

How can the voices of children in the early years, influence changes in pedagogy and practice?

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Children's issues have become a greater priority since the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989), and it became a legally binding obligation to respect children's views; yet their views about educational practices are often neglected. Reasons are often cited as lack of maturity or competence; however, I argue that children's voices should be taken into consideration if we are to develop more inclusive practices that respond to their views about learning. This is not simply because they have a right for their voices to be heard, but more importantly, because they are key informants and experts on their own lives (McNaughton 2002) and are the best source of advice for matters affecting them. Nevertheless, as Singer (2014, 381) notes, 'too often children's voices are not heard or not heeded,' reflecting the constant theme of powerlessness and exclusion felt by children (Messiou 2006).



For younger children, the situation seems even more bleak as their voices are further removed from curricula documentation (Early Years Foundation Stage). An earlier version explicitly stated 'All children have an equal right to be listened to and valued in the setting' (DCSF 2008: Principle into Practice 1:2), yet in the most recent iteration (DfE 2017) there is no mention of child voice, with more emphasis being placed on adult-led activities in preparation for the formal learning of Year One. Whilst there is no causal

link between adult-led activities and a neglect or absence of child voice, there is a danger that more instructional modes of learning may diminish the possibility for children's voices to be heard. Bernstein (1975; 1990; 2000), for example, speaks of the importance of a play-based curriculum that underpins the 'invisible pedagogy' (Bernstein 1975, 9). Here, teachers plan the learning, yet expect children to rearrange and explore their environment; acknowledge the power that children have over their own

Respecting children’s views provides a model of good pedagogical practice, however, there is a limited awareness of how to put it into practice.

selection and structure of activities; enable children to regulate their own social relationships (King 1979). Thus, children have opportunities for their voices to be heard as they navigate their opportunities for learning.

What do we mean by voice?

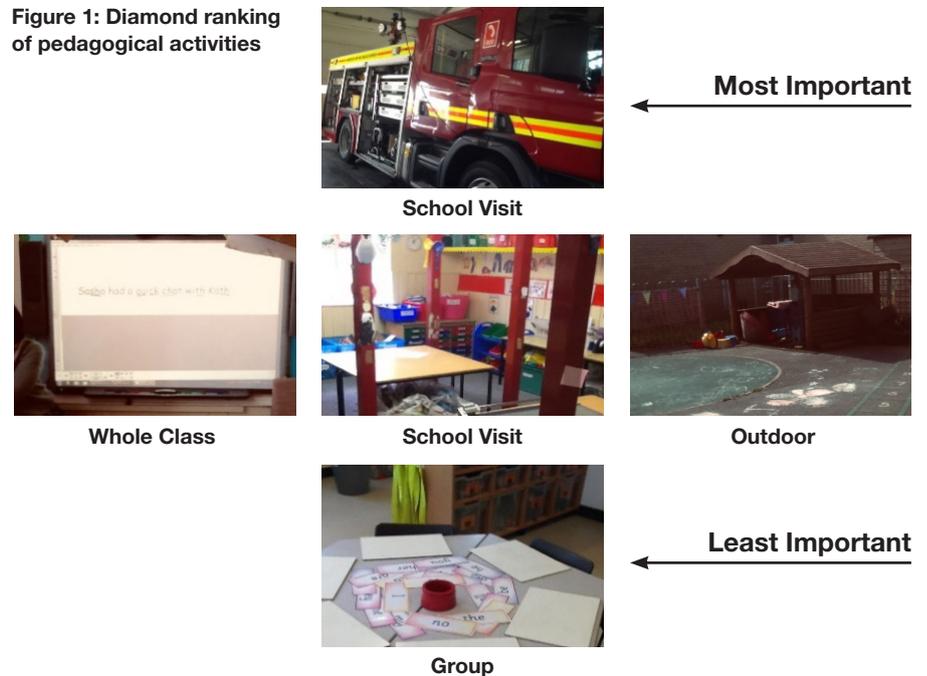
Thinking of voice as a window into the lives of children, necessitates an exploration of what we mean by ‘voice’. As more people adopt the term, it is in danger of losing much of its specific meaning, becoming disconnected from its original theoretical sources. For example, it can become sensationalised with adults assuming they can exchange and match children’s thoughts to different situations and adult’s interpretations (Komulainen 2007). This is particularly significant for practitioners working with younger children; unless they provide genuine and meaningful opportunities to listen to children’s voices, which acknowledge that children see with different eyes and have different priorities and concerns (Kellett 2011), it becomes problematic to reflect on their intentions, motivations and meanings.

Nevertheless, it cannot be assumed that children possess one homogenous voice. Hence, it may be more helpful to consider the notion of ‘engaging with voices’ (Cruddas 2006) rather than ‘listening to voice’, which avoids an over reliance on adult ways of listening to children, and considers how child and adult voices operate together.

How do we listen to voice?

Respecting children’s views provides a good pedagogical principle,

Figure 1: Diamond ranking of pedagogical activities



however, there is limited awareness of how to put it into practice. Lundy (2007) developed a model to support our understanding, which focuses on four elements: space; voice; audience; and influence. For instance, by ensuring that the space is inclusive, it enables the views of a diverse range of children to come to the fore, and safeguards that participation is not just afforded to the articulate and literate. It reflects Lenz Taguchi’s (2010) work that reminds us that there are no best ways of learning, but ones that respond to the complexities, differences and diversities, of all those involved in the teaching and learning process.

Nonetheless, practitioners report feeling a disconnect between acknowledging the child as an active learner, and the daily compromises they feel compelled to make in their pedagogical choices (Genishi and Dyson 2009). Perhaps it is the

overpowering curriculum guidance and pressures from Ofsted, which explain practitioners’ confusion over the balance between learning that responds to the child’s voice, and more structured activities.

What does this look like in practice?

To explain what engaging with voices might look like in practice, I provide examples of a research study that employed tools readily used in early years classrooms, to explore the perceptions of inclusion of 40 children aged four to five, in two Reception classes.

The first tool used photographs of pedagogical activities occurring in the children’s daily routine (e.g. Group work; Whole class; Outdoor learning), in a diamond ranking activity. This is a recognised thinking skills tool (Rockett and Percival 2002) valued for facilitating discussion, and exploring and clarifying positions



These examples illustrate how the stimulus of a photograph can encourage children to begin to reflect on their thoughts and experiences.

and feelings on a topic. Its key strength lies in the notion that it's not important where the children place the photographs; rather it's their reasons for doing so that reveal much more about their thinking. Diamond ranking (figure 1), usually employs nine statements or images, however, due to the younger age of the children, I used five images after trialling its suitability with similarly aged children.

In one group's discussion, Hannah placed the 'Working with the teacher' photograph at the top of the diamond, explaining she felt included *"Because I was listening to the teacher and what she says."* Another child agreed saying *"Cos I like working with the teacher, to do my handwriting."* Another group reveals how diamond ranking can also disclose differing opinions. Henry placed the 'Group work' photograph at the bottom of the diamond, saying *"I don't like doing that work, cos it's really boring"*; Leo disagreed saying *"I find it good."* These examples illustrate how the stimulus of a photograph can encourage children to reflect on their thoughts and experiences in light of what others say, and consider how they might formulate responses to questions.

Children's drawings

Children's drawings are also a very successful tool to engage with voices; they form part of children's everyday activities; are considered fun and relaxing (Fargas-Malet et al. 2010) and minimise the power relationship between the child and adult. Through application of the tool, an emergent theme within my study, revealed children perceiving

themselves to be more included when they could choose the content, context of the pedagogical activity or with whom they could work. The examples presented are intended as a glimpse into the lived experiences of younger children's perceptions of inclusion. (Pseudonyms are applied to ensure the children's anonymity). An example that demonstrates how the tool can be used to explore complex issues, comes from James. He was keen to draw the pictures (figures 2 and 3), explaining that he perceived himself as included when he was making books because he was with his friend. However, when I questioned him about why he didn't feel included, he was more reticent, stating *"I don't want to tell you"*. James may not have wanted to, or been able to, articulate why he did not perceive himself to be included, however, the words he chose, *"Very, very, ever so included... Making them with Jack"*, and the pictures he subsequently drew, indicate that he placed some considerable emphasis on the opportunity to learn with his friends.

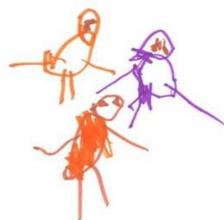


Figure 2: James feeling included when with his friends



Figure 3: James not feeling included when on his own

Indeed, in his drawings, James depicts himself working with two friends when he was included (figure 2), and alone when he was not (figure 3), stating *"I was left alone without Jack"*.

A further example comes from Emma. Whilst drawing her picture of an activity she did not perceive herself as included (figure 4), I spoke to her about the two people. She explained that her friend was on the right and she was the one on the left. Noting what I perceived to be a downturned mouth in the image of Emma, I asked her to tell me a little more about how she was feeling; she remarked that she didn't feel included *"Cos I hate going outside. I thought it was going to rain. And it's freezing!"* - this appeared to resonate with the context of the activity.

When Emma drew her picture of a pedagogical activity in which she felt included (figure 5), I was immediately struck by the number of people



Figure 4: Emma not feeling included outside

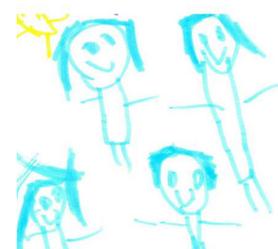


Figure 5: Emma



in the image who were all smiling. Interrogating the picture further, I asked Emma whether she was on her own when doing something creative; she responded “*I’m with other children!*”. Seeking further clarity about why she felt included, she commented “*Because they’re my friends!*” Thus, I concluded that her inclusion was predicated on a sense of belonging.

A final example, further exemplifies this notion of belonging. Jacob drew a picture of himself and his friend playing football (figure 6). Discussing the picture, Jacob said he felt included “*Cos I like playing with George*”. Trying to understand whether his inclusion was specifically dependent on George being present, I asked if he felt included when he was working with someone else or on his own; Jacob’s response was quite emphatic – “*I don’t like doing stuff on my own!*”

These examples seek to illustrate how the act of using every-day activities, such as drawing, can provide a space for children to feel comfortable about expressing themselves in ways that more traditional forms of questioning might not offer.



Figure 6: Jacob feeling included when playing with George

Conclusion

Reflecting on these experiences and those of the other children in my study, drew me to conclude that more emphasis needs to be placed on finding opportunities for children to express what they think and feel about matters of importance in their schooling. Paying attention to issues of detail, such as those highlighted here, enables us to further understand children’s thoughts on their learning experiences. Moreover, practitioners need to place children at the centre of their learning and reflect on alternative ways of engaging with their voices. Despite the ever-increasing demands of a mandated curriculum and assessment strategy, practitioners are the ones who know their children, and as such, it is upon them to find ways of listening to children, in an attempt to understand their priorities, interests and concerns and bring about meaningful change in their learning.

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Pen Portrait

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