011; Storò, 2013; Ulvik, 2014; Ulvik and Gulbrandsen, 2015). The literature about communication between professionals and children, however, is much more limited and often refers to how professionals talk to a child about something. This kind of communication places more emphasis on the adult telling the child about something rather than an exchange of meaning in a conversation between the professional and a child or group of children.

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Professional practice that only uses result- or goal-driven communication gives rise to some voices not being heard or being marginalised in the communication process. For example, a conversation between a professional and a child that are differently positioned, one with the holder of expert knowledge and one in need of support, constitutes a power differential. Hence, for the conversation to be meaningful the professional needs to consider their position in the communication process (Mannion, 2007; Ulvik, 2014; Wall *et al.*, 2019). This "expert" model of communication is based on the "willingness" of a person, in this case the child, to follow those that have been accredited with power derived from cultural norms on how adulthood and childhood are produced (Qvortrup, 1999; Qvortrup, 2008; Qvortrup, 2011; Cassidy *et al.*, 2017). This power differential reduces the likelihood of mutual understanding between an adult and a child being achieved.

If importance is placed on meaning-making rather than on technical, hierarchical communication processes (Habermas, 1987; Holman, 2000; Pearce and Cronen, 1980) with a view that language and communication are embedded and embodied in time and place and are based on the meanings that populate an individual's social world, there is a better chance that meaning-making between professionals and children can occur. In their examination of professional practice in Norway, Ulvik and Gulbrandsen (2015, p. 213) argued, "that everyday life, both as a concept and as an object of study, may help frame professional practices in ways that expand the professional's attentiveness to a great variation of inputs from the child".

This type of communication places children in a different position, one where they are credited with the competencies to co-construct meaning with professionals about their identity and their social world.

Moreover, communication is complex. Ruch (2014) suggested that the complex nature of conversations with children is on a conceptual continuum, where some professionals see children as vulnerable and in need of protection and others see them as competent and strive to empower children to articulate their views and include them in decision-making. Despite these two ends of the pendulum, what is evident in the literature is that for conversations between professionals and children to be meaningful it requires an interactional adult partner and knowledge of the individual child's everyday life and how they make sense of it (Storò, 2013; Ulvik, 2014; Ulvik and Gulbrandsen, 2015; Van Nijnatten, 2013). From this perspective, children's views are heard through the co-construction of meaning between the professional and the child.

Meaning-making conversational processes that support the establishment of common ground are designed for the power in the relationship to diminish. However, some children will have less experience of these kind of conversations with an adult and may therefore have difficulty in expressing their thoughts and experiences (Van Nijnatten and Jongen, 2015; Wall *et al.*, 2019). For example, in dialogue with a professional about negative experiences, reluctance to talk about it by the child may be a result of the trauma itself, or the child may be reluctant to take a position that is deemed as a "breach of trust" between the child and his or her parents or caregivers (Van Nijnatten and Jongen, 2015). Hence the child is less likely to disclose their thoughts and experiences in fear of retribution by those deemed close to them.

Confusion about the role of the professional by the child, in not understanding what the person might do with the information, may also cause the child to be reluctant to talk. Confusion may also be a result of their historical pattern of conversations with adults, so the child expects a similar pattern that fits with their previous experiences (Blatchford *et al.*, 2016; Soto *et al.*, 2010; Van Nijnatten and Jongen, 2015). Children can also be excluded from what might be perceived as an adult conversation, where children may not be told about a dying relative, a pending divorce or are told made up things about sex and sexuality (Lundy, 2007, Van Nijnatten, 2013) as children are perceived to be too young or

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innocent to understand. Professionals may exercise similar restraint in the kinds of conversations they have with children as they are considered as vulnerable beings or victims to be protected. As discussed by Davies *et al.* (2023), parents and many health professionals may want to protect the child from the burden of decision-making about their health. Furthermore, many professionals must consider the balance between the parent's right to legal decision-making with the rights of the child. This can lead to conflict and differences of opinion, which may also influence a professional's unwillingness to participate in open conversation with children.

Research question

This study explored the research question:

RQ1. What shapes an adult's ability to hear children's perspectives?

It is significant line of inquiry because it explores child and professional interactions and relationships needed to move forward in the child participation deliberation.

Method

Narrative Inquiry. This study was conducted over a two-year period commencing in 2017. Narrative Inquiry (NI) qualitative methodology was used to explore the research question as it aligns with the value for co-construction in communication and can therefore offer robust insights for implication for practice. In NI research the primary goal is not to secure a representative sample, but rather to go deep within each participants' lived experiences to hear the narration of their own lived experience as they understand them (Clandinin, 2013; Cousins, 2009).

NI is also a relational process and that ultimately frames the research process. According to Clandinin *et al.* (2016, p. 36), "researchers are not only the describers of participant's stories but are "actively in relation with the participants". This relational process allowed the researcher of this study to move away from categorising children according to developmental age expectations to recognising children as actors in their own lives (Wyness, 2018). As NI methodology is a relational process, the co-constructing of meaning gave voice to the child participants as they were validated as knowledgeable about their own lives and were contributors to change on how adults listen and respond to them; moving them from a subordinate role to one where they were seen as competent contributors to the research.

NI is also useful in honouring the professional's lived experience while studying practice. As professional knowledge is constructed with historical, political, economic and moral dimensions, hearing the professionals' practice stories helped to uncover the layers of meaning across time, social context and place. By participants telling, retelling and reliving their practice stories change emerges, where the possibility of moving beyond those stories as fixed are made possible (Clandinin, 2013, 2016; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016). Thus, as the participants' stories sat alongside each other, possibilities for change were illuminated.

Ethics. The study received ethics approval from Griffith University's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) in 2011 (2011/661). The study strictly adheres to principles of voluntary participation, informed consent and assent, permission to record and deidentified research outputs.

Participants. In this study, the lived experiences of four child-facing professionals and three children were collected over a two-year period. The selection criteria of the adult participants included:

- completion of the Griffith University's Bachelor of Child and Family Studies; and
- employed in child and family services.

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The four adults who agreed to take part worked in schools, child protection, residential care and childcare services.

They were recruited by contacting Bachelor of Child and Family Studies alumni students via email and through telephone contact with students whom the researcher had remained in contact with since their graduation. Out of seven respondents, two female and two male participants were recruited. Their ages ranged between 21 and 50 years at time of contact.

The children were purposively selected where a relationship with the researcher had already been established. Dockett and Perry (2007, p. 52), in their research with children, said "knowing the children and their knowing the researcher, as well as their context, are essential parts of constructing meaning and the interpretation of the data". In their work, with children and young people, Clandinin *et al.* (2016) are very mindful of who to invite into a study of lived experience, as it is not the intention to focus on a particular experience in time but rather to go alongside the participant in their experiences overtime. Hence, the opportunity to go alongside the children in their experience meant having access to them and their families over time was important. The selection criteria for the children included:

- the child participants were known to the researcher, with a sense of trust already established; and
- the researcher had access to each child, to observe them in different contexts.

The three children were recruited from speaking to five interested children known to the researcher via social and work relationships with their parents. Two male and one female were chosen with an age range from five to nine years at first contact.

Data collection

Over the two-year period, several research data collection strategies were used to help gain a nuanced and comprehensive perspective of the participants. The strategies included: a chronicled life-line drawing, two semi-structured interviews, informal conversations and a researcher's journal. All research tools were used with the adult and child participants as follows.

The chronicled life-line drawing was used as a reflective tool to explore the relationships, connections, past experiences, important events and the significance of place of each participant. It provided a starting point for establishing how each participant created meaning out of situations in their life and created an opportunity to find out what might be significant in each participant's social context. The life-line drawings were included in the first interview, where the participants were asked to talk about a time they had a conversation with a child/adult.

The second semi-structured interview was designed to seek clarification and an opportunity for each participant to re-narrate their story. Along with the first storied account, this interview was used to produce the final storied account for each of the participants. As NI happens in the midst of ongoing experiences, bringing back the storied accounts (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin and Huber, 2010) for further clarification was also used in the analysis of the data. Ongoing conversations with the participants were used as a means of pulling together some of the commonalities, differences or tensions within and across the storied accounts. In total, there were 16 data collection episodes.

Particularly for this study, the researcher found the informal conversations with the children produced the richest dialogue; consistent with one of the key findings that everyday conversation and interactions between professionals and children influence an adult's ability to hear a child's perspective. Thus, this rich and innovative study enabled the researcher to become the teller of the stories in a negotiated partnership with participants to co-construct their storied accounts.

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Data analysis

Two waves of analysis were conducted to make meaning of the field texts as they were collected and written into storied accounts. The first wave of the analysis examined each participant's lived experience to identify each participant's voice. In the first wave of analysis, the three-dimensional NI space of temporality, sociality and place (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) was used. The combination of what is told, how it is told and its social location gives voice to each of the stories. This makes explicit the participant's views, feelings and understandings and the events that were significant in their impact on the individual over time and place. The second wave of analysis was a thematic analysis for discovering the emerging patterns that appear within and across the stories.

Results

There was evidence from the participants' stories that everyday conversations and interactions that take place between professionals and children influence an adult's ability to hear a child's perspective. The most revealing insight was the complexity and challenges that exist within the broader political, cultural, institutional, social and economic metanarratives that enabled or constrained child professional conversations and in turn limited the children's right to be heard and their perspectives taken seriously.

The themes and sub-themes that resonated within and across the participants' stories refer to what is similar, as well as to the differences, gaps and tensions that exist within and across their stories. The overall themes related to opportunities to build trusting relationships and the acknowledgment of how power plays a role in having meaningful conversations influenced both the children and the professionals in their ability and opportunities to have meaningful conversations with each other. The sub-themes for the children and the adults will be presented separately.

Child and adult relationships that build trust

The children in this study expressed their understanding of a trust in a child–adult relationship by how they felt about the conversations and interaction they had with the adults in their everyday lives. Sub-themes included:

- attitudes of adults towards them;
- safe environments for conversations to take place; and
- playful behaviours.

Children spoke about trust, in terms of what they liked or disliked about the way adults interacted with them. Trust, for them, was displayed by an adult being kind and supportive, acknowledging them for doing the "right thing" and giving them "important" things to do, indicating the adult trusted them to perform a task and the child trusts the adult that supports them on how to be successful in their everyday lives. For example, Toby spoke about conversations he had with his cricket coaches. He said they consulted with him:

> Yeah, they ask me what I think, and they ask me where I'd like to bat. They're really good because they are not like, you have to bat first, and that person has to go there. They're always asking somebody, my opinion, or somebody's opinion. It's really good.

He also spoke of one of his teachers that he felt trusted him by giving him important things to do:

> There's one teacher, in one week he's chosen me twice to do pretty important stuff. I think he sort of knows I can, he goes, that boy there, [he] knows he's [Toby] trustful. He knows I'll get the job done and stuff like that.

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Toby also spoke about school not always being a safe place. He felt it was a strict and serious place and he did not really want to talk with teachers about what he did on the weekend or things like that. He said, “not everyone is your friend in the classroom”. Olivia mentioned several times that she did not like it when an adult shouted at her:

> Like if you have a teacher that’s really strict, you don’t want them to shout at you. You want them to be nice and not shout. Just give them [children] the work and then if it’s not as they [teacher] expected, you know you, just give it back to them [children] and say, please go and do this again.

The child participants indicated that when they were given responsibility by an adult, there was a feeling of empowerment for them; presenting them with the notion that the adult sees them as capable and willing to treat them equitably. For example, Toby liked the notion of being given responsibility and being able to do things for himself.

> I can do my homework on my own now, if we get a card, like in nearly every task we do. We need to sign it off to say we are finished it. So, then she’ll [teacher] sign it and if we haven’t finished something she can, like I’ll take it up to her and she can help me through it. I reckon my teacher is good.

Opportunities for play and playing between the professional and child were spoken across all the participants’ stories. Adults seen by children as playful gave them a sense of being accepted and they found enjoyment in their interactions with them. Play and playful behaviours indicated to children that this is a safe place and the adult liked being with them. John spoke of a teacher that he really liked because, “he is more chilled out and likes to ride bikes and plays games with the kids”. Olivia said the adults who do not like her will shout at her and adults that like her are nice and do not talk to her in a mean way. When people are nice to her it makes her feel happy and when they are mean, she does not want them around. She likened this idea to her friends, in that when they [her friends] are mean to her she does not what to play with them:

> Like if they are being mean to me, I would just go away and play with someone else. But sometimes other people are mean to other people that I play with. So, I just tell them that maybe you’re hurting their feelings so can you please stop that.

For the adult participants, the conditions for building trust with a child or group of children included:

- getting to know each child;
- safe spaces for conversations to take place;
- opportunities for play and entering the child’s world; and
- the adult’s opportunities and skills in having open and honest dialogue with children.

Natasha, who worked as a child and family support worker in a primary school spoke of several experiences she had in conversation with children where she felt there was trust between them:

> To begin the relationship, they need to want to engage with me. We spend lots of time together. I think time is a big part of building a relationship, it doesn’t have to be hours but consistent. I think trust is the biggest one I can see because if they don’t trust me, they are not going to form a real relationship with me.

Adult participants also spoke of informal, calm and relaxing spaces required to have meaningful conversations. Natasha thought it was because she wanders around the playground with the children; she “hangs out with them”, which made them feel more comfortable around her and as a result some children took it upon themselves to come and talk with her about what was going on for them:

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> Just wandering around at break times meeting the children that I know and meeting their friends, introducing myself and just getting to know them so they get to know me too. Being present helps.

As the stories of the adult participants continued to unfold, the notion of using open and honest dialogue with children was seen as an effective way to build trust and mutual respect. Thomas, a high school teacher, put this into context when he spoke about his ability to listen to children, “I see a lot of kids that are into footy, but then when you take the time to talk to them, there’s all this other stuff going on in their lives”. By reaching out to children in areas of interest to them gave Thomas a gateway to having further dialogue about things that were happening for them outside of the school context.

Natasha, in her work with vulnerable primary school children, indicated that children would open up to her despite the fact she was mandated to report if the child disclosed that someone was harming them. She felt her open and honest approach helped children to talk to her about what was going on in their world. “He must know it is not OK for them [parents] to being doing that to him [child], for him to be continually telling me what has happened”. She also felt humbled by knowing a child would trust her enough to let her into his or her life. “I think everything you share with someone brings you closer, brings us close”.

Natasha felt that being open, honest and upfront with the child from the beginning is of the upmost importance:

> Being open and honest was the only way to build the trust that is needed for a reciprocal relationship with a child. On my first meeting with a child, I tell them what my responsibilities are about their safety and well-being at all levels from preps to grade seven. I always tell them what my responsibilities are, letting them know if they tell me someone is hurting them, I will have to tell someone. I would tell them whom I would have to tell and what might happen. I tell them that I will ask for their permission first and keep them in control of the situation as much as I have control to do so. I have posters on my wall in my room where I meet with the children about that. Some children will read it every time they come to see me, with others, as they have done that once, they don’t want to hear about it again. But they still open up [to me], some of them, not all.

Building trust was seen as a crucial step in hearing children’s perspectives; however, the power differentials that existed in spaces occupied by adults and children often excluded children from having their views heard. The next section illuminates the participant’s perspectives on power and agency.

Power and agency

The dilemmas faced by children and professionals in having meaningful conversations appeared to be produced by the metanarratives within and across the landscapes they occupied. Within the overarching theme of power and agency, as told by the adult participants included:

- children’s agency;
- equitable relationships;
- power imbalances; and
- silencing children’s voices.

The participants also indicated that conversations between professionals and children were not privileged due to time constraints, models and frameworks of practice and the discourse around children’s capacity to participate.

The adult participants in this study, shared the view that children were active agents in their interactions with them. They viewed children as having the capacity to understand and explain their worlds. As expressed by Angus, a residential worker and child protection officer, “every time I work with a child, I realise they are smarter that we give them credit for,

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if you actually talk to them and ask their opinion”. Further to the notion of child agency, Natasha suggested children needed to be listened and responded to in a fair and equitable manner if we want to lessen the power differential between them. “She [child] is letting me into her life. She is sharing important information and allowing me to hear that, Therefore, it is important that I respond to what she is telling me”.

Further to this, the adult participants discussed strategies for building equitable relationships by giving children responsibility and supporting them regarding their own interactions and behaviours. For example, Sarah worked in a non-government organisation where she worked with small groups of children that were having difficulties fitting into mainstream education. She did not define or label the child by their behaviour; she accepts them for who they were and supported them to be able to be successful in the space she occupied with them:

> Setting up that safe space and getting to know them and their behaviours is informing which tools I think are good for them. Acceptance is a really a big part of it instead of trying to correct or control the behaviour. I just call it a behaviour that does not reflect their highest good. Others might be called being naughty. I don’t really see it like that. I just see it as something has happened and this behaviour has developed.

The adult participants’ stories attended to the notion that they worked with children caught up in a systemic cycle of marginalisation and exclusion. Hence, rather than listening to children and having their perspectives heard, the institutional policies and practices of the landscape they occupied with children dictated to them what a child should accomplish, who should accomplish it and how that should be accomplished, where most often children’s perspectives were not considered. For example, Thomas spoke about the school where he worked, describing his experience and that of many of his students as negative. He felt that this was because, not only were students labelled, but the space they found themselves in was not always what he considered emotionally safe:

> I remember they gave me a class. There were all 30 boys. They said to me, ‘These are all the dead beats mate; just get them through the year. Don’t worry about them just concentrate on their behaviour. I was like [. . .] oh man deadbeats you are labelling them. They [teachers] wrote a letter about it. They said, this kid is a no hoper. I read it out to them [students] and I ripped it up and said, this is what they think about you, and this is what I think about the letter [. . .] CRAP. Let’s change this.

An ethical dilemma faced by the adult participants in this study was contained in the labelling and silencing of children’s voices. Children were silenced based on their age, abilities, gender, economic status and the way in which they behaved. They considered the marginalisation of children to be an unethical approach to practice; hence, they used strategies that showed respect to children. This was noted in Natasha’s ability to lessen the power imbalance as demonstrated by her inclusion of children in decision-making:

> Normally what I try to aim for [is] a shared goal with the child and then ask what you think we need to work on. We might spend most of our time talking about friends, school, playground stuff, talking about home. It is only a short time that I might say, how are you going at school, how many times have you been at school this week or tell me what is going on at home.
>
> Angus, in his role in residential care found the lack of consistency of staff led to marginalisation of children, as getting to know them well enough to build trust was almost impossible.

The child participants spoke of power in a different way. The sub-themes for them included:

- adults who were interested in them;
- respected them;
- made them feel listened to; and

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- helped them be successful in the social context they shared.

The children's stories also indicated they were not part of decision-making, particularly on the school landscape. The responses from all the child participants indicated they chose to follow the rules set by the adults as they observed the consequences of not doing so and were rewarded for abiding by them. In this study, the children said they followed the rules in the classroom because they were rewarded for doing so and wanted the rewards, as told by Toby:

> The other day I was doing my work and trying to get my card up to date because I hadn't finished it, so I got a point and a lolly for that. I think it's a good because we get lollies for doing work and I think that is a good way to get the kids to finish off their work.

When asked what she thought about being able to contribute to the rule making in the classroom, Olivia suggested, "maybe do something for the good kids that have been good in class every week". She said she liked the reward system but was not always successful in obtaining the reward as you had to be "good" and "smart" so mostly the same people got the reward. She was very disappointed when she could not get enough points to bid on something she really wanted. John suggested they get more time to play.

In summary, the child participants were accepting of the adults setting the rules and offering rewards for compliance. However, there were times when they raised concerns about the fairness of some of those rules that were set for them and did not appear to know how to go about changing what happened in the spaces they occupied with adults.

Discussion

Building trust was one of the main affirmations that emerged from this study. To build a trusting relationship between a child and a professional, both the child and professional need to experience and feel trust; it is a reciprocal response to the quality and reliability of the people encountered in one's life. Eishstellar and Holthoff (2011) pointed out:

> Trust can only be nurtured gradually and carefully, building strong relationships takes time and is a joint process, requiring both parties to trust the other person and to be trusted by him or her. Placing trust in children, in their competence and responsibility, can be an empowering experience for them, not only strengthening the relationship but also for their self-confidence (p. 43).

Building trust between child and family professionals and children happens by creating safe places for everyday conversations to take place in the spaces where professionals and children occupy together. However, currently professionals are taught how to involve children in assessment and planning, or how to engage children in learning activities, however, how to listen to and talk with children to hear and act on their perspectives is still addressed in a very generalised way (Ruch, 2014; Ulvik and Gulbrandsen, 2015). Ulvik and Gulbrandsen (2015, pp. 216-217) argued that "making everyday life and its narratives a starting point for professional conversations is an available way to probe issues that have to do with emotional states and relationships". This was evident in in the stories told by the participants in this study, where it was noted that children will open up to them to talk about what was happening in their lives if they feel the adult respects and trusts them. Everyday conversations and relationship building needs to acknowledge children's agency and capacity for decision-making.

The use of play to build trusting relationships was also seen to be as important to the child and the professional. Play was used by professionals to build relationships and to provide a safe place for conversation to happen. This is as a shift in thinking about the space that children occupy with professionals from an adult-directed space to a child-centred space, where play is seen as an important part of learning and where children are empowered by having some control over the space they occupy with adults (Moss and Petrie, 2002; Lester and Russell, 2008; Centre for the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2018).

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Play nurtures a sense of belonging and safety. Too often the structure and the intentions of the places professionals and children occupy are not conducive for play as there is a lack of understanding on the part of the professional as to what is meant by play and the level of control needed (Centre for the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2018; Lester and Russell, 2008). In spaces where the professionals' knowledge and understanding of play as a means for building relationships, learning, well-being and creating a sense of belonging (Boddy, 2011; Cameron, 2013; Centre for the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2018; Lester and Russell, 2008, Moss and Petrie, 2002) see play as an accepted practice. Therefore, if professionals what to hear children's perspective through their everyday interactions with them, play as practice needs to be included in their pre-service training.

Guidance and support from professionals to be successful in their everyday lives was also important to the children in this study. Challenging the discourse around managing children's behaviour to one where children are supported to express their views and participate in decision-making without fear of punishment or belittlement is clearly needed. Moore *et al.* (2015) found that teachers, coaches and police often used their power as adults to intimidate children and young people. particularly those who were challenging their authority. They say that children and young people felt that to be safe they needed to be around adults they could trust to react to them in a positive way, where familiarity and predictability were the key characteristics of safe people. Thus, if a reciprocal relationship is at the heart of hearing children's perspectives, it is important that professionals and children get to know and respect each other.

Conclusion

The knowledge gained in this inquiry is about imagining new possibilities for shaping an adult's ability to hear a child's perspective. The main aim of this inquiry was to consider what is needed to enhance the practice knowledge and skills of child and family professionals to talk with and listen to children to have their views heard. The reoccurring theme interwoven in the stories told by the participants was that children and professionals need a safe space for meaningful conversation to take place; one where mutual respect has been established between them. Most revealing was the notion of the professionals' ability to build trust with children through open and honest conversations, safe places and playful behaviours which in turn diminishes some of the power differential between them. Through meaningful, co-constructed conversations with children professionals can begin to uncover the way a child sees themselves and views their social world.

The wider social construction of childhood and adulthood cannot be ignored. There is no doubt that children are headed for adulthood, it is the conditions they experience as children that can be different (Qvortrup, 2011; Cassidy *et al.*, 2017). Reconstructing the ways childhood is viewed needs more consideration. Unpacking this with the participants has illustrated that using an ethical approach to working with children requires professionals to be aware of how their practice can work towards discrimination and silencing the voice of children. Hence, achieving some form of equality for children requires their inclusion in the social practices that happen in their everyday lived experiences with adults. As discussed by Warming (2019, p. 336) "it is through these practices that children and other groups negotiate and learn about their rights, duties and identities". Therefore, listening to hear a children's perspectives takes special kinds of theoretical knowledge and practice skills. Professionals that work with children will need to be critical thinkers and have the skills to listen to children in the present. This requires intentionality in creating emotionally safe places where children have a sense of belonging, where the professionals work alongside children as a more knowledgeable other, not necessarily a more powerful other. This is where new possibilities for child participation can occur.

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Implications for practice

Implications for practice gained in this study were based on the findings woven with the researcher's story as a teacher of pre-service training for child-facing professionals across several disciplines (health, psychology, education, human services, social work and criminology) who will work with children and their families. These implications also have application for lawmakers and policy makers. An overall approach to practice that pays particular attention to children's everyday life experiences (Boddy, 2011; Ulvik and Gulbrandsen, 2015) is necessary if professionals want to hear and act upon children's perspectives. This would encompass a professional's understanding of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989), as this document is not only a model for good practice but is also a legally binding obligation. More specifically, those working with children will need to understand the notion of children's agency and their right to participation at a much deeper level. This would include moving away from only consulting with children to learning how to hear children's perspectives and respond in a way that is visible to them in an ongoing change process.

Secondly, to make children visible a shift in habitual ways of seeing children and defining childhood is essential, this can be achieved by teaching pre-service child facing professionals to be critical in their thinking about individual children and childhood. This restricted view of children and childhood needs to be unpacked during their training to obtain a fuller and nuanced view of childhood from more than one perspective. This could be achieved by providing pre-service professionals with opportunities to learn how to critically think about practice within and across disciplines.

Another implication for practice is in teaching communication skills that facilitates co-construction of meaning with children and creating emotionally safe spaces for conversations to take place. This involves the study of communication that goes beyond technical skills to an ability to use conversational processes that enables trust and a sense of safety for children and support the establishment of common ground. This will take a deeper kind of listening, where knowledge is created from children reflecting on their own experiences and deepened by discovering each other's knowledge through talking and listening.

Finally, play is an essential element in an everyday practice approach. As indicated by all of participants in this study, play and playful behaviour builds trust. A deep understanding of play is needed by professionals for them to understand how to enter the world of a child or groups of children (Cameron, 2013; Lester and Russell, 2008) changing from adult-directed environments to child-led environments. Using play as a tool for child-facing professional practice must be part of pre-service training and taken seriously in its application when working with children.

Limitations

A qualitative narrative approach was taken for this study. As NI is a relational research methodology, it requires an ongoing inquiry space between the researcher and the participants. As stated previously in NI research, the primary goal is not to secure a representative sample, but rather to go deep within each participants' lived experiences (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, 2013, 2016; Kim, 2016). The sample in this study was intentionally small so that the in-depth conversations between the researcher and the participants could take place over a two year period. This allowed for the children to see themselves as a part of the study rather than objects of study. However, the stories told are only a small percentage of the many stories that could be told.

Building reciprocity between the researcher and the participants is an important process in NI. This relationship presents some limitations in terms of how the participants may perceive the researcher. In this study, the participants were known to the researcher and may

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perceive the researcher as the one with authority holding expert knowledge, which may have caused them to give answers that they thought the researcher wanted to hear.

Misreading of the texts is always a possibility in attempts to make meaning of the stories. This could lead to the possibility of trying to create a sameness in the stories; therefore, the researcher must be aware of this possibility when composing the research texts, as there may be multiple truths and a sense of cohesion may not happen (Tracey, 2010). To achieve the rigour and integrity of the participant's stories, the practice of reflexivity was necessary (Kim, 2016, Clandinin and Connelly, 2000), which can be open to bias if the researcher is not well rehearsed in how to use reflexivity in the process of listening to the stories told. Differences in culture, age and gender may be at play; therefore, the researcher must also be aware that this could be the basis for differences in the co-construction of meaning.

Conclusion

The UNCRC reminds us of our obligation to give children the right to express their views and have those views considered on matters that affect them. The stories shared in this NI are an invitation for further inquiry into the prerequisites for having meaningful conversations between professionals and children. This study has uncovered aspects of professional practice needed to shape an adult's ability to hear children's perspectives. These included ways of building trust between children and professionals, providing spaces where children feel safe to express their views, using play and playful behaviours and using open and honest communication to co-construct meaning in their conversations with children.

Recognising and working intentionally to diminish the power differential between professionals and children was also illuminated through reciprocal relationships, responsibility and guided participation. This study has highlighted the knowledge and practice skills needed by child-facing professionals with the views of children in mind. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) remind us, it is through the telling and retelling of stories that possibilities for change can occur.

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