Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background and rationale

Recent Government agendas have highlighted a need for "children and young people to have more opportunities to get involved in the design, provision and evaluation of policies and services that affect them or which they use" (Children and Young People's Unit, 2001, p.2). Involving children and young people in this way has the aim of producing better services, leading to better outcomes for children and young people (Children and Young People's Unit, 2001). The Government has set out core principles for increasing the involvement of children and young people, which all Government departments are expected to follow. No lower age limit of children has been set for participation policies (Children and Young People's Unit, 2001). Indeed, the guidance reports one case study in which children aged between two and four years old in nurseries took part in a consultation (Children and Young People's Unit, 2001).

The Government Green Paper 'Every Child Matters' (2003) outlines a range of measures designed to reform and improve children's services. It states that "Real service improvement is only attainable through involving children and young people and listening to their views" (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2003, p.10). It also describes the Government's commitment to enabling children and young people to become involved in the planning, delivery and evaluation of policies and services which relate to them. Miller
(2003) argues that the understanding of children's perspectives gained through children's participation, can lead to adults being able to provide services that are more relevant to children's needs.

Whilst consultation with older children has become more usual in children's services, this is not yet the case for younger children (McNeish & Newman, 2002). Sure Start is a Government initiative focused on reducing child poverty and social exclusion with the aim of achieving better outcomes for children and families. Sure Start local programmes have been established in areas of high socio-economic deprivation and are concerned with improving the health and well being of families with children aged 0-4 years old. Sure Start local programmes are delivered by local partnerships, which aim to bring together services in the areas of childcare, early education, health, and family support (Sure Start, 2005). In a research study commissioned by the Sure Start Unit, (Clark, McQuail & Moss, 2003), 50 Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships’ (EYDCPs) childcare audits, which included consultation activities, were studied in order to find out to what extent preschool children were being consulted. Only a small minority were found to have focused on the views of children under five.

Miller (2003) argues that the main barrier to children's participation is the attitude of those adults who do not believe that children have the capacity to make informed decisions. There are also implications stemming from the changes to professionals' working practice that may be necessary in order to consult children. Alderson (2000) argues that some adults resist consulting
children, as they are worried about loss of control. A further concern may be that adults are anxious about the possibility of causing distress to children because of the topics raised or requests which cannot be granted (Alderson, 2000). There can also be a lack of confidence amongst professionals about consulting young children (Alderson, 2000). Clark et al. (2003) suggest there may be a need to help practitioners to reflect on their skills of listening to and observing young children, to increase their confidence in their own abilities. This may have training implications for professionals working with young children.

1.2 Research question
This research aimed to explore current practice and the experiences, perceptions and views of a sample of professionals working with children aged under five, with regard to consultation with young children. It was anticipated that this research would highlight facilitating factors in consulting with young children, as well as potential barriers and what may be necessary to overcome them. Thus, the policy initiative to consult young children, as users of children's services, could be compared with current practice, and the issues raised regarding its implementation could be explored.

1.3 Aims and objectives of the research
The specific aim of the research was to explore the experiences, perceptions and views of relevant professionals with regard to consultation with children under the age of five, within early years settings.
This research aim was operationalised through the following objectives:

- explore what early years practitioners understand by ‘consulting with young children’ and how this is perceived;
- describe current practice in consulting with young children within a range of early childhood settings;
- investigate the experiences of practitioners in consulting with young children, including methods used and factors relating to successful or unsuccessful consultation, as defined by participants;
- investigate the results of consultation with young children;
- explore facilitating factors in consulting with young children and any conditions necessary for this to occur;
- explore the potential barriers to consulting with young children and ways these may be overcome.

1.4 Structure of the report

This report is organised into a number of chapters. In Chapter 2, a literature review regarding consultation with young children is presented. Chapter 3 outlines the study design and methods used during the research. Findings from the research are presented in Chapter 4. Finally, in Chapter 5, findings and conclusions from the study are discussed.