

## *Look Who's Talking: Eliciting the voice of children from Birth to Seven*

Guest Editors:

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Grounded in children's rights, this special issue aims to advance understanding of the affordances and constraints of implementing Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in educational settings with young children – those aged seven and under. Part 1 of Article 12 of the UNCRC states 'State Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the voice of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'. Debates in the literature around the implementation of this article have centred around two key areas: whether children are considered capable of forming and expressing their own views; and whether practices support children to air their views. While there is some reference to young children within these debates, they focus primarily on practices and contexts associated with older children. The proposed papers in this special issue have been purposefully selected to extend and challenge current understandings about how educational practices and research methodologies position young children as competent/non-competent social actors who are/are not capable of forming their own views. While the stance taken by the authors acknowledges that children are competent individuals with views about their experiences and the right to have their views listened to, the conceptual understandings and insights reported break new and important ground by drawing attention to the deep-rooted complexities associated with this viewpoint.

To set this debate in the context of the rights attributed to children under Article 12, we draw on the UN's Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comments (UN, 2009) which set out meanings attributed to phrases within this article. For example, with regard to decisions about whether children are '*capable of forming and expressing his or her own views*' (UN, 1989), the Committee asserted that we should start from the premise that "*...a child has the capacity to form her or his own views and recognize that she or he has the right to express them; it is not up to the child to prove her or his capacity*" (UN, 2009, para 20). Furthermore, the Committee stipulated that "*it is not necessary that the child has comprehensive knowledge of all aspects of the matter affecting her or him, but... has sufficient understanding to be capable of appropriately forming his or her own views on the matter*" (UN, 2009, para 21). It also added that to realise children's rights within Article 12 "*requires that the child be informed about matters, opinions and possible decisions to be taken and their consequences* (UN, 2009, para 25) and that "*...age alone cannot determine the significance of a child's views... the view of the child needs to be assessed on a case-by-case basis*" (UN, 2009, para 29). Thus, if children's rights under Article 12 are to be met, adults need to start from the assumption that children have capacity to form their own views and it is up to adults to inform children about matters to enable them to form an

opinion on such matters. The Committee also stressed the need to support children to express their views and stated: “*simply listening to the child is insufficient; the views of a child have to be seriously considered when the child is capable of forming their own views*” (UN, 2009, para 28). It asserted that “*...the full implementation of article 12 requires recognition of, and respect for, non-verbal forms of communication including play, body language, facial expression, and drawing and painting, through which very young children demonstrate understanding, choices and preferences*” (UN, 2009, para 21).

All children, including our youngest children, have a right to be educated about Article 12 and their rights within this article (and all other UNCRC articles). The UN Declaration on Human rights Education and Training (UN, 2011) declared access to human rights education and training as a fundamental right in all levels and forms of education, including preschool. It defined human rights education in the context of three key dimensions:

- Education *about* human rights, which includes providing knowledge and understanding of human rights norms and principles, the values that underpin them and the mechanisms for their protection.
- Education *through* human rights, which includes learning and teaching in ways that respects the rights of both educators and learners.
- Education *for* human rights, which includes empowering persons to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others ([UN, 2011](#), Article 2).

Thus, a clear message emanating from the UNCRC and the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training is that adults have a responsibility to raise children’s understanding about the values inherent within Article 12 (and other UNCRC articles). Moreover, there is also a requirement for environments to be created which recognise and respect children’s rights within Article 12 and which promote children’s agency and action in relation to expressing their views (Robinson et al., 2020). The enactment of children’s rights within Article 12 in practice is, therefore, not only concerned with what children learn *about* the article but, significantly, it is concerned with their experiences of education *through* and *for* their rights within Article 12. It is this enactment of Article 12 in practice - the ways in which children from birth to seven years are educated *through* and *for* Article 12 - with which this Special Issue is primarily concerned.

The practical enactment of Article 12 becomes evident through the actions of adults, and the resulting environment created by them and experienced by children. The extent to which an environment supports (or otherwise) positive teaching and learning *through* and *for* children’s rights within Article 12 is dependent upon the degree to which adults consider children to be capable holders of their rights. These views can be viewed along a continuum; at one end children are seen as being able to form and express their own views and as competent holders of their rights within Article 12 (James, Jenks and Prout, 1988; Corsaro, 2005; Mayall, 2000). At the opposite end, however, children are seen as less competent and incapable of forming their own opinions (Raby, 2014; Tisdall, 2018). In such circumstances, rather than being viewed as capable holders of their own rights, children are considered as being dependent upon adults to uphold and apply their rights for them.

With regard to perspectives about whether children are capable of forming and expressing their own views, Smith (2011) and Kellett (2014) acknowledge that children are often

considered to be social actors who are autonomous individuals, and MacNaughton et al. (2007) assert that young children can 'create and communicate valid views about the social world' (p. 164). Acknowledging children's influence and participation positions them as active agents (Shultz & Guimaraes-Iosif, 2012; Horgan, 2017) and as democratic citizens with a role in influencing how, for example, education and other aspects of their lives manifest themselves in their lived experience (Serriere 2010; Mitra et al. 2014). In adopting this stance, we recognise the complexity of children's lives, and acknowledge that their lives extend beyond schooling. Furthermore, as Struthers (2015) emphasises, facilitating opportunities for children to practise their rights through being heard and having influence is a way of ensuring that they learn about their human rights.

It is often the youngest children who are considered less competent at forming and expressing their views and as relatively deficient when compared with adults (Hendrick, 2000; Hammersley, 2017). We also hear of children's voices being filtered by adults, often well-meaning adults, but their messages are nonetheless filtered (Roberts, 2000; Komulainen, 2007; Lansdown 2010; Bucknall, 2014;), with this being particularly true in the case of younger children (Wall, 2017). Building on the views of Gündoğru and Yildirim (2010), who situate the need to engender democracy and rights in the context of early human rights education, this Special Issue presents new research and thinking associated with practices which support the teaching and learning of young children *through* and *for* their rights within Article 12. It brings together contributions which demonstrate how practice with the youngest children – those aged up to eight years – can both acknowledge children's rights within Article 12 and view children as competent rights holders.

The issue of whether adults view young children as capable or incapable holders of the rights within Article 12 is of particular significance in terms of young children's informed consent, and the currently under-reported and under-theorised area of informed consent with young children is addressed in this issue. Understandings around the age and development of children, coupled with a change from 'research on' to 'research with' or 'for' this group of children (Darbyshire et al. 2005) stemming from the ratification of the UNCRC in the United Kingdom in 1991, has significant implications for traditional understandings of ethical practice (l'Anson 2013; Graham et al. 2015) with regard the research process (Flewitt 2005) and participatory approaches (Pascal and Bertram 2009) involving young children. To date, common practice has been to assume consent to participate if young children appear to openly engage with researchers or practitioners, however, papers within this Special Issue, interrogate processes of assessing practices to promote informed agreement and refusal with young children.

Essential within this debate is the role of the adults in creating time and space to elicit young children voice. Child-centred pedagogies within early childhood settings are commonly considered as enabling of this type of practice, but this is critiqued as assumed pedagogic heterogeneity (Chung and Walsh 2000) and as a result, how practice is enacted and how it is experienced by adults and children (Langford 2010). The role of the adults, the extent to which they act as role models for voice and as rights holders themselves is up for debate. There is certainly a mirror effect between the dispositions and skills of the adults surrounding young children and the dispositions and skills of children and young people as a result (Wall et al. 2019). This is arguably more important when considering the context of

early childhood when children can be non-, pre- or emergent-verbal, with adults as a result needing to act as skilful interpreters and translators. The extent to which these adults feel able or have the skill to inhabit a pedagogy of voice, therefore, becomes a critical component.

Collectively the papers address the lacuna in the literature around children's voice, rights and participation with our youngest children by drawing on the perspectives of national and international experts and researchers. The contributions have been intentionally selected to ensure the inclusion of empirical research, methodological and ethical perspectives, pedagogical innovation, and theoretical engagement with key issues associated with eliciting voice with children from birth to seven years old. The contributions, although grounded within the broad context of education and educational settings, have the potential to transcend disciplinary boundaries by making a significant contribution to debates about participatory and rights-based epistemologies in early childhood research and effective methodologies to support eliciting young children's voices.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

To represent the field to maximum impact the papers chosen for this special issue present different theoretical, empirical, methodological and pedagogical (classroom based and professional education) perspectives, and cover a range of international contexts (Spain, Australia and Sweden in addition to the UK). The contributions also encompass the full age range represented by the early years, from birth to seven years, and are from both experienced and novice researchers. Cross cutting the whole issue are the ethical and practical dilemmas generated when undertaking this kind of work.

The issue starts with a systematic review of the literature in the field. Urbina-Garcia, Jindal-Snape, Lindsay, Barrable and Boath provide a view that is novel in capturing work undertaken, internationally, between 2015 and 2020, to listen to the voices of young children aged three to seven years. By including this paper at the outset, we not only acknowledge the rise of systematic reviewing within education, but also the usefulness of such a lens to provide an overview of the field. This systematic review focuses on methodologies used for supporting voice, a much-debated issue when researching with young children and one that reoccurs across the special issue. We recognise that much of the innovation around methodology for listening to voice in the early years stems from practice, and that in early years settings around the world practitioners have been working for some time to implement the Articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) with young children. With this in mind, our next paper looks to codify current theory with those practices. Cassidy, Wall, Robinson, Arnott, Beaton and Hall build on their previous work that outlined eight factors for consideration when eliciting voice with young children. The paper interrogates vignettes of practice nominated by practitioners from diverse settings and age groups to explore the pedagogical and ethical dilemmas experienced as practitioners seek to elicit voice. The intention is to further develop thinking and generate useful dialogue around the motives, challenges, affordances and constraints inherent in working to facilitate voice with young children.

A key ethical dilemma presented by the UNCRC centres on ascertaining young children's consent (or otherwise) for participation. Our next two papers focus on this core aspect of voice. Huser, Dockett and Perry discuss the ethical and methodological considerations for rights-based epistemologies aimed at children under five in Australian early childhood education. Well-established in the field, this team of researchers advances previously published ideas by applying a model of three ethical spaces - physical, social-emotional, and creative – and considering the role of each of these spaces when facilitating voice with young children. Complementing this paper, O'Farrelly and Tatlow-Golden give examples of practice to support decision-making in children aged two to five years, demonstrating the importance of visually appealing methods to inform young children about research. They highlight the potential of their work to transcend disciplinary boundaries.

Continuing the debate around ethical issues, Ceballos and Susinos' contribution focuses on power relations when eliciting voice with children aged three months to three years, highlighting the complexities and particularities of research with children in the pre-linguistic ages. The paper examines three initiatives implemented in Spanish schools. The authors develop a critical and reflective positioning about their aims, as researchers, to reduce power differences between children and adults and increase children's agency. Work of this type with such young children is rare and represents an important extension to the field. Extending the focus on under-threes, the following paper presents findings from empirical research which explored how policies and practices in early years settings in England support reading development with children under three. The author looks critically at how young children's voices and choices are included in reading policies and discusses the perceptions, experiences and challenges for early years' practitioners of including young children's voices in such policies. As well this specific contribution, this paper also adds to the broader debate about ethical pedagogical approaches to early reading policy development.

The next empirical paper focus on marginalised voices and the complex considerations when those marginalised are also young children. Street's research centres on participants from low-income areas, she argues children's voice cannot be decontextualized, and asserts that foregrounding children's voice against those of their m/others may establish unhelpful rights hierarchies and harness educators and carers to a colonization of childhood. This contribution emphasises methodological sensitivities fundamental to this type of research, while also reflecting on the role of the researcher's reflexivity in ensuring voices are heard authentically.

Building on the empirical thread of the previous paper, Murray's paper focuses on young children's questions in their early childhood education, asking whether these questions are valued and heard. Framed within critical pedagogy, the paper argues that these questions are representative of the children as rights holders and asks about the nature of what is asked by young children and how this is influenced by dominant cultures of a setting and system more widely. It concludes that where uptake of young children's questions is low, and a culture of performativity dominates, then pedagogy can be perceived to inhibit practice that facilitates young children's right to express their views by questioning. Similarly, Boardman explores early years educators' perceptions of reading with children aged from birth to three and the extent to which these children's voices are acknowledged

within the process. Again cultures, this time concerning school readiness, are shown to be influential in constraining opportunities for voice. Indeed, it is concluded that these children's voices and their choices are not considered in ECEC settings' reading policies. Here two papers, both set within the context of the English education system, highlight how dominant agendas and policies, centrally determined, can influence the practices of a setting and as a result shape the extent to which there is, or is not, space and time for voice.

The final papers of the proposed special issue consider the role curriculum and professional learning play in supporting spaces where young children's voice is privileged. Borg and Pramling investigate how young children's voice and agency are addressed in the new Swedish preschool curriculum. Focusing on issues of sustainability in relation to global trends, they ask critical questions about responsibilities for early years staff and how young children's agency can be encouraged and maintained. Following on from this, Reid and Kaneva's contribution considers pedagogical practices that encourage an ethical approach to voice-centred teaching for future practitioners. By including this paper targeting professional learning, we conclude the special issue by acknowledging the importance of practitioners in the early year's phase and the centrality of the role they play in eliciting the voice of young children.

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