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# Listening to children and young people and empowering them - some new techniques using philosophical and spiritual listening. An educational psychologist's story

## **Abstract**

This article outlines one area of research which I, as an educational and child psychologist, have been involved in for more than 30 years. The area is 'listening to children and young people (CYP): helping to empower them through giving them a voice'. The work has involved the development of various materials, including the Student Report and a version for students excluded from school, to the more recent spiritual listening tools, inviting children and young people to discuss their views about the big questions of life; namely, life's purpose and meaning. Fundamentally, such aspects are felt to be keys to understanding what drives us, how we learn, what we want to learn, how we behave and what our future plans might look like. A hypothesis has been proposed, positing that if we understand children's deeper motivations and drives, as evident from the meanings they attach to philosophical and spiritual questions, we might have a key to help them learn more effectively, behave well and make future plans to enhance their happiness and wellbeing. To enable adults to have such conversations with CYP, the Little Box of Big Questions 1 and 2, have been developed and published, and are used by psychologists and others, internationally, as assessment, therapeutic and research tools.

## **Keywords**

people, young, children, listening, story, psychologist, educational, spiritual, philosophical, techniques, them, empowering

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# Listening to children and young people and empowering them – some new techniques using philosophical and spiritual listening. An educational psychologist's story

Professor Irvine Gersch

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## Introduction

**T**HIS ARTICLE outlines one area of research which I, as an educational and child psychologist, have been involved in for more than 30 years. The area is 'listening to children and young people (CYP): helping to empower them through giving them a voice'. The work has involved the development of various materials, including the Student Report and a version for students excluded from school, to the more recent spiritual listening tools, inviting children and young people to discuss their views about the big questions of life; namely, life's purpose and meaning. Fundamentally, such aspects are felt to be keys to understanding what drives us, how we learn, what we want to learn, how we behave and what our future plans might look like.

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## The beginning 1980–2000: Student views

Following my postgraduate training in Swansea, I started work as a Local Authority educational psychologist (EP) in 1974, in London, working in schools, special schools and units, clinics, with social workers, and alongside medical colleagues. My work involved assessment, and direct treatment (such as school phobia, depression, learning difficulties, behavioural problems, and family work). Thinking back, the experience, though exhausting, was invaluable in learning much about the widest range of children's psychological development and issues, and special needs. What struck me early on, however, was that few professionals asked the child or young person what they personally thought, in a direct way, of their problem, its cause, the referral, the assessment, the intervention and life itself. Instead we carried out standardised tests, general assessments, and sometimes elicited children's attitudes.

One exception to this way of practising was Dr Tom Ravenette, working for the London Borough of Newham, who was creatively applying Personal Construct Theory to work with children. As a student I had the wonderful fortune to be placed with him for a month, and learn some of his techniques, and after that to take up a job in the neighbouring borough. We remained colleagues up until his death a few years ago, and I was to remain totally influenced by his outstanding work, much of which has now been published (Ravenette, 1999). His starting question was always – how does the child see it?

A few years after I had started work as an EP, I attended an Annual Conference run by the Association of Educational Psychologists. One event was a play written by children in local authority care, called ‘Barbara’s Case Conference’. All the psychologists were allotted a role to play, and off we set. In a nutshell, the story made the point, dramatically and emphatically, as well as angrily, that the main player in the case conference, the young person, had been totally left out. All the professionals were talking, and although the young person was trying to talk, in Bob Dylan’s words ‘no one was listening’. In brief, the play depicted the worst possible case conference, whereby the young person was ignored; views dismissed or rationalised as not significant, and finally asked to leave for behaving badly. The message was clear: ‘Hey, adult professionals – you don’t listen to us. How would you feel when big life plans are being made for you?’

They were making an important point – dramatically.

At that time, as part of my work, I had become the specialist psychologist for children living in a residential assessment care home. Children were placed there when they were hard to place, and assessed by a psychiatrist, teachers, a psychologist (me), care workers, and social workers. But children’s views were not given much air time, nor were they even recorded formally. Some children were not even aware of the reason why they had been placed in care. It did seem to me at the time that formal testing, particularly cognitive testing, put the cart before the horse. First, we needed to get the child’s view of what was happening to them, and why.

As a response, I developed the Child’s Report, to be completed by the child or young person themselves, with help, but asking directly about their views about their plans and future. After much staff opposition, the scheme was agreed on a pilot basis. The evidence would speak for itself. A learning point for me is that change is most often resisted, but people don’t mind trials and experiments, and are even sometimes willing to change their mind!

There is a lovely saying that the only change people really like is the change in their pocket!

I also learnt that there are predictable stages to each change I was ultimately involved in be they at individual, local or national level, and these are:

1. We hate it – here are the reasons why it won’t work
2. Here are all the problems: or we have tried that before and it didn’t work.
3. If you persist, we might try it
4. If it works – good, we were doing something like that all the time, it wasn’t such a big deal.

5. Let's keep it going
6. Actually, wasn't it my idea in the first place?  
Anyway... returning to listening to children:

The Child Report was the subject of pilots with children, and was changed over time. Working with other colleagues and the EPs in our psychology service team, we developed the Student Report (Gersch & Holgate, 1991). A Report for Children Excluded from School (Nolan & Sigston, 1993) reported in a series of articles and chapters, for example, Gersch, Holgate and Sigston (1993); Gersch et al. (1996); Gersch (2001). The main sections of the Student Report were about school, home, hobbies, future plans, and special needs. Most importantly, we sought children's views of the actual report format and instructions, and they told us that the drawings needed to be improved, that we needed to include more sections about feelings, and that we should use it more with children. Following observations of adults using the tool with CYP our instructions had to be amended to stress the importance of allowing CYP time to speak and for the adults not to interfere and simply state their view of what the CYP should have said. I recall one adult correcting a child who was dictating her response that 'she hated the meals', by saying 'that's not true.... I'm writing that you like the meals here!'

And so, with time and piloting, the Student Reports were updated and used by our own EP team, in schools, and in quite a few services in the UK. I was also able to give keynotes, and lectures, publish some articles and chapters in books on the subject, and felt that I had made a modest input to a change of attitude. I was delighted when the first ever Code of Practice in SEN highlighted the importance of eliciting the child's views in all assessments for CYP with special needs, and was aware that this work had been taken into account. Whilst at first the idea had been so heavily criticised, by the late 1990s one could say that many people had moved to stage 6 above.

I stayed working in this Local Authority until the year 2000, some 25 years, moving to senior educational psychologist, deputy principal and finally principal educational psychologist. It was in the latter role that I could play a part in supporting others in the development of ideas about listening to children, advocate a local authority policy on this, and finally conduct talks and visits to schools to advocate the idea, which was generally becoming routine, and needed little persuasion.

I also had the wonderful opportunity to serve on the government's working group on the future of educational psychology, culminating in a report DFEE 2000, (DFEE 2000a and b) which gave me another platform to advocate and promote such ideas. I also served as Chairperson of the BPS Training Committee in Educational Psychology (1994–1998) I was able to co-lead the change from a one-year MSc to a three-year doctorate, again against massive opposition, which would ultimately give EPs more time to work in-depth with children and listen to their views, and to carry out more intensive casework.

I do believe that EPs can contribute at so many levels, including individual case-work, family work, work with schools, research, Local Authority policy, national policy, systems work and training – all of which is needed to make a difference and make things happen. (Gersch, 2004, 2009).

The next phase in this work coincided with a change in my role from LA EP to University Professor and Programme Director in Educational and Child Psychology at the University of East London, where I am currently employed.

### **The spiritual phase 2000: The Spiritual Listening Project**

After I had moved to the University of East London, I became fascinated in exploring attitudes about children's deeper meanings and the purposes they attach to their lives. Returning to a literature review and study of the very early Greek Philosophers, such as Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, and early mystical scholars, I formed the view that the connection between psychology and philosophy could be highly productive and novel. These ancient philosophers posed fundamental questions of each other such as; Why are we living on this planet? What is our purpose? What is the meaning of our lives? How should a life be lived? What ethics should guide us? What do we enjoy aesthetically?

What if young people could answer these questions? What if the answers could help us obtain a deeper understanding of their lives than merely elicited from literal questions, and then empower and help children and young people with their life plans and decisions?

#### ***What is spiritual listening and the spiritual listening hypothesis?***

The whole spiritual listening project is premised upon the idea and hypothesis (*the spiritual listening hypothesis*) that we are all driven by the meanings we attach to our lives, our personal drives, and our natural instincts. If we could tap these factors, learning would be easy and life's choices might be happier. The aim of this project therefore is to tap powerful liberating motivations to enable and empower CYP to make effective life and career choices, in their own terms.

It is worth emphasising that in this context, spiritual refers to one's animating or vital drives, and does not necessarily imply religious motivation; rather, it relates to such metaphysical questions as one's purpose, meaning, hopes and values, and relates to such questions as:

*'What is my purpose on earth; how do I fit into the universe; and, what should I be doing with my life?'*

The project is, therefore, fundamentally about deep *spiritual listening* to CYP, which the author has defined as 'listening carefully to the client's responses to questions about metaphysical issues. It is an attempt to ascertain not simply views about the here and now, but more specifically views about the meanings they attach to their lives, their essential drives, motivations and desires.' (Gersch et al., 2008, p.226)

In order to answer these questions, together with doctoral students and other colleagues, we have been carrying out research at the University of East London with small groups of children aged from 8 to 16 years in a variety of schools.

At the suggestion of our publisher, the questions have now been packaged for ease of use, onto colourful cards which are attractive to children and nicely boxed up, with instructions, and two sets have been produced commercially, as follows:

**The Little Box of Big Questions: *Philosophical conversations with children and young people*** has four sets of cards, each with four individual cards under the headings of Identity, Important People, Meaning and Purpose, and finally, Thinking and Planning (Gersch & Lipscomb, 2012).

**The Little Box of Big Questions 2: *My learning, my behaviour and my future*** – this has three sets of cards, each set containing 5 individual cards with philosophical questions about learning preferences, behavioural ethics and finally future planning, with a planning card (Gersch & Lipscomb, 2015).

There is no space in a short article such as this to summarise our work, much of which has been published, but suffice to say that:

- Children as young as 8 can indeed answer these spiritual or philosophical questions sensibly.
- They love doing so and feel that they are talking about unique untapped topics.
- Their responses are key to understanding their lives and their purpose.
- School staff and educational psychologists are using such questions and reporting that they find them to be really valuable.
- Children and young people find the questions helpful in clarifying their own ideas, and in a recent study, to help them choose A-level subjects, and career choices.
- I have included some references at the end for those interested in the research (e.g. Gersch, Dowling, Panagiotaki & Potton, 2008; Gersch & Lipscomb, 2013; Gersch, Lipscomb, Stoyles & Caputi, 2014; Lipscomb & Gersch, 2012).

### **Going Forward: The next steps for this work**

Our work continues to explore the potential of these tools, and to develop new ones, all with the aim of encouraging and enabling professionals to listen carefully to children, and in so doing to empower them to arrive at happy, healthy choices and future plans for themselves.

We aim to produce a package aimed specifically at these CYP who are about to go into the sixth form and need to make subject choices and begin thinking about the direction of their careers. We plan to produce a version for adults, who frequently tell us, when carrying out conversations with CYP, that they themselves would love to be asked these fundamental questions. With adults, we have developed a model of coaching, supervision and mentorship, again using these spiritual questions, to work with performers, writers, psychologists, head teachers and colleagues in independent practice. Anecdotal and experiential evidence points to this approach being very helpful and life changing in certain circumstances when people are facing significant life choices. For the future, we will of course need to collect data and evidence to evaluate the impact of this work, and have some small scale studies underway.

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