

TALKING & LISTENING TO CHILDREN



Exploring how social workers
and children communicate

The Talking and Listening to Children Impact Pilot: Evaluation report (Jan 2018)

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1. Introduction

This report, its findings and recommendations follows on from an extensive four nation UK collaborative research project between Cardiff University, the University of Sussex, Queen's University, Belfast and the University of Edinburgh that explored how social workers communicate with children in their everyday practice and how social workers and children involved in these encounters experience and understand them. This original research entitled the "Talking and Listening to Children Project (TLC), was completed in 2016 with the aim of generating new knowledge that will enhance the quality of social work education, practice and policy and in doing so improve children's experiences of policy and practice outcomes.

This original research project highlighted three key messages: communication between children, young people and their social workers is framed by the complex context in which it takes place; social workers need to use their skills sensitively and creatively to make spaces for communication with children and young people; the relationship between children, young people and their social workers is more important than communication itself; a good relationship will forgive a poor communicative encounter.

A number of web-based resources were developed to support translation of this knowledge into social workers' everyday practice. The TLC online resources are designed to support a range of professionals within the social work field and have significant relevance for those working in related areas such as youth work, child care and within in the charitable sector. The resources are interactive rather than prescriptive and sit within a '*Child Case Context*'¹ model, an approach which is rooted in ecological systems theory. This approach recognises the interconnection between individuals, relationships, and the wider systemic environment; how these factors interplay with one another, facilitating or frustrating understanding and interactions, plays a key part in how social workers and children communicate with one another.

Continuing to develop the findings of the TLC project, the Department of Social Work and Social Care at the University of Sussex commissioned further research which took the form of an impact pilot project. The pilot involved working with two group of social workers in two separate local authorities over the course of six months, with the aim of 1) facilitating learning from the online resources

¹ See appendix one



using an experiential and accessible approach; and 2) exploring and measuring the impact of these resources on the practice of social workers.

2. Pilot implementation

2.1 Action inquiry approach

The TLC Impact pilot used Action inquiry (AI), a reflective learning method, to facilitate the learning from the web-based resources. AI is a cyclical process of reflection and action to strengthen individual and organisational practice and operates at three interrelated levels.² **First person AI** is self-inquiry, a process of bringing awareness to our thoughts, feelings and actions in a personal and professional context. **Second-person AI** involves joint inquiry with others into issues of mutual concern. **Third-person AI** seeks to bring a wider community, such as an organization, into inquiry. As a method, AI is in alignment with the TLC '*Child Case Context*' model as a whole systems approach to learning and change and thus worked in synergy.

At its heart AI is about developing capacity for cultural change through the transformation of individuals and organisations towards achieving greater reflectivity, effectiveness, emotional intelligence and wellbeing (Torbert 2004).³ The AI process in the context of TLC was adapted to support the development of increased insight, shared vision and practice. It used collaborative ways of communicating and applying learning to enable change and understand the impact of both the resources and this approach on social workers and children.

2.2 Pilot sites and participants

The TLC Impact pilot project took place over a period of twelve months between January 2017 and December 2017 across two local authority areas, Site A and Site B, based in England. Monthly sessions were held in each locality, for six months. A significant amount of time was invested upfront in order to secure the participation from social work teams and ensure they were fully informed as to the nature of the pilot and commitment to being involved. This is further referenced in the recommendations section of this report.

Seven people attended from the Children and Families Service in Site A and seven people from Family Support Team in Site B. The social workers had a range of experience; from newly qualified workers through to senior workers who had been practicing for a significant amount of time. Attendance varied and depended largely on external factors such as the need to attend court at short

² Appendix two

³ Torbert, B. (2004) *Action Inquiry: The Secret of Timely and Transforming Leadership*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc.



notice or children in unexpected and immediate need of support/protection. Participants were also absent due to workload or sickness. After the first few sessions, a core group of 4-6 participants from each locality were in attendance regularly each month.

2.3 Session content

Each session was co-facilitated by two facilitators and took place over a two hour period. The sessions were framed around each of the four web-based resources: Getting the Mindset Right; Creating the Space; Communicating with Purpose; and Making Good Endings. Sessions began with a short breathing space and communication exercise to promote participant connection and dialogue. The main body of the session was comprised of watching sections of the relevant web-based resource and taking part in a variety of experiential whole and small group exercises, such as the world café approach⁴, the use of systemic mapping and constellations work, and sculpting using mediums such as Lego to explore a particular reflection point or case study outlined in the resources.



Each session was completed by inviting each participant to hold an individual inquiry/question that was relevant to them and inspired by the session content, and to use times in between the sessions during their working practice, in order to reflect and/or take some action. Examples of inquiries held by participants include:

⁴ World Café Is a whole group interaction method focused on conversations. A café conversation is a creative process for holding collaborative dialogue, sharing knowledge and creating possibilities for action in groups of all sizes. The environment is set up like a café to encourage more relaxed and potentially creative conversation to take place. www.theworldcafe.com



- “What drives my approach and what dilemmas does this present?”
- “I am trying to use more interactive resources in my work with children.”
- “Reflecting on past experience of a family who over-identified with my ethnicity and religion, I will see how I manage this issue as it arises again.”
- “I will explore how I am working with a set of siblings. I am aware that the older one is more dominant, so I would like to explore that more.”
- “I’d like to see if the children on my caseload know what my role is and what I am here to do.”
- “I am going to think about how to make better use of school visits and school space. I am going to try and ask for the space I need and get the best room available.”
- “I will try and think in advance what I need to do with each child and try and apply some structure in order to feel there is a better sense of purpose.”

The purpose of including this in the content of the sessions was to increase the opportunity for participants to bring reflection and learning into their everyday social work practice, increasing self-awareness of, and potential change in, their interactions with children based on these insights. At the beginning of the following session, participants were invited to briefly share any thoughts, feelings or actions which may have resulted from their individual inquiry.

2.4 Evaluation methodology

Data collection

All individual sessions were audio-recorded. The recordings were used to capture the individual action inquiries and to pull out any key changes relating to practice since the last session.

A monitoring framework based loosely on the structure of an ‘Outcomes Star’ was designed specifically for this project covering ten domains of practice: **confidence, skills, obstacles/barriers, organisational support, access to resources, resilience, frustration, empathy, weight given to children’s voices, fears**. Each domain was scored using a Likert scale of 1-10 (see appendix). Each domain was accompanied by a text box in which participants were asked to explain their interpretation of each domain and reasons for their scoring. Participants were asked to complete this at the beginning of the first session. At the final session, participants were provided with their original scoring and asked to indicate on a separate form any change in score against any



of the domains, and if so why. The provision of written feedback to accompany the scoring provided rich data which added context and nuance to the quantitative data. The data from each participant was entered into an excel spreadsheet in preparation for analysis. Ten participants completed both pre and post session scoring (6 Site A and 4 B participants), with one additional participant providing post session data only in the form of written feedback (Site B).

A focus group was also held with participants in each locality following the final session. These provided a less structured format for participants to reflect on how the sessions had been most beneficial to them in terms of their practice as well as what elements of the sessions/format could be improved. Questions covered: **logistics, programme content and methodology, and impacts of taking part**. Both focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed. A total of ten participants took part in the focus groups (5 from Site A and Hove and 5 from Site B).

Research ethics

Participants were provided with a brief information sheet which explained how their data would be stored securely and confidentially and their right to withdraw their data at any point. Participants were provided with ID numbers which were used on any written information they submitted. Written informed consent was sought from all participants before commencing the first session.

Data Analysis

Upon reading the initial transcripts and the written feedback accompanying the quantitative measure, similar themes became apparent. Therefore a decision was taken to combine the data together for analysis. This took the form of basic thematic analysis; initial coding of chunks of data, then merging and pruning these codes, drawing the most significant ones together under broader higher level themes and subthemes. Examples of individual action inquiries held by participants which corroborated or further illuminated the themes were then added in as appropriate.

3. Impact – key changes to practice

The analysis of the scoring from the quantitative measures demonstrated positive shifts across a number of the domains. Summary statistics are presented in Figure 1 below, followed by a presentation of major themes emanating from the quantitative and qualitative feedback.



Headlines
<p>80% indicated an improvement in their confidence in working with children</p> <p><i>"More confidence, system issues still remain but have more knowledge to help me to circumnavigate." (A02)</i></p>
<p>70% indicated an improvement in skills or working with children</p> <p><i>"I feel there is no limit in what to use to engage with children and talking to them." (B08)</i></p>
<p>70% stated they had experienced an improvement in listening to children</p> <p><i>"TLC group has really helped bring children's voices to the forefront, we've had ample opportunity to talk about individual children on caseloads (A01)</i></p> <p><i>"This space allowed me to really think about how to encourage children to have a voice and how I can hear it better." (A02)</i></p> <p><i>"I have definitely improved in this area and making a conscious effort to obtain views from children more regularly." (B07)</i></p>
<p>50% had decreased fears in working with children</p> <p><i>"More relaxed in direct work, less agenda driving, more an inclination to be in the moment." (A02)</i></p> <p>50% stated they felt less frustration</p> <p><i>"Slightly more mindful now to not let frustrations (external) impact on my practice (A04)</i></p> <p>50% stated they had seen an improvement in their access to resources</p> <p><i>"TLC group helped us get funding for more resources in our team to use with children." (A01)</i></p>

Fig 1: Improvements captured from pre and post quantitative and qualitative measures based on 10 participants.



The following section combines the qualitative feedback provided by the participants in the sessions, written feedback accompanying the quantitative measures and focus group data. Three overarching themes dominate. These relate to changes in direct practice with children, connecting with self and others and the impact of the wider environment.

3.1 Theme One: Improvements in direct practice with children

Becoming more child focused

One of the overarching goals of the TLC Impact Pilot was to provide participants with the confidence and skills in order that they may improve the way they both listen and talk to children. The first online resource describes the competing tensions in taking a relational vs. procedural approach to work with children and this theme was ever present throughout the remaining sessions. The passionate and focused discussions arising from these tensions seems to have enabled real shifts in practice which are borne out through the qualitative feedback.

"I have been able to reflect on why I am there and am more mindful of getting to know the individual, rather than 'tick boxing'. Being present with the moment."(B01)

"The weight given to children's voices, I thought that for me I felt more confident about, its giving yourself permission, those moments of engagement and connecting, that enable you to do the more difficult talking, and those observations, and being able to just be with a child." (A06)

Another participant reported that she had developed a curiosity in her interactions with children: *"I wonder what he meant by that rather than how am I going to say that."* (A02)

At baseline, two participants talked about specific challenges working with certain age ranges and these participants both felt this had improved as a result of taking part in the pilot. For example:

"I feel more confident in using a variety of ideas in engaging older children and the power of listening to them. They always have an interest that I can tie into discussions." (B08)

Another stated in her post session feedback that she is now:

"Seeing improvement in interaction with children following experimentation with different tools and approaches." (B01)



Several participants highlighted how their individual inquiries helped them to reflect on their interaction with children to help them feel listened to. For example:

"My inquiry was something that I always wanted to do, but I felt like I don't have time to, but thinking it. I made time and it actually benefitted me, because the inquiry that I picked is after the sessions with the children, always pick up the phone and call the parents and talk to them and talk to the child beforehand. I felt the children thought they were listened to and it built a relationship with the parents as well." (B11)

Another participant chose to actively observe her interactions with a child in terms of how she positions herself in the room, reflecting on how the body language of the child matches their words. The following month, this participant described her experience of sitting down on the floor next to the child to do a piece of interactive work, and was able to observe that the child was engaged and thinking rather than just going through the motions.

The first online resource invited participants to think about the quantity and quality of headspace and preparation time they were able to engage in before their meetings with children. Several participants noted how changes to practice in this area helped them to become more child focused.

"We were buzzing around and buzzing around, we were not preparing, we were doing, but not seeing, I felt that, I am doing doing and not seeing. But since then I became more focused on preparation, to make that 5-10 minutes preparation for each session with the children. I feel now more focused on what I am going to do with them." (B11)

"I have become much more thoughtful when planning a session with a child. Ensuring that I tailor it to the individual child, I feel like I have a real sense of the personalities of the children on my caseload." (B07)

Re-iterating the value of play

As a key part of becoming more child centred, a number of participants emphasised the increased focus they now give to allowing play in their work with children. This was a marked shift for several of the newly qualified Social Workers as illustrated by the two quotes below:

"At the beginning when I was doing assessment, I was talking to the parents and whenever I met the children, I am interviewing them rather than doing stuff with them. Now I've realised that I can actually play or do things with the children and



actually still get information out of them So yes over the last 6-7 months there has been a noticeable change for me.” (A03)

“I think I realised I was getting it the wrong way around, as a newly qualified, I was going to every assessment and visit with such an agenda in my head.... I wrote here [in baseline assessment] ‘I was worried about missing a vital bit of information in just playing.’ How awful? Just playing? But I have written here [post assessment], ‘The space has allowed me to think about how to encourage children to have a voice, but also to actually hear it.’ And it is in that playing, and I have just had the best fun!” (A02)

For social workers with more experience, increased confidence and comfort with certain aspects of play was also apparent in their feedback:

“And the touching thing, I have two girls on my caseload that always want to do hair and makeup all the time and I had always been a bit resistant thinking no, but I have become a bit more comfortable, and the mum’s sitting there all the time, she’s not fussed at all. And I think I couldn’t have done that six months ago.” (A05)

“I had my nails painted absolutely hideously the other day, but it felt like such a privilege and it was actually a really bonding thing to do, because this little girl was holding my hands and it was a real connection.” (A06)

One participant used her inquiry to pay attention to how she interacts with the different siblings in one family. She reported back the following month that she had become more interactive with one child in particular, providing colouring pens and paper. Interestingly she was then able to observe the child using these with his mum, and then felt better able to assess the connection between them. This participant also explained how she was experimenting with buying soft toys and feelings cards to help the younger boys (5 & 9yrs) to express their feelings, which she reported had both worked well.

Another experienced social worker, who already owned a well-stocked resources box, funded by herself, explained how her involvement in the pilot had allowed her to think more creatively about different ways to engage children.

“I think about what is it they like to do, what do I like to do – what are my hobbies and almost like having my hobbies bringing into the session e.g. planting some chilli bulbs with the children, because I love gardening.” (B11)

This same participant brought in her collection of resources to one of the sessions and in the focus group described how she now shares these communally.



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"I am now vigilant in bringing ideas and resources to the cupboard and no time to claim costs but I recycle most times and am more creative. Everything I have rather than having it in the boot of my car, I put it in the cupboard and maybe other people could use it." (B11)



The issue of access to adequate resources also featured heavily as a theme in the sessions and post session feedback. This is discussed further in theme three: Impact of the Wider Environment, as part of the organisation/systemic issues identified by participants

Feeding children's voices into the statutory process

Several participants came to the sessions and illustrated how they were better able to amplify children's voices into the more procedural aspects of their work.

"I had a conference last month, and I purposively went to see the children before and filled out their wishes and feelings in the template and it felt like I had really made that extra effort to do that rather than just go on our usual visits and see how they are feeling then." (B07)

This same participant also noted the positive impact this had on herself:

"I guess I just felt a bit more organised, and at the conference for the Chair to recognise that I had done that, it was a sense of pride that I had managed to organise that." (B07)

Another participant talked about the additional emphasis she had been placing on making sure the children are made visible in the court process – how she made it her role to keep reminding about the presence of the children –



articulating their names and bringing them to life so that they remained centred in the conversation.

3.2 Theme Two: Connecting with self and others

The importance of providing a dedicated peer reflection space

For most participants, being given permission to step away from their day to day practice and reflect on their work was invaluable. For one participant this was indeed the most valued aspect to the sessions:

It's been nice to have some space to actually think 'well why do I do, and what is the reasoning behind that, what informs that'. (B08)

“Actually that's the thing, it is that idea of protected time and that's what it is. The headspace and physical space to stop that running running running and think from a distance or an overall perspective about these things,... so that we don't give up on anything or keep reducing our standards of expectations from ourselves as professionals.” (B06)

Many participants noted the importance of the peer support provided in the sessions:

“It was really helpful coming together to share experiences with my colleagues and know that some of my insecurities and challenges are similar and this sense that what I am feeling is normal and expected in social work.” (A01)

“It has been helpful to listen to other team members' worries which we all experience and makes you feel that you are not the only person feeling that.” (B11)

For some this had a direct impact on improved confidence to carry out their work with children:

“I am less desperate to get it right first time – that has been a significant shift for me. Having the safeness of the group to really think about it, made me realise that actually 'it's alright' ” (A02)

“What I liked about the group is an acknowledgement and the support around that this is really difficult. That is something am going to miss. As it enabled us to do our jobs better, enabling the kids to talk about their experiences.” (A06)



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Several participants in one locality described how the sessions helped accentuate the supportive nature of colleagues:

"We'd discussed a lot in here and when we went out we just kept continuing ...so I think it helped to have that sense of togetherness." (A03)

Another participant also expressed how this sense of kindness also extended out to working with families: *"And it's definitely been easier to do that with our families as well."* (A05)

Shared Practice Ideas

Throughout the sessions, there was ample opportunity to share practice ideas and trouble shoot problems. Examples of the ideas exchanged include:

- Use of Jenga to work with siblings and ask them to pick out a block and name an emotion
- Emotion cards
- Use of the driving to talk to older children, or autistic children, taking walks side by side
- Suggestions to meet in café rather than home
- Sharing tips on how to remember children's names within larger families.

Connecting with self

The beginning and end of each session allowed time for mindfulness practice and self-care which a number of participants commented positively on.

"I liked the way it was set up, so we arrived, it never felt rushed ever, there was always something at the beginning that got us in tune with our breathing and I felt like I really arrived. There are so few things I do in my work where it's like 'are you okay? Sit down, be calm, think, breathe'." (A06)

"In the beginning it felt a bit silly, picking an object, 'what is this, I've got a report to write' but actually today, and the last 3 or 4 sessions I've just thought let's just go with this and actually it's been really good." (B01)

Many participants spoke in the focus groups about how they could incorporate mindfulness practice into their everyday work following the pilot.



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“If we had some structure or little core of these sessions to carry into our team meetings, that would help, so even like a quick 5 mins of breathing and reflective questions.” (B06)

3.3 Theme Three: Impact of the Wider Environment

As part of the ‘*Child Case Context*’ model, the impact of the wider organisational systems, structures, expectations and competing tensions was a strong theme throughout discussions.

Competing Demands

Many participants commented in the focus groups, about the ever present struggle to balance the competing ‘procedural’ demands of the social work ‘system’ with the relational aspect of their work with children, which requires time, imagination and managerial support. For many, the sessions helped to reiterate what many already felt, in terms of maintaining more of a balance towards the relational.



“Sometimes it’s easy to hide behind the organisation’s agenda of got to get this assessment completed you have got to get this report completed, you have to get this conference convened, so certain newly qualifieds are running around thinking this is alright because this is what the organisation wants us to do. But actually somewhere in the middle of all that you also have a responsibility as a social worker to do that direct work and give it more emphasis.” (A02)

“Sometimes the organisation becomes more important than the children, and I was just thinking in the last month how many times I’ve been asked, can you cancel that or re-arrange it so you can finish that report because we have court timescales, and actually that is the wrong way around, we shouldn’t be thinking I’m going to cancel



that or re-arrange it because I've got to get report A done, and I think that needs to come from the top down." (B08)

"But I am aware that there is a lot of organisational changes at the moment, and whilst it's driving me crazy cause there is an awful amount of change again I want to recognise that the 'Me and My World' once we have got our heads around it, is much much more child centred and hopefully those statutory reviews, which are so important for children, will be a much more valuable experience." (A06)

Access to resources to use with children

In both localities, there was strong group consensus about the lack of resources provided by the local authorities to carry out work with children. Participants felt that these were core tools that should be made available to them but were not done so adequately. A number of participants provided their own arts/crafts which they paid for out of their own pocket.

"But it should be that we can just turn up and pick up some pens papers stickers, play dough, figures or whatever, it shouldn't be what can we borrow. The bits in the room are a bit sort of rubbish, there are a couple of bricks and a couple of that, definitely not enough to entertain a small child." (A05)

As one participant said: *"If we were doing a social work assessment we would highlight that this would be an area of concern! There are no toys in here."* (A06)

"Well you know a teacher will have what they need, a doctor is not expected to buy a stethoscope." (B01)

"We were given a resource box, once, but that was three years ago and we lost it in the fire." (B11)

Each locality spent time within the sessions generating ideas for the kind of resources needed and the systems required to make these accessible. This was then communicated to managers by the session facilitators. Whilst 50% of all participants recorded an improvement in access to resources at the end of the pilot, the qualitative feedback demonstrates that the reasoning for the scoring was varied. Within one locality, some of the participants stated they had experienced an improvement in the resources provided by their employer. For example:

"As a pod we now have a budget to spend on resources and have a place where we will keep all of them." (A04)



"The TLC group helped us get funding for more resources in our team to use with children." (A01)

"Some resources/tools to work with children have been emailed by the local authority since we began this process." (A03)

However others in this same locality did not feel this way. In their feedback there was a palpable sense that despite some resources being made available as a result of their feedback, this was not sufficient or did not fully meet the needs of the team.

"There is still those issues around the resources I still have my box which I restock and put things in. I have noticed in our room there are lots more things but I don't know whether I can use them." (A06)

Others in this locality described that there had been an increase in sharing of resources/tools among colleagues of items bought by individuals. Several participants also talked about colleagues and team members being a resource in themselves.

"Colleagues remain a wonderful resource re experience and knowledge." (A06)

"We also discuss and share ideas in group supervision." (A04)

In the other locality there was more pessimism regarding change in this area, with the majority of respondents expressing negative comments:

"But we are still where we were at the beginning in terms of the resources, we haven't heard back." (B01)

"The social work job requires this and there should be a space to talk to children and social workers should be able to access the equipment they say they want. It's good to hold that standard." (B06)

One participant stated she had increased frustration due to the fact that the discussion on lack of resources in the sessions had not yet resulted in a response from management.

4. Process related evaluation



The focus group also provided an opportunity to explore some of the facilitators and barriers to engagement in the pilot, as well as discuss ideas for ensuring the sustainability of the work.

Management support to attend sessions

In both localities, the pilot received strong support from managers who encouraged attendance. This was noted strongly by the participants, particularly in one locality, as being key to facilitating their attendance, despite the competing demands described above.

"I think the key to people being available and present, is the management support, definitely I think [managers], there was never this sense of there is that TLC group coming up, can you just go out, there was never anything like that and I think that if there was something that had come up that was quite difficult, they would have given support." (A06)

"I think management commitment, the fact that [manager] was just on it, very very supportive, it really helped, did feel that it was justified the time." (A02)

"We were told from the start to put in diaries and must attend unless there is something very urgent, like court which you are expected to go. Knowing you have permission to be here was a positive thing." (A01)

"It's about being given that permission to step away." (B01)

Attendance, length and timing of sessions

There was no overall agreement about the timing of the sessions or length. Some participants felt that holding sessions towards the end of the day would be better so they could leave work and process the material more fully. However, for others, they felt they would have been unable to attend towards end of day if it meant missing after-school slots with children. Some felt two hours was sufficient time for each session, but not all agreed:

"I disagree, I am really mindful that a lot of the time in the group, not that it felt rushed, but there would have been a benefit if we had some extra time, as I felt a the clock was ticking and are we going to get everything done. When the group ended I thought I could have done that for a little bit longer. But I do know that people would probably struggle at that time of day, but I don't know if it could be a little bit longer with a break." (A06)

"Teachers have inset days, and it would be helpful for us to have a whole day where we are given permission to meet like this and have a sort of 'what's working for



you, what's going well and not well' and working through the worksheets together but just having the space and permission." (B01)

Experiential content of the sessions

There was strong support for the experiential aspect to the sessions. One participant explained:

"In terms of my own learning, I learn more from doing and discussing than watching." (A06)

"I liked the activities where you get up off the chair." (A05)

Some aspects of the experiential method were not useful to participants or required additional time to fully engage with. For example, the reflective diaries were under-utilised and participants found there was insufficient time to fully engage and understand the systemic mapping exercise. However, the AI process was well received, with participants engaging and incorporating the action-orientated approach in a way that suited them.

"I think it was more a sub-conscious thing, I set it and didn't necessarily think that is what I was doing in a session but it kind of just happened." (B07)

"Picking an inquiry, something that you would like to do in the future and then sticking to it has helped." (B11)

However, some participants, across both localities found the language of the AI method a little alienating. For example:

"I think I just had a bit of an issue with the terminology, practice inquiry, and I don't know why, I had a bit of a block about it and if I think about more of a practice reflection, I think that is probably more of the language we are used to and I think that is what we are doing. And I don't know that with the language of inquiry I have to be more pro-active than I need to be, which sort of put a block on me doing it, as I was thinking I haven't got time to do this, but actually if you think about a practice reflection, we do that all the time, so for me, that was a bit of a block." (B08)

Value of the online resources

The participants found the online resources a useful tool to opening up discussions and reflections.



"I felt like a lot of what they were doing in the videos, we do anyway, but it was a good hook to get us talking of examples and our experiences." (A01)

"But its good to hear it, social workers talking about their experiences of direct work and what tools and what they thought before and what they are doing now, that was good to hear, you could kind of relate to it." (B11)

However, some felt there was insufficient time to fully utilise the content of the online resources, for example:

"I found them relevant and useful but I think there was not enough time to interrogate what was going on. Sometimes I feel there was a lot we had to cover, so it meant extending the time or reducing the amount of material." (A03)

Others pointed out the need to have structured sessions in order to get the most out of the resources, mostly due to time pressures in their workload that would make watching the resources as part of self-learning, very difficult.

"We have so many resources and so much research that we could access and so on, but we don't, cause we are constantly running so it's only when something is in the calendar, its planned out, in advance so flagged up that the time is for this, it's the only time that one would do it." (B06)

"I think it's helpful to have an external facilitator as well that sort of comes with that agenda and does it for us, we are all constantly running and its helpful to have a different perspective as well, because quite often we get caught up in organisational stuff and you don't, and having that separation." (B08)

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

One of the major findings of the original research was the value children and young people place on building relationships with their social workers and the need for this to take place sensitively and creatively. To this end, the pilot has clearly demonstrated its effectiveness in helping social workers reflect on their practice, values and aspirations, within the context of ever present competing 'procedural' demands, in order that they may shift the balance towards the relational; both in the way they interact, listen, talk and play with children.

The combination of both the online resources, reflection points, experiential exercises and AI method, worked well. The emphasis on observing current practice, or making small changes and reflecting on the experience, provided opportunity for participants to internally focus their attention on subtle



elements of self-practice, in a non-threatening way. In doing so it provided a way to help deepen understanding of thoughts and feelings which motivate actions, and consequentially may provide first steps in the process to changing or enhancing practice. The 'headspace' created by the sessions to embrace self-care and (re)connect with colleagues was deemed invaluable by the participants, creating the appropriate safe environment for learning and honest reflection to take place.

The success of the pilot is also illustrated in the requests for it to continue in some way. There was particularly strong support in one locality and a lively discussion took place on how this could be enabled.

The following section focuses on what next steps might be taken to strengthen any future replication of the impact pilot, as well as widen its impact and scope, building on the findings of this report.

Process and Content

- **Session configuration:** reviewing the length, timing and frequency of sessions will strengthen the overall quality and impact of the process. Replication of the pilot should consider holding either longer sessions (such as 2.5 or 3 hours) or more sessions, such as 10-12 rather than the original 6 piloted. This will allow time to cover the web-based resources in more detail, include more experiential exercises and embed learning over a longer period.
- **Facilitated learning:** external facilitation was valued. To support sustainability, facilitators could support an identified practice lead to deliver structured sessions within their current CPD framework.
- **Guidance framework:** developing the resources designed for each session into a simple guidance framework would support further replication. The guidance framework should emphasise the experiential non-linear and emergent nature of the work and encourage future facilitators to use their own initiative; a light touch reference which guides rather than prescribes the content of sessions

Organisational Support

- **Senior Management:** As the findings highlight, commitment across the whole system, and particularly at the level of senior management is key in ensuring the attendance, engagement and sustainability of the project. Conversations and commitment from senior figures in the early stages should also be coupled with their ongoing support throughout the sessions. This includes communicating with direct line managers, keeping



abreast of project developments, actioning any requests stemming from the participants or their inquiries and sending clear messages to all highlighting their support.

- **Participants:** Ensure participants have a clear understanding of both the value and commitment of the project, in order to support attendance. This can be aided through the facilitators' attendance at team meetings to explain the project and the provision of soft and hard copies of information.
- **Resources:** As part of the preparation process, ensure services have the necessary resources in place to enable sessions to take place and that these have been organised well in advance. This includes adequate room space with enough space to move around, projectors and IT support, flip charts and pens.

Sustainability: widening TLC's scope and impact

The recommendations below represent a number of options to scale up and widen the impact of the TLC project, some of which are already in discussion. The recommendations focus on capacity building and sustainability to ensure any actions taken sit within appropriate organisational frameworks.

Embedding TLC within existing pilot areas: For the two pilot sites, **explore** the possibility of embedding TLC into standard CPD and workforce development programmes, for example through practice educators and the teaching partnership. Where there is an appetite, this may include match funding in partnership with the local authority and, if successful, ESRC funding. As participants pointed out, introducing the sessions into CPD more widely would require real commitment from managers to allow participants the time to attend, and this may need to be reflected in their workload.

National Reach: Explore further the possibilities of scaling up TLC to a national level. Options include:

- Recruit five Local Authorities (LA) in the South East Region of England to take part in TLC. This approach would include a 'champions' component, whereby practitioners from each LA would be trained to deliver the programme within their services. To ensure the sustainability of this approach, work would also take place with relevant workforce development and HR departments to embed the programme and its continuation into core CPD and job descriptions. As previously highlighted, buy in from all aspects of the service are required to ensure TLC is woven into the fabric of the service.
- To further support this, develop a 'community of practice' for service champions; this might include bi-annual meetings and a virtual platform

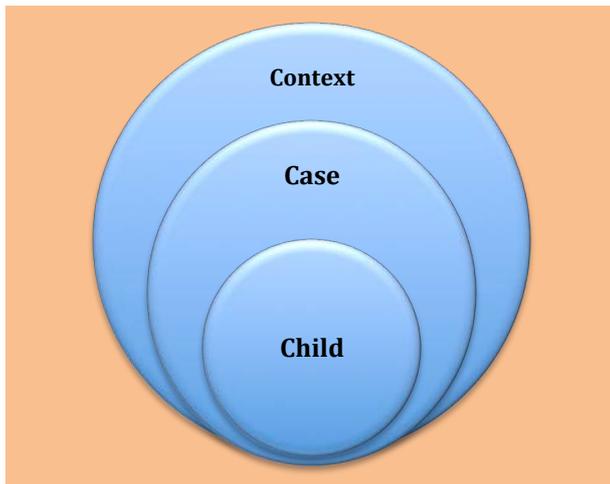


such as Facebook/wordpress to enable practitioners to share resources, support and learning.

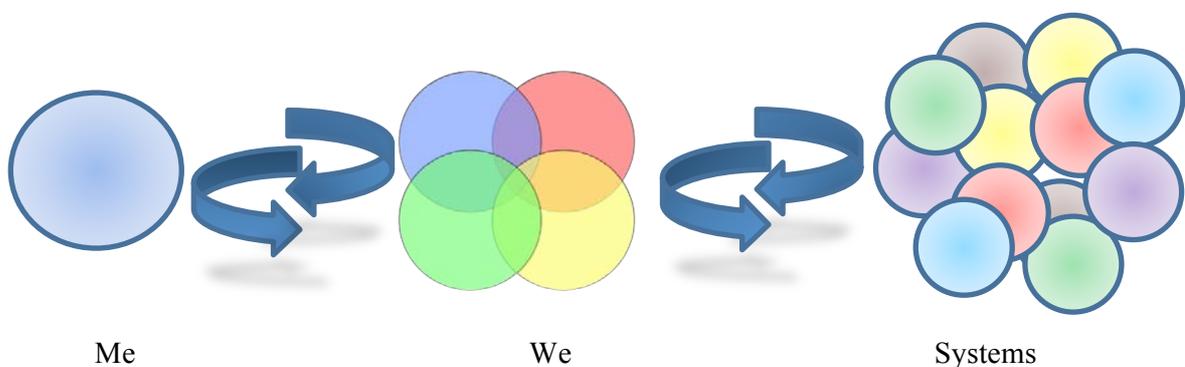
- **TLC Consolidation with Scotland or Wales:** Explore the potential of further developing work in the initial TLC research sites of Wales or Scotland, consolidating their developments with this pilot to connect and evolve the research as a whole.

Appendix

1. Child Case Context Model: an ecological model for communication



2. Action Inquiry: Whole systems approach to learning





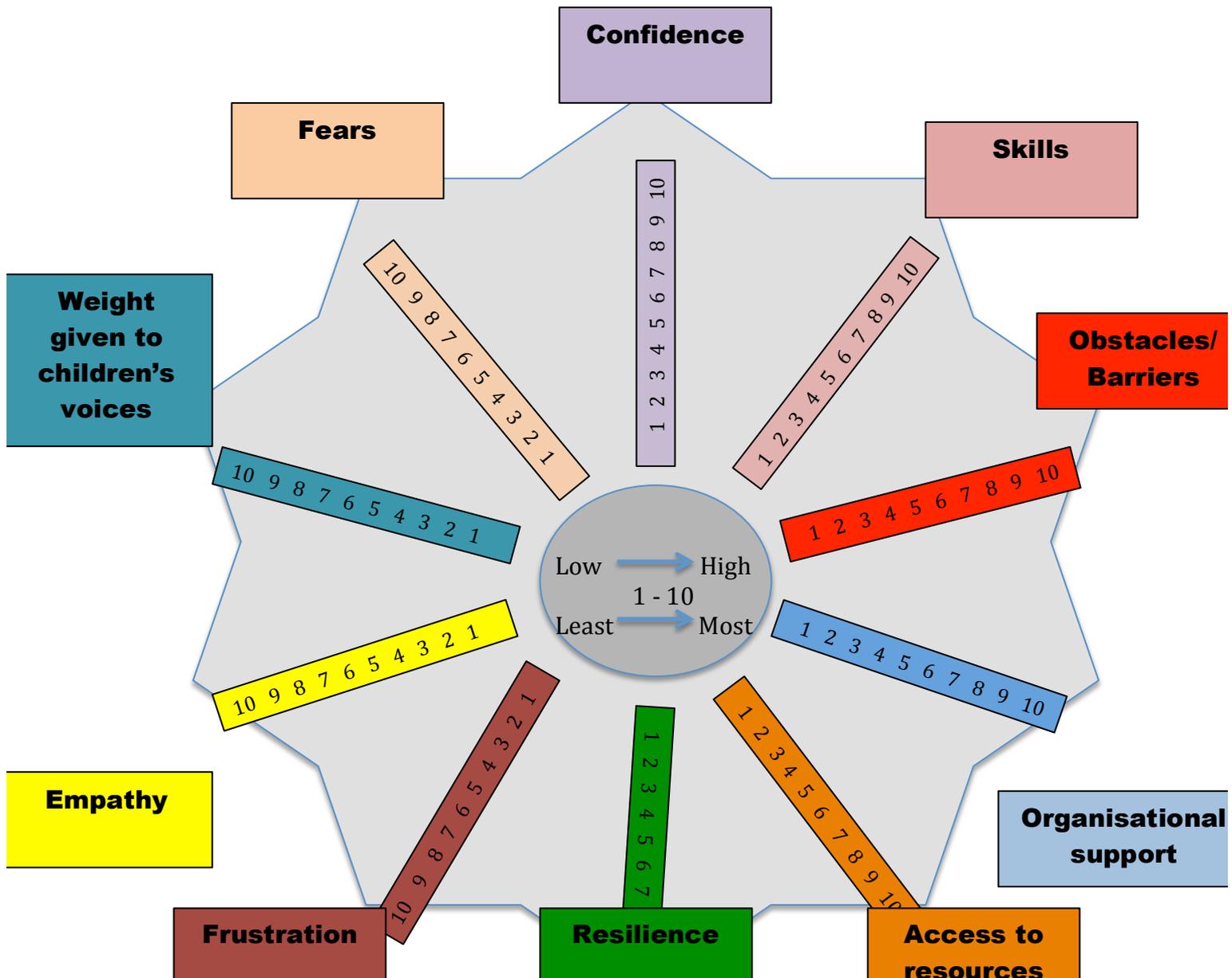
Exploring how social workers and children communicate

Inquiry into yourself- how you feel, think and behave

Relationships and communication with others into mutual inquiry

Bringing the wider organisational, social, political, economic and ecological systems into inquiry

3. Monitoring template





Exploring how social workers
and children communicate

Outcome stars monitoring FOLLOW UP - Reflecting on practice

Please read over the forms you completed in your initial session. If you would score yourself differently now on any of the domains, please indicate the new score below and write a sentence or two as to what has changed (for better or worse!).

If there is NO change, please CIRCLE that option and also state why. Please feel you can be honest.

Confidence Score – NO CHANGE NEW SCORE _____

WHY?

Skills Score – NO CHANGE NEW SCORE _____

WHY?

Obstacles/barriers Score – NO CHANGE NEW SCORE _____

WHY?

Organisational support Score – NO CHANGE NEW SCORE _____

WHY?



Exploring how social workers
and children communicate

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Access to resources Score – NO CHANGE NEW SCORE _____

WHY?

Resilience Score – NO CHANGE NEW SCORE _____

WHY?

Frustration Score – NO CHANGE NEW SCORE _____

WHY?

Empathy Score – NO CHANGE NEW SCORE _____

WHY?

Weight given to children's voices Score – NO CHANGE NEW SCORE _____

WHY?

Fears Score – NO CHANGE NEW SCORE _____

WHY?



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Any other comments

(For those not attending the focus group)

Please tell us your thoughts on:

- What did you like/not like about the sessions?
- How did you find the process of doing individual inquiries between sessions?
- Was there enough focus on the resources and interactive exercises?
- What could be improved if we repeat this with another pod?

