

Reconceptualising the Voice of Children in Child Protection

Authors : Sharon Jackson, Lynn Kelly

Abstract : This paper proposes a conceptual review of the interdisciplinary literature which has theorised the concept of 'children's voices'. The primary aim is to identify and consider the theoretical relevance of conceptual thought on 'children's voices' for research and practice in child protection contexts. Attending to the 'voice of the child' has become a core principle of social work practice in contemporary child protection contexts. Discourses of voice permeate the legislative, policy and practice frameworks of child protection practices within the UK and internationally. Voice is positioned within a 'child-centred' moral imperative to 'hear the voices' of children and take their preferences and perspectives into account. This practice is now considered to be central to working in a child-centered way. The genesis of this call to voice is revealed through sociological analysis of twentieth-century child welfare reform as rooted inter alia in intersecting political, social and cultural discourses which have situated children and childhood as sites of state intervention as enshrined in the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child ratified by the UK government in 1991 and more specifically Article 12 of the convention. From a policy and practice perspective, the professional 'capturing' of children's voices has come to saturate child protection practice. This has incited a stream of directives, resources, advisory publications and 'how-to' guides which attempt to articulate practice methods to 'listen', 'hear' and above all - 'capture' the 'voice of the child'. The idiom 'capturing the voice of the child' is frequently invoked within the literature to express the requirements of the child-centered practice task to be accomplished. Despite the centrality of voice, and an obsession with 'capturing' voices, evidence from research, inspection processes, serious case reviews, child abuse and death inquiries has consistently highlighted professional neglect of 'the voice of the child'. Notable research studies have highlighted the relative absence of the child's voice in social work assessment practices, a troubling lack of meaningful engagement with children and the need to more thoroughly examine communicative practices in child protection contexts. As a consequence, the project of capturing 'the voice of the child' has intensified, and there has been an increasing focus on developing methods and professional skills to attend to voice. This has been guided by a recognition that professionals often lack the skills and training to engage with children in age-appropriate ways. We argue however that the problem with 'capturing' and [re]representing 'voice' in child protection contexts is, more fundamentally, a failure to adequately theorise the concept of 'voice' in the 'voice of the child'. For the most part, 'The voice of the child' incorporates psychological conceptions of child development. While these concepts are useful in the context of direct work with children, they fail to consider other strands of sociological thought, which position 'the voice of the child' within an agentic paradigm to emphasise the active agency of the child.

Keywords : child-centered, child protection, views of the child, voice of the child

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