

Chapter 16: Enabling and Building Capacity

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Introduction

There is little doubt in our minds that doing voice work is cumulative; that is to say when done authentically and with the intent to enable it is cyclical and becomes expansive as children and practitioners engage in continual dialogue and meaning making. There is a virtuous cycle that overlays practice – the more you engage with children and young people the more they will engage with you and the more fluent the dialogue becomes. This rests on the caveat that the process build on mutual trust, relationships and meaningful action as described in Chapter 6, without which the cycle breaks down. Nevertheless, the more you tackle the dilemmas inherent in voice work, the more successful and effective it will be.

As highlighted in Chapter 11, the process requires a specific set of skills and dispositions that enable practitioners to listen to children. As a result, the more you develop the skills and dispositions for effective and meaningful dialogue then the better and more inclined all participants will become to do it again to foster this way of communicating. This chapter therefore aims to explore this self-reinforcing process to discuss how we can take those first steps to enable voice and then work to sustain it and build capacity over time across individuals, communities and settings.

To draw out this idea of voice being cumulative, we must consider the underpinning skills, dispositions and understanding that facilitate the cultures of listening and compassion described in Chapter 11. At a deceptively simple level, fundamental to this is the children's communication skills. Their ability to articulate what they are thinking to another and to hear and respond to what someone else is saying. This is, of course, a central focus of early years education (for example, Buckley, 2003; Law 2017). But in the context of voice and

when children may be non-verbal, pre-verbal, or emergent verbal then this takes on another level of importance. Of course, it is not just about the vocabulary, it is also about the way they interact with others, the associated speaking and listening skills, how they learn about such things as developing a communication, building a dialogue, agreement and disagreement, how to challenge, how to back down and how to initiate and finish an exchange. This work starts with non-verbal and pre-verbal babies when an open definition of voice is incorporated (Wall et al. 2019; Wall et al. 2017). *Realising the Ambition* (Education Scotland, 2020), national practice guidance for Scotland, for example highlights that voice is important from birth as part of children's wellbeing as they recognise for babies as they provide the example: "I 'speak' my voice to you through my noises, actions and expressions. I am learning to communicate my thoughts and feelings by responding to others and my environment." (p26). These are the basis on which children's voice practice rests and without practicing these skills then children and those that work with them will be impoverished.

Providing children with the time, space and skills to talk through their learning, increases awareness of an individual's dispositions, feelings and value base for learning in this way, as well as about particular issues (Wall 2008). Due to the emphasis on sharing the learning then this awareness will, in time, stretch to not just how I am feeling and thinking, but also to how others are feeling and thinking alongside me. It builds an empathetic and social awareness, which we have argued elsewhere leads to an increased ethical consciousness (Wall, 2012). Ethical consciousness can be described as an awareness for the individual that they are one of a wider group within which they need to co-exist and that different individuals in that group will have strengths and weakness that may, or may not, be the same as their own. We saw the importance of this work in the beginning of this book where we talked about Voice and Democracy and in particular with the example, where children formed back of their community to drive forward their Forest School (Chapter 5). That sense of belonging became central to the work.

This type of talk contributes to self-regulation and metacognitive awareness of not just what they learn, but why they learn it, shown to improve attainment (Higgins et al. 2016; Hattie 2008). When the focus of dialogue is the topic of learning together, on making the process

of learning explicit (as hinted at in our previous chapter on Listening with Purpose), this promotes an even tighter feedback loop that is catalytic of both voice and learning practices (Wall and Hall 2016).

Of course, while the children are developing their skills, dispositions and understandings, equally important in the virtuous cycle are the skills, dispositions and understandings of the adults with whom the children are engaging. These are the people modelling the behaviours and attitudes (Wall and Hall, 2016; Wisby, 2011), actively listening to the children's contributions (Jalongo, 1995), facilitating the spaces and places for voice and introducing tools for dialogue and to support reflection (Robson, 2010). In many cases the adults' voice will enable (or not) the successfulness of the voice practice for the children.

Extending these ideas to contexts where some children may be non-, pre- or emergent-verbal and their role can also be extended more explicitly to interpreter and assistant as well as active participant, both in regards dialogue and decision making. This role is skilful, and an adult not so disposed, can easily shut down the potential for voice as much as they can encourage it; this might be intentional or, more likely, unintentional (Robinson and Taylor, 2007). The development of open dispositions across the whole community is fundamental and mutually reinforcing, so enabling voice and building capacity is about developing opportunities for self-expression and putting systems in places that make all participants feel supported in communicating their perspectives as well as negotiating their position within the learning context and alongside other learners (Corsaro, 2017).

Enabling

To start this section, then we need to note that the word *enable* should be used with caution as it could be considered too representative of a positioning embedded in power dynamics (see Chapters 1 and Chapter 6). We have to be careful, therefore, that 'to enable' does not sound too authoritative, like we are giving power to the children as a gift they would otherwise not be able to access, this in itself is not complicit to our understanding of the ethos of voice or practice aligned to children's rights (Lundy, 2007; Cassidy 2012). Alternatively, we would like to suggest that enabling is more about how we facilitate a participation culture for all individuals within a community. The ways in which voice is

encouraged, facilitated and nurtured. Within the early years, with young children, then this means unpicking what we mean by voice and the adult's role in hearing and supporting that voice (as covered in other chapters) but it is also about how a dialogue is instigated, the purposes with which it is undertaken and how participants react to the ongoing process. To maximise the potential of the virtuous cycle of voice, which we are suggesting, then enabling should be about ensuring that all participants are alert to voice, are responsible for their own and others' participation and are creative, metacognitive and ethical in how they facilitate its ongoing development. This is different to The Listening Cycles for example, which are process driven and focused on the actions required to exemplify listening. Here we consider how the cycle is not about repetition of the steps, but rather an attempt to generate growth in voice culture in an expansive nature. Perhaps the cycle expands and grows with each iteration. This process of growth exemplifies what we mean by 'enabling'.

Under this understanding of voice, it is important first to consider how voice work might be initiated. Despite the UNCRC being ratified across almost all countries in the world, there are still many contexts where the idea of consulting children about what they might think is in its infancy or largely unconsidered. Indeed, if you extend this to think about voice with the youngest children then we think it is far less common (Wall et al. 2019; Clark 2006). Voice work therefore has to start somewhere. It takes one brave person to listen to what is said and act on the information. This can set the path towards enabling change. However, it should not be underestimated how important those first steps are for both the adults and children. If you work in a context where children's voices are not included, whether that's a cultural, political or presumptive influence, then to do so for the first time takes courage. Courage to be the first one to listen and answer, courage to be one to ask that first authentic question to the children. We must not forget, as practice develops and capacity for this way of learning and working expands, that these first steps are important and influential.

To change the nature of practice, to take that first step into the unknown, takes professional courage (Alexander, 2010) in an attempt to progress pedagogy. Yet, early childhood practice is well equipped to take such risks, where the culture and pedagogy often tends towards approaches that are more child-centred and fluid (Martlew and Grogan, 2013). It

may be more challenging in formal schooling but in early childhood centres the open and exploratory nature of the pedagogy focused on planning for endless possibilities, lends itself to embracing the unknown (Woods, 2017). Yet, to genuinely ask children for their opinion changes the whole nature of the pedagogic relationships, and therefore the very dynamics of how adults and children interact. This can be scaffolded and controlled, and this is probably the reason why many first steps are more consultative in character, in the guise of a questionnaire or an interview, with the semiotics of research giving leverage and validity to the risk-taking and potential change in practice, while also giving a strong structure as back up.

Of course, these tentative first steps can be derailed from being a system shift if those responses sought from children are not listened to in an active way. There are many examples of voice work being undone before it has really started by adults asking the questions, taking that important first step, but then not listening to the responses or worse dismissing them out of hand. This undoes all of the potential and can even take the practice backwards as the children will not trust again when asked for their opinion (Wall, 2012). The dialogue needs to be enabled and facilitated with transparent and authentic intention (preferably shared with all participants) as when voice is elicited and responded to equally by all participants, then radical change can happen (Fielding, 2006). However and whenever you start on your voice journey, if participants engage in a dialogue that values a contributions, is inclusive of all individuals and perspectives and has shared goals then we quickly see a move from structured and closed, too much looser, flexible and open opportunities for voice (Wall et al., 2019).

We are therefore implying that there is a continuity of voice practice, with individuals and communities at different stages in their voice practice development. This could be seen to mirror the idea of a ladder as in Hart (1992) and Sheir's (2001) work, but in line with the critiques of that work (Fox, 2013), we would suggest there is no end goal that we should all aspire to achieving all of the time, but rather a pragmatic fluidity to practices as the community's shared intent moves along and back depending on contextual influences and intents. As long as we remain cognisant of voice as a dynamic continuum with multiple influencing factors, in line with these talking point posters, then the practices will continue

to be cumulative (Dockett et al. 2017). Therefore, we need to stop considering voice as an activity that is off or on, but rather something more nuanced and metacognitive (Wall, 2012).

Of course, this is related to the broader culture and ethos of the setting in which the activity is taking place. Voice is context specific (Dockett et al., 2009; Irwin and Johnson, 2005). We should therefore be understanding of the idea that, for example, there will be differences, between formal and informal education settings; between child orientated and more adult orientated pedagogic cultures. There might even be differences between the contexts created by different structures or adults within the same context. In none of these places is voice practice more or less important or difficult, but recognising that it challenges norms in different ways for adults and children within any community is useful and forgiving (Fielding and Moss, 2010). Voice and its associated practices need to reflect the environment and people within it, yet we should never limit the potential by using this as an excuse.

Sustaining the dialogue

When voice practices mature and get more sophisticated, then there is a tendency not to see voice as something that can be switched on and off (Wall et al. 2019). Rather than moments that can be labelled as exclusively voice and others that are not, there is a movement towards an all-encompassing culture that is defined by mutual respect across individuals with multiple, fluid moments that facilitate voice aligned to a range of intents, pedagogies and processes. The idea that we might timetable structured moments that are explicitly voice, for example, the student council or circle time, are no longer sufficient as they feel limiting and isolated. They do not fit with the understanding of voice as communication, as dialogue. Yet it is important to emphasise that at this point, the work is not done and finished, there is no tick box to be checked and forgotten about, rather there is a need to revisit and re-engage with the understandings that underpin the approach, maybe with the children themselves now actively involved (for example, Blaisdell, 2017; Tisdale and Bell, 2006).

Within the cumulative cycle of voice we foresee, there is no end point or finish line. Indeed, over time voice practice will develop and become embedded, as children and adults build confidence, skills and dispositions and so change understandings of appropriate practices. Additionally, there is likely to be new challenges for the community such as new policy and curriculum, updates in technology, demographic fluctuation or staffing changes that could also mean a reassessment of where voice work fits in. These normal influences of time passing should therefore be underpinned by a prerogative to go back and revisit previously held assumptions and revise according to current understandings and context. For example, the definitions of voice that were subscribed to when voice was first intimated are likely to need adapting as the children and the adults gain experience. Similarly an influx of new children and their families who are not familiar with this way of working might need some new tools or spaces to facilitate their induction. Any revision to one aspect of practice and associated understanding will impact on other aspects represented by the talking point posters. This will not stop and we see a dynamic relationship across the different aspects which will be in continual flux (Wall et al. 2019).

It is worth spending some time thinking about how this ongoing dialogue might be experienced by one individual over a period of time. This includes considering continuity through significant transitions, for example, what happens if the feeder nursery privileges voice practice, but the primary school has an alternative structure and expectations, the child's voice may be perceived as counteracting those principles, or vice versa. However, it also includes how individual children move through different contexts within one day from home to nursery, from one space to another, or from one adult to another. All might represent or create a different voice culture for the child to inhabit. The children's movement across these contexts brings with it a new set of traditions and systems to learn (Burns 2018). The child must find their place within each new context and that may mean learning to articulate their voice in varied ways. Articulating and managing expectations becomes essential and as a result encouraging the adults and the children to be aware of and reflexive about how different contexts have different associated voice expectations and how this can change over time needs to become a core activity.

Reflexive practice

To build capacity around voice then the virtuous cycle of voice needs to be acknowledged and cultivated. This process necessitates a dispositional approach to the eight factors presented in this book, where no one aspect is considered to be the finished article. Rather, all the factors are working in a dynamic, continually evolving individually and in relationship with each other. As such we see an ecology (Kemmis et al. 2012) of voice and this complexity provides a context to develop and expand Hart's (1992) and Shier's (2001) models to more clearly represent the messiness of practice. When one factor is targeted, worked on and progressed, it will impact on other aspects, therefore a reconsideration of associated aspects will be essential. Voice will never stand still and so will not be 'sorted', but rather represents an ongoing negotiation of practice involving a constant learning process for all involved. For example, if a community has been focusing on the process of active listening to the babies in their care (Clark 2017), then as they become more aware of the attunement necessary (Cubeddu & MacKay, 2017). and the importance of their own role as part of the communication then this may mean returning to the definition of voice, the tuning in will mean a new, developed understanding, or a further consideration of the tools and spaces used to facilitate these conversations. The eight factors proposed in this book, will be in a constant dynamic relationship, where none will ever be the finished article, but rather then deeper one is considered, then the more the others will appear deficient.

Reflexive practices for professional learning (Mockler and Sachs, 2011) are therefore needed to support practitioners in engaging with this constantly evolving practice of voice where the interaction between the component factors are in constant flux. The process of enquiry, asking questions of what happened, what changed and what did or didn't work, should be central (Cochrane-Smith and Lytle, 2009; Hall and Wall, 2019). However, this process should not be seen as isolated to the domain of practitioners, it should also be opened up to children. By encouraging young children to also view voice from an active position of enquiry it facilitates a view of voice as constantly evolving, as something that can be learned about and better understood, whilst also being an experience they can have an active role in developing. The talking point posters introduced in this book aim to support the dialogue between adults and children and encourage this questioning frame. By sharing this learning process as part of the voice imperative we believe it helps to ensure a richness

to the co-constructed understandings of voice within a context and an authenticity to the shared cumulative cycle of learning about voice.

The case studies that follow present the full breadth of this cycle, with some practitioners working hard to sustaining voice in already established practices while others are just starting out in the landscape and are dipping their toe in the water for the first time. They demonstrate those initial acts of bravery, which enable the cycle to begin.

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