

Transcript

[Introduction]

This is a Research in Practice podcast, supporting evidence informed practice with children and families, young people, and adults.

Emma: Welcome to the Children's Information Project podcast, a series of conversations exploring how better use of children's information, data and voice can help to improve children's and families lives. This podcast is one way that the project is sharing its thinking and learning alongside workshops, webinars and regular meetings of our learning community. My name is Emma Smale, and I am the convener of the Children's Information Project Learning Network. The Children's Information Project is funded by the Nuffield Strategic Fund, and hosted by the University of Oxford in partnership with the University of Sussex, The London School of Economics, Research in Practice and four local authority partners. The project aims to improve the way that administrative data and information about and from children, young people and families are used in local and national government. To do this in ways that integrate their voices. The project is a collaboration between researchers and local authorities, with the aim to co-develop solutions together with a learning network of local authorities from across the country. This is the first of two introductory podcasts, we will delve into what is meant by children's information, data and voice and consider why improving the use of information matters. We will start to explore some of the challenges with existing data in children's services, how children and families voices are not always heard and how engaging with diverse voices raises questions about ethics, children's rights and democratic accountability.

Today I'm delighted to be in conversation with four colleagues from the University of Sussex, who will share their perspectives and reflections. I'm going to hand over to them, to introduce themselves.

Elaine: I'm Elaine Sharland and I'm professor of social work research at the University of Sussex and I'm what's called the co-investigator, so one of the leads of this Children's Information Project and the area of work that I am, sort of, leading forward is our work that is around voice and how we can best bring children and young people, parents and carers and practitioners voices into administrative information that local authorities work with and use about them. As well as how we can engage more inclusively with their voices about how their information is used. So, my background is mainly child and family social work research, a lot of which has been about working collaboratively with practice and sometimes with policy makers to try to make sure that research and practice inform each other in ways that are helpful for children and families. So, that's me.

Perpetua: I'm Dr Perpetua Kirby, and I'm a lecturer in childhood and youth in the school of education and social work here at Sussex. I have been working for over 25 years now in the area of children's participation and children's agency and rights and working cross sector.

So, health, social care, education, really thinking about well, what is the purpose and what are the practices for engaging children in decisions that affect their lives, and what does that look like and why do we do it and how might we do it in different contexts. What are the politics of it, you know, where does power lie, what are the different stakeholders involved? So, really trying to unpick those issues and surface the tensions involved, the different purposes, the different assumptions, so we can really explore practice and think how we might engage in a way that is meaningful, rather than simply tokenistic.

Caitlin: I'm Dr Caitlin Shaughnessy, I'm a research fellow, also in the school of education and social work at the University of Sussex. I'm an early career researcher on the project, so I completed my Ph.D. only two or three years ago and I'm also part of the voice team. So, taking a particular angle on voice within the overall project. My research background is really in education, but looking at how creative practices can be used to amplify and understand voice. I've previously done some work with families who are seeking support in social care and how we can use creative methods and practices to make those voices more understood and more heard through that process.

[Why do we need to improve children's information and data and voice?]

Emma: So, first of all I think it would be helpful to begin with explaining the purpose of the project. So, Elaine, why do we need to improve children's information and data and voice?

Elaine: Thanks Emma, jolly good question, I mean, the very short answer I suppose is as it says on the tin and in the title of our project, that improving children's information, data and voice, we see as part of, or as a major mechanism towards, improving children and families lives. That means both strategically and operationally, improving the services and support and what we can provide in order to enable children and families to lead better lives and achieve better outcomes. It's also very much about the need to improve the way we use information to achieve those ends, the way we do that, to improve how we do that in a rights-respecting and an ethical way. So, it's a question of rights, this ties in very much with the children's rights agenda, but also a real imperative to believe the idea that if we make better and more ethically sound use of the information we gather about with and from children and families, we can do better by them. That's the starting parameter, just to elaborate a bit, we know already... I mean one of our starting points for conceiving of this project and proposing it to the Nuffield Foundation who generously agreed to fund it in the first place. Was that we know already from practice experience, from research, from wherever we look that, kind of, nationally returned children's administrative data, so we're talking about the Children in Need centres or looked after children returns are not helpful for informing local authority decision making and planning. Either at strategic level, let alone operationally. They may indeed give, at least a skewed picture to national government as well, Children in Need centres for example records diversion from care. It will record the mechanism that may have been used for children to be diverted from care.

So, let's say a section 47 [of the Children's Act], but it won't tell us anything about the nature of the support or services that are being provided to ensure that that diversion is a long time diversion rather than just a delay. It simply records, here's a diversion, here's the mechanism, case is still open or case closed. Another example is, you know, we record placement stability. The OCC [Office for Children's Commissioner] actually records social worker stability, but nothing about relational and relationship stability and that tells us a very, you know, arguably very limited amount about what is really going on and significant in a young person's life. So, what that tends to mean, you know, it's not just the national returns, even a lot of the administrative data, the much fuller administrative data that local authorities do collect is not sufficiently meaningful to be fit for purpose to inform decisions. There's lots of proxy data used for example, one indicator taken to indicate something else because it's the best we can get. Often the information that's collected is used for multiple purposes that it's not necessarily fit for. So, it may well be, you know, that we're trying to do too much with the administrative data that we have and reading too much into it in lieu of having any better alternatives. Of course administrative data, things that appear in local authority or national data sets are they provide metrics about populations or cohorts, they don't tell us much, and they're not intended to tell us much or anything about individual pathways.

In contrast to that, we're also really aware that case records, a lot of material that exists embedded within management information systems in local authorities, those are predominantly, you know, designed and used for practice and for operational purposes, but there is probably much richer information in those that might inform, better inform and help us develop better administrative data as well. So, we're aware that there's potential there but also real gaps in what administrative data can tell us. Previous work... so it also really highlights that children and families very rarely feel that their voices are expressed or recorded within the information, within the data that's collected about them. Certainly the data that appears in administrative datasets. Not only do they feel their voices aren't expressed or recorded there, but they certainly feel they don't get taken into account, heard, acted upon. So, one of the core elements for us to, kind of, improving that and one of the core objectives for the project is to find ways of integrating voices of children and young people and families and indeed practitioners who work with them, into the content of information that is gathered and used about them. Also the processes and the systems. So, that we are able to have much more voice informed information and also use that information in ways that are informed by those same voices.

[How is the project working with local authority partners?]

Emma: That's really interesting, thanks Elaine. So, the starting points to the project are administrative data is not always helpful for informing local authority decision making. Proxy data is often used in the absence of better indicators. Administrative data is used for multiple purposes and importantly children and family voices are not expressed or recorded, and they do not feel their voices are heard or acted upon. You also mentioned opportunities, perhaps for the rich information collected in case records. So, how is the project working with local authority partners, can you tell us a bit more about the work taking place in the local science?

Elaine: In our project as it happens, the focus is primarily we're working with four key, kind of, local authority sites as we call them, the work that we're doing with them to help them to improve their information use is guided really by what they've been interested to improve in this domain. That has meant that our focus across the sites has been on improving information use and improving voice of children who are-, or young people leaving care, children who are in need or on the edge of being either in need or in care, so those that are, kind of, referred, knocked back, re-referred etc. Also children in their early years, those happen to be the focuses that we have. I just wanted to reflect back slightly on something you introduced in your introduction, Emma, that I just want to say a bit more about. So, we're not really conceiving of this as a research project that is about children's information, data and voice. What it is a, kind of, collaborative project in which we're here working with local authorities and children's services practitioners, policy makers, in order to enable them to improve the way that they use information. The way that in doing that, they respond better to the-, they're hearing us respond better to voices. So, we're, kind of, I think you'll find in most of the conversation we're about to have, our role is really enabling not prescribing, we're working alongside.

[How do you define data?]

Emma: Brilliant, enabling, not prescribing, we'll hold that in our thoughts. I think you used lots of different terms, as did I, in the introduction. So, I think things like data can mean different things to different people and you've mentioned already administrative data and where that might be at national level but also a local level, but also you've mentioned voice. So, I think these things might mean different things, can we think a little bit more about some of the confusion that arises when we think about the word data or indeed the word voice. So, how does the Children's Information Project define data and how do you introduce it to people?

Elaine: Yes, it's a good question. I'd say they're very good questions, all of them, and we'll try to, kind of, unwrap a bit here. I should say these are good questions but we as a team working on this project have been asking ourselves a lot. Some quite animated conversations I think and I think probably the space that we're in now, the point that we have arrived at, at the moment, I would say is probably not fixed in stone actually, because our thinking and certainly our understanding and use of the language is still... you know, will continue to evolve. Particularly through the collaborative work we're doing, but having said that, if I take data first, yes, it means very different things to different people. So, as researchers, if we're speaking for ourselves in this space, we're very comfortable of thinking about data as either quantitative or qualitative. So, in research language any recorded information and that could be case notes, drawings, emojis, as well as, you know, measurable, scalable items, but any recorded data can be considered as... we could use that word data and we would quite comfortably for whatever the material is. Also we've used the word data to describe those things, whether or not they're collected or aggregated in some sort of data set or whether they just sit somewhere recorded wherever they are. That's terminology we could consider happily all of that if they'd said but we're also very aware that, you know, the word data does mean very different things to different people and that's one of the things that we need to work with. It also may mean little or nothing to

some people and it might well not be, you know, a word, a term that, for example, some of the children or young people or indeed families that we are going to be working with or alongside, it may not be a term that's meaningful to them at all.

We need to find ways of working with that. In contrast, you know, data scientists in local authorities or strategic leads in local authorities or indeed in national government, what they mean by data is likely to be the quantitative items that are measured and counted and scaled and collated and aggregated into... digitised now into data sets for statistical analysis in order to inform strategic decision-making, service, policy planning. I know in some of the field work, in particular I think Caitlin and Perpetua have done, you've already encountered front-line practitioners who are using the word data to refer to what's in written case notes. Pictures or text messages that, you know, have been sent to them. Many of them will use the word data to describe those but others will simply talk about those as information. We haven't yet spoken with children, young people and families yet. There's a whole series of governance and ethics hurdles to get over before we can do that directly but, I mean, my suspicion is that they may well... they won't be uniform either but they may well be much more likely to talk about their records or their files than they might perhaps about their data. You know, we don't yet. As I was mentioning before, because our role really, as you say, it's enabling, not prescribing, we're here working alongside local authorities.

You know, we're not imposing any project definition of what data is or data are. I always need to remember data in the plural. We do want to see what we can learn from the different perspectives and languages and assumptions that people do make about using that word. Obviously, what we're wanting to achieve through this is, one way or another, optimising the ways that we can reach a common purpose of improving the quality and use of children's information and whatever we call it. That's data. We're using the word information just in the most inclusive way possible here. The goal of the project is to enable local authorities and national government to improve the way that they use all relevant information about them from children and families. Whether it gets called data or not, that will include the information that is incorporated into either local or national administrative data sets but it also includes the information that isn't necessarily currently collated at all, that sits in case records, sits elsewhere in management information system and isn't necessarily referred to as data. Information is just our umbrella term, really, for saying everything. Whether or not those involved in using it or, you know, or generating it choose to call it data. It's whatever it is that is maybe important to know and take into consideration about children and families, whether individually or in aggregate and whether it's called data or not. You know, that's our umbrella term, really. Then from that, we can think about how voice is related to data and information.

[What do we mean by voice?]

Emma: That's helpful. An umbrella term and anything that feels important, in essence, that we need to know about children and families. You mentioned voice there. Tell us a little bit more. Voice means what in the children's information project?

Elaine: I think to put it in a nutshell, some of the information that's important to know about children and young people and families is information that comes direct from them and indeed from practitioners who work directly with them, information that expresses their views, their wishes, their experiences. Primarily, that's what we're calling voice and what we're saying needs to be better listened to and better heard. Voice also expresses the views, wishes, priorities of others who have an interest in making best use of children's information, so policymakers, those who decide what it's important to know, administratively to know about children and their families and their wellbeing, their voice is also an expression of their views about what it is that's important to know. By voice, we mean whatever expression it is of views, priorities, wishes, experiences that both influence the shape that information takes and what's in there. Our starting point from that, I think this is quite important. It took us quite a while to get here, I think. Our starting point is that voice isn't something, or certainly shouldn't be seen as something that is somehow separate from or distinct from children's information or children's data. It is and it should be integral to them. It's woven, it's threaded and needs to be threaded in meaningful ways throughout children's information. You know, I think we started out at one point, a little rubric whereby we were thinking, okay, so, let's use information or data as... data to mean information about children and voice that's information that's from children, for example. We moved a long way from that, I think. Voice is actually already integral to information and data. There are voices, there are priorities expressed within that, even it's tacit, not explicit. What we're aiming to do is really amplify, enhance the voices of, you know, children, young people, families and practitioners within information. Hence the, kind of, name, the title of our project which took some arriving at as well but I think hopefully captures that which uses-, children's information, that's the encapsulating umbrella term, followed by improving lives through better listening and better data. The listening to voice and data are part of what is improving lives through better use of children's information. That's just an introduction, I suppose.

[Whose voices are important?]

Emma: I'm going to try and recap before we go into this in a little bit more depth and bring in other colleagues. We have children's information. Some of it gets called data and some of it gets collated and used at an aggregated level. Some of it stays in management information systems and it just gets used at a case level, a more individual level. Some of it expresses the voices of children, young people and families, practitioners and others and some does not. We are going to try and use these definitions through the rest of our conversation but I think it is worth acknowledging that language is a tricky thing and we might slip up from time to time. We're going to continually revise and think through what do we mean by children's information and how does data and voice and those terms relate to the wider project. It's really helpful. I'd like to bring in other colleagues now, other guests to dig into how voice might improve children's information and this question about how it might improve children and families lives. What we need to do is to listen to voices as a core part of information collection and use. To start with, Caitlin, I wonder if you might come in here. Can you say more about whose voices are important and why is it important that we hear these voices and integrate them within the information we collect and use?

[Whose voices are important?]

Caitlin: I think let's start with whose voices that we are interested in listening to and hearing from. Primarily, it's those voices of those affected and directly involved in children's social care, so, this is children and young people, parents, carers and families. As Elaine said at the start, these are really minimally represented within those statutory returns and in much of this information that makes its way into the local authority data sets or the information that the government then uses to make the really important decisions, the policy decisions that affect children, young people and families lives. We know that those voices, children and young people's voices and families voices might be better represented within these case files and these management information systems but that's not always systematic. Also, there's plenty of evidence that even when those voices are recorded within those systems, they're not always listened to, families don't feel that their voices are listened to or heard. Really, the more vulnerable those voices seem to be, the less likely they are listened to, so, it's only those so-called sensible voices that get heard and particularly as well if those voices are challenging the status quo or their experiences or the support they're getting, again, less likely to be heard. We're also aware that some groups within this group of children, young children and families may be particularly missing or hidden with that information. For example, children with disabilities or very young children or those whose first language isn't English. All those who are otherwise marginalised, they won't be as represented within those information systems as others. We really need to find ways to develop practises and systems that attend to their voices as well and think about how we can create spaces and places where those voices can be heard. We're also really looking as well at the voices of those who are working directly with children and families. Front line practitioners who interact with them on a day-to-day basis, those who are writing the case notes to record children and families experiences and information or translating and putting that information into those electronic record systems.

We also want to know about the voices of the people who are prominent but implicit really in these systems that get used to, kind of, gather this information. Those are the voices that determine what information is collected, what information is analysed and how that information is used. For example, this is really about the managers and the data analysts that are sometimes seen as quite separate to, kind of, the everyday practices of social care but they make really crucial decisions about how information is analysed and how information is interpreted that gets collected from children and families. Then as well, that feeds through into those people in leadership and policy positions who make decisions about what information local authorities are required to collect and how. Then also, how that information that is collected is then used to make strategic decisions of resource allocation and need. I think what we have seen across the project so far, particularly in talking to managers and practitioners is that information collection and, kind of, use of data and information within local authorities is not this simply neutral process that supports children's social care. Lots of different voices are embedded with and shape the systems that currently exist. It's really interesting for us to see how these almost tacit voices at a local and national level influence and impact the everyday practices on the ground of how information is gathered and collected. How those voices of practitioners and families and of children in those day-to-day interactions that are so important in children's social care are

not always heard or listened to and don't necessarily frame the basis of decisions that are made at higher levels. A simple example might be that if a practitioner is documenting a visit after seeing a family and doing some work with a family, they might have to fill in details or a report under different headings. What those headings say and what those boxes say will impact what the practitioner asks the families, how they conduct the visit and then what they record afterwards. Who is deciding what those questions or what those boxes are in the electronic record. It's going to be those further up, the managers, the data analysts, the policy makers. In that way, it's those tacit voices of the more senior managers.

Emma: Caitlin, I really like what you're saying about tacit voices which influence what and how information is gathered, recorded and analysed and how important it is to consider how the systems and practical constraints of those systems, boxes and headings, as you say, shape and determine which voices we hear. Really clear that the decisions made at a local and national level are influenced by these tacit voices. There's a lot to consider here. Perpetua, the second part of my question was about why it's important to listen to multiple voices and to integrate them within the information we collect.

Perpetua: There are a number of issues here. The first is really the issue of a commitment to an ethical practice and one that emphasises inclusion of different people and different stakeholders as something that's really core to the endeavour of information systems rather than some simple, sort of, functional add-on that might be seen as just enhancing efficiency. It's a, sort of, ethical stance and commitment, primarily. I think this is getting more attention, particularly with the advent of AI [Artificial Intelligence] and machine learning. This issue of ethics has really come to the fore and it's one that we're really exploring in this project and thinking, well, what does it mean to have that ethical practice of working with people's information, including but beyond machine learning? I suppose the second area that's, sort of, core and really emphasised in social care is the rights of children and young people to participate in decisions that affect them that's really embedded in the UN [United Nations] convention of the rights of the child. This is obviously core to ethical practice, that commitment, but it's also about ensuring that services and policies related to children's and families lives are better... they better involve them in, sort of, informing those decisions about what is there to support them. That's key, that, sort of, emphasis on children's rights but beyond that and perhaps an area that isn't talked about so much is actually, well, what does it mean for a democratic institution, whether a local authority or national government to engage with the voices of multiple stakeholders and where is the role of democratic accountability? You know, as democratic local authorities and national governments, there is something about engaging with multiple voices and their commitment to citizens, both young and old. What does that mean? What does that mean for local authorities to think of it as a, sort of, democratic accountability and commitment? It was Caitlin that said earlier that, you know, when you listen to diverse voices, you are going to get diverse perspectives. Part of democracy is engaging with that diversity and the tensions and the uncertainties of what that evokes. You know, when you think of data, it can get quite neatly packaged as though we, sort of, put the information in and then we get nice decisions popping out but actually, when we're engaging with a diversity and a plurality of voices, it's a bit messier than that. What does that mean for a data analyst?

Emma: I like that notion, Perpetua, that data is neatly packaged and that we put information in and get nice decisions popping out but actually, it's much messier than that and that the messy space where there are varied and competing voices perhaps is of real interest to this project.

Perpetua: Caitlin was talking about, for example, those less sensible voices who are not heard so much. How might we enable and engage the diversity of young people with whom social care organisations work with, for example, as well as the parents, you know, and families involved as well. Decisions are made by lots of people, for some of whom have never met the children in question. Some have, like social workers but also lawyers and judges. For young people and their families to get involved in these processes, there's a, sort of, assumption that we're working from that actually by engaging and enabling people to feel listened and heard, they're going to more likely want to engage in the processes. The process that informs decisions about their lives, rather than just thinking that people are making those decisions without their involvement. The other is about the meaningfulness of information. No matter how sophisticated a data system is or analytical processes, if the information feeds that is not meaningful then what comes out of that is similarly going to be questionable in its value for informing services that really do improve people's lives.

Emma: We've heard about the aims of the project, the gaps and the challenges with current administrative data in children's services. We've talked about how this project is defining data and voice and information but also, that there is space to go on defining and understanding what these terms mean. We've heard about how data is shaped and influenced by people within local authorities and that this impacts upon strategic decisions. If the voices of practitioners, of families and of children are not always heard or listened to, then decisions are not framed or informed by their interests, aspirations or needs. There is a need to enable diverse voices to feel listened to and heard so that decisions are made in partnership with all children and families and we've reflected on making information meaningful so that our data systems can tell us about real experiences and provide a basis for doing things differently or better to improve children and families lives. I'd like to thank Elaine, Caitlin and Perpetua for speaking with me today, for their thoughtful contributions and questions about how we can improve the use of children's information. Next time, we will look into the principles for working with children and families voices and practical ways that you can embed voice into the information used in children's services. I hope you can join us.