

The productive parallels between young children's voice and practitioner voice

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Introduction

This entry uses eight inter-related factors of voice for children from birth to seven years (definition, power, inclusion, listening, time and space, approaches, processes and purposes) as a scaffold for thinking about practitioner voice. It argues that for children to have a voice then adults around them also need to have one, and without parallel consideration the former is likely to stall. By considering each of these factors in turn from the lens of the practitioner, their practice and their professional learning, I exemplify the complex relationship and make recommendations for a productive voice culture to be developed.

The eight factors that I use to structure this entry originate in the *Look who's talking: Eliciting the voices of children from birth to seven* international seminar series funded by the University of Strathclyde, UK. More information on the project and its participants can be found on the project website: www.voicebirthtoseven.co.uk. This seminar series brought together researchers and practitioners who work with young children (birth to seven) to give and support their 'voices' in respect to different aspects of their lived experiences. The intention was to create a space for individuals working in this relatively under-developed field to come together in a collaborative process, engaging with relevant theory and practice. The aims of the seminars were to move debate forward through developing guidelines and provocations for practice and advancing theory for facilitating and constraining the voices of young children.

What we maybe did not foresee at the outset was how ambitious the idea of a set of guidelines was, as a group we struggled to agree on anything except the idea that voice was context dependent. Rather what emerged were a set of factors, presented in two complementary ways, to be considered by communities striving to implement and improve their voice practice. Over time and through ongoing discussion, it became obvious that these factors should not be considered in isolation or as specific to one group of participants, but as an evolving dynamic where the different facets as applied to the children and the adults could be developed together and in parallel. Indeed, in the ecological model (Kemmis et al. 2012) that emerged it also became apparent that a continuous cycle of reflection for all participants was essential, where these facets would

need to be revisited on multiple occasions as individuals' capacities, experiences and understanding moved forward.

Eight factors for voice with young children

Two outcomes were produced by the seminar series to support this level of reflection on voice work. The first was eight factors that were seen as pivotal in facilitating very young children's voice: Definition, Power, Inclusivity, Listening, Time and Space, Approaches, Processes and Purposes. All of which demand attention and subsequent action if young children's voices are to be heard and taken seriously. These factors were published (Wall et al. 2019: table 1) with key questions for each one aiming to prompt the community towards an enquiry standpoint that embraced the constant evolution of voice within their context.

TABLE 1: EIGHT FACTORS FOR VOICE WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE (ADAPTED FROM WALL ET AL. 2019)

1. DEFINITION

It is essential to address the question of what is 'voice'.

A definition will advance the work more easily. In the context of this paper, voice is considered to be more than verbal utterances; it allows us to express who we are. Voice, therefore, includes, but is not limited to: words; behaviour; actions; pauses in action; silences; body language; glances; movement; and artistic expression.

What is voice? What is not voice? How does voice link to rights? When is voice not appropriate?

2. POWER

Voice is about power; it is relational.

In establishing a setting where voice is recognised it is important to note where the power lies. Often there is a power imbalance between and among staff and the adults associated with the establishment, but there are power relationships, too, between adults and children and even between the children themselves.

Who owns what is said? What is the balance between collective and individual voices? Who is asking the questions?

3. INCLUSIVITY

Everyone has an equal voice.

Following from the acknowledgement of the power relations in the context, it is important to consider how inclusive practices are. The notion of inclusivity allows for everyone to be seen as a competent actor and holder of rights. In an inclusive approach, diversity is celebrated and dignity and respect are key.

Does everyone have an equal voice? How do I know when someone is excluded? Do I value some voices more than others? Is opting out a key part of inclusion?

4. LISTENING

Voices should not have to be loud to be heard.

Listening is an active and responsive process which relies on tuning-in to voices, having a shared purpose and providing recognition that voices have been heard. This will occur if time is given to voice and will, inevitably, lead to voice having impact or influence.

How do I listen to conflicting voices? Who listens to me? How do I listen non-judgmentally? How do I hear silent voices?

5. TIME & SPACE

There is always time for voice.

It is important to acknowledge the pressures under which education professionals are working, significantly in an age when accountability and formal assessments are prime foci. However, establishments' formal and informal structures have to allow space and time for voice. In doing so, this will allow patience to be practiced on the part of the listeners and curiosity to be expressed by the children and the adults with whom they work.

How does space shape voice? How much space is given to child: child voice? When do adults act as voice role models to children? Which tools and techniques are supportive of voice?

6. APPROACHES

Open dispositions support voice.

In being open to a wide range of practices there is more likelihood that there will be greater opportunities for young children's participation. It is worth noting that determining not to participate is also an expression of voice and that the approaches adopted in practice should be open to this. Approaches ought to be flexible and meaningful for all participants, but especially for the young children whose voices are to be heard. In determining approaches to eliciting and facilitating voice, practitioners need to be reflective about their practices and be strategic in designing approaches for the most positive impact.

Am I patient? What skills do I need to support voice? How do I allow for the unexpected? How do I reflect on the process? How do I record voices?

7. PROCESSES

Processes should enable voice.

While the approaches adopted pertain to the individuals within the context, processes are the structures and conditions under which they work. The structures should provide opportunities for consultation, collaboration and dialogue in order to facilitate the reflective and strategic action mentioned above. Processes should be dynamic and have a forward momentum. Processes often require innovation and risk-taking in determining processes.

How comfortable am I taking risks? How do I build trust with different groups? When is voice risky? How do I use voice to move things forward?

8. PURPOSES

Shared goals will advance children's voices.

Discussion is needed about why it is important that children's voices are heard. To hear children's voices is a primary goal or purpose, but there may be others deemed of significance in any particular context, for example, to promote democracy, consultation or activism. The goal may be to assist with planning, evaluation or to effect change. What is common, though, is that the purposes and goals in facilitating young children's voices need to be clear, agreed upon and carefully communicated.

What am I doing this for? What have I got to lose? How will I evaluate this? What are the children getting from this?

The second output arose from the work of a graphic facilitator, Albi Taylor, who was employed to record the discussion in the seminars and to free-up the participants to involve themselves as fully as possible in the dialogue. Albi saw her role as synthesizing the thinking she heard and, as a result, she was able to look across the seminars and produce a summary. Her output has been published as *talking point posters* on the project website to be used in schools and nurseries with the intention that they start dialogue between practitioners, children and families (figure 1). They form an output that shares the ideas of the more wordy, academic outcome, in a manner that is designed to be more user-friendly (Arnott and Wall, 2020). However, they are related to and are intended to operate in dialogue with the theoretical framework discussed previously, mirroring key ideas in different ways.

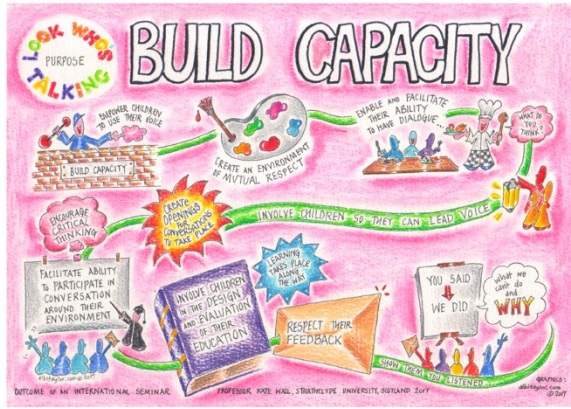
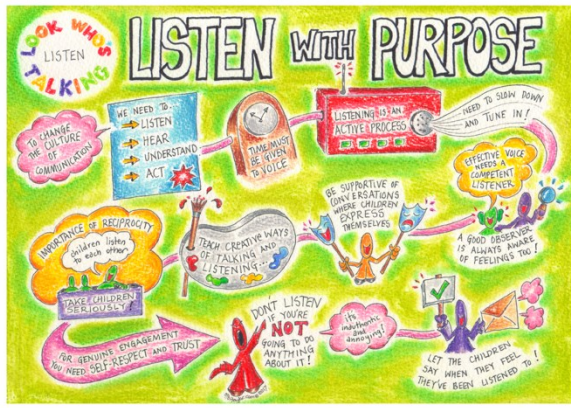
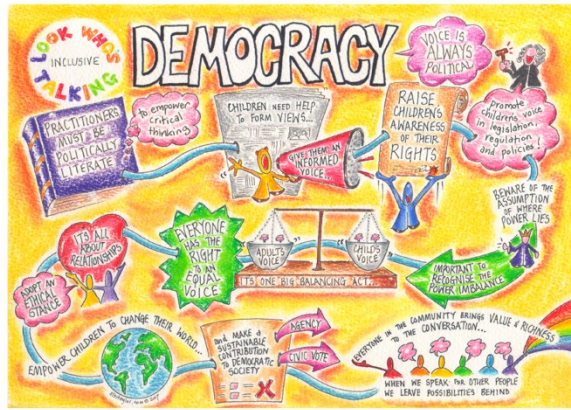


FIGURE 1: TALKING POINT POSTERS OUTPUT

Parallels for practitioner voice

The ecology of voice that I propose means that dialogue, unsurprisingly, is essential as part of the classroom practice *and* the professional culture inhabited by the practitioners. The Talking Point posters are a purposeful tool to support this type of professional dialogue in a way that can involve children and parents. However, what do they look like if applied directly to the skills, dispositions and understandings of practitioners rather than the children?

In Hall and Wall (2019) we showed how parallels between what we know from the children's voice field can be useful in considering how a culture of practitioner enquiry develops in professional learning contexts: what these factors might look like if applied to a staff meeting, for example. We used these understandings to unpick the tensions and dilemmas implicit in spaces where teachers engage in reflective and strategic (metacognitive) conversations about their classroom practice, showing the dynamics to be complex and potentially fraught, but essential in taking such a practitioner enquiry stance forwards. I would argue in contexts where the staff room is closing down practitioner voice, then drives to encourage and develop children and young people's voice will not progress as far as they might.

To take this one step further, within this entry, I have used the factors to consider what practitioners are encouraged to do in voice promoting settings, on their own or in a team, when working with children and young people. I am attempting to draw parallels between the voice practice with children and the voice practice in professional learning contexts by exploring the actions and dynamics of the practitioners. This is prompted by visits to settings with well developed voice culture embedded in a UNCRC based agenda. Here the children have a voice, but it is obvious that the adults do to. The leaders of these settings encourage the practitioners to speak up, to challenge power, to be inclusive of individuals and of different perspectives, to be act on what they hear in their conversations about voice when listening to each other and to the children, to be innovative and creative in their use of space and place, in the approaches they use and the purposes with which they engage in voice. The practice that I see is not curtailed by 'this is what we have already done', by systems and contextual constraints, but rather inhabit a positioning of what might be possible and entrepreneurialism. Therefore, in table 2, I outline each of the factors once more, but with more explicit thinking about the practices and perspectives of the practitioners' voice.

TABLE 2: THE EIGHT FACTORS THROUGH THE LENS OF PRACTITIONER ACTION

1. DEFINITION

It is essential to address the question of what is 'voice'.

A practitioner with voice understands that it can be defined and demonstrated in a similarly nuanced way to children. There is an awareness that you speak not just with your voice but also in your behaviours, actions, pauses in action, silences, body language, glances, movement, and artistic expression. As a voice role model understanding and being cognisant of all the ways we communicate thoughts, opinion and belief with children and with other adults are important, especially as they are being watched and replicated within and beyond the context.

2. POWER

Voice is about power; it is relational.

Power dynamics exist in our relationships not just with children, but also with colleagues and other adults who come into the setting. Finding ways to acknowledge power, to ensure everyone has a voice regardless of status, including a share in decision making and leadership, are essential. This also means finding ways to mediate interactions with inherent power imbalance to attempt greater equality and shared leadership.

3. INCLUSIVITY

Everyone has an equal voice.

Inclusivity is about valuing and involving everyone in the community in decision making and activity in appropriate ways. It is also about acknowledging and including different perspectives and incorporating them as much as possible. From a practitioner lens, this of course operates within the classroom, but also in how we interact with each other, in the staff room, and across home-school partnerships. It has implications for how we communicate our rationales for what we do and why we do it, and the extent to which we are prepared to change course from a plan should a suitable alternative be suggested.

4. LISTENING

Voices should not have to be loud to be heard.

We need to demonstrate that we are listening to a broad range of voices, including those expressed in different ways, and model what can be done with what is heard. For listening to be active and responsive then our professional culture should facilitate flexibility, for changes of plan, and creativity, to do things slightly differently to the 'norm' depending on contributions made. This means a professional culture of trust with explicit permissions for practitioners to act and take reasonable risk, as well as the professional dispositions in individuals to take these opportunities and go for it.

5. TIME & SPACE

There is always time for voice.

How practitioners support each other in their endeavors to make space and time for voice in an otherwise pressurised system is essential. Cultivating shared dispositions to see both formal and informal opportunities, to make the most of captured moments and to be creative in developing varied environments. However, it is also about better professional dialogue about the needs of individuals and time for practitioners to speak out about what worked (and what didn't) and their associated vision for voice in the setting. This means time and space for practitioners to voice their experiences, beliefs and values in a safe and supportive manner.

6. APPROACHES

Open dispositions support voice.

To ensure opportunities for voice, practitioners need to work together and generate a shared vision for voice. This doesn't mean uniformity or that staff are speaking with one voice, but to be respectful, supportive and explicit of the different perspectives and strengths brought by different tools, people, spaces and times of the day, week or year. Professional ethics should underpin this. A shared approach helps develop the professional courage to act and change practices, while also enquiring into the extent to which they were successful in doing what was expected.

7. PROCESSES

Processes should enable voice.

The central process for many practitioners is the cycle of plan-do-review, therefore considering this cycle with a voice practice emphasis is helpful. A tight feedback loop, especially with young children, between the different elements, is useful in reinforcing the connections that are being made for all. This means supporting a culture of 'can do' where staff engage in dialogue and act on what they have heard. The sharing of the review element, across adults and children, has increased importance when actions are more likely to be spontaneous; for example, communicating and having confidence about successes and failures to inform future plans.

8. PURPOSES

Shared goals will advance children's voices.

Articulating why particular voice practice or the resulting action is being implemented is often overlooked or rushed, particularly when acting in quick response. Yet being clear about the rationale and purpose of different types of voice work has power. This clarity should extend into the informal and formal, medium and long term, planning of a setting so that voice is embedded giving clear purpose for activity. This might lead to developing school policies and development plans in full consultation For the practitioner, this authenticates and values actions in this area and in turn builds a productive legitimacy for a type of activity that might otherwise be overlooked.

Conclusion

For children to have a voice, then it is important the adults around them also have a voice in regards what they say and what they do. Practitioner voice therefore inhabits a space of not just dialogue but action, with implications for the professional culture they inhabit.

Practitioners act as voice role models for the children, but also the practice of speaking out, being heard and living and working in a democratic environment, allows that experience to productively enhance their professional reflection on the practices they use. Indeed, by drawing these elements tightly together, with close feedback loops between what the practitioners say and do, what the children say and do, and how these two aspects interact, is catalytic of the growth and development of voice practice.

By considering the child's voice and the practitioners' voice in parallel then a productive ecology of voice practice emerges. So much of what is described emphasises the need for a professional culture of trust and autonomy to underpin voice work. This is important for the children but is equally so for the practitioners. The tools, talking point posters, developed in the seminar series aim to facilitate this connected process. A catalytic and cumulative relationship is therefore likely with a virtuous cycle overlaying the practice. This of course rests on the caveat that the process builds on mutual trust, relationships and meaningful action, but I would argue that this is less likely when the practitioner voice is not equally prioritised within the setting. Without this, the cycle is likely to break down. The more practitioners feel able to tackle the dilemmas inherent in voice work, inhabit the same experience, speak about it and share their practices, then the more successful and effective it is likely to be.

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