Why the Voice of the Child Matters for Education in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Article 12 of The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) expressly states that when adults are making decision that affect children, children have the right to have their opinions taken into account and their views respected [1]. Internationally, capturing, including and responding to the voice of children in all decisions that affect them is articulated as a key principle in education policy and practice contexts. Ensuring that the child's voice is included in a meaningful rather than a tokenistic manner remains an ongoing challenge for education systems. The author suggests that effective teaching presupposes that the child has contributed to the process and that this contribution has been accommodated and incorporated in the learning and teaching process. Based on four research projects, that have specifically included the child's voice, the author concludes that from the earliest stage of development, children can and should contribute to their educational experiences. These research projects explore the concept of the voice of the child through a case-study of the inclusion of children with special educational needs at primary [2] and post-primary levels [3], a national evaluation of the experience of educators, children and parents at pre-primary level [4] and a national evaluation of provision for children with autism from pre-primary to post-primary levels in Ireland [5]. This paper suggests that at the 100th anniversary of John Dewey's Democracy and Education, the concept of the child as the starting point, the centre, and the end can only truly be realised in a commitment to providing the child with opportunities to express his/her voice. The author argues that through adopting child-centred and innovative strategies, all children, irrespective of age, or ability can be included in this process. This argument is supported by excerpts from research in which children were consulted and included through a methodological approach derived from the child conferences described by Clark and Moss [6].

1. Introduction

Article 12 of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child heralded a seismic shift in education policy and practice through expressly referring to the child's right to contribute meaningfully to decisions that affect their lives [1]. The concept of the child as a co-constructor of knowledge in education contexts is not new and can be traced as far back as 1916, with Dewey's rejection of stimulation and response in favour of providing an opportunity for all members of a group having 'an equable opportunity to receive and take from others' (p.55) [7], mirroring the philosophical underpinnings of Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child [1]. This concept was further extended in the pedagogy of listening articulated and embraced by Loris Malaguzzi in the pre-schools of Reggio-Emilia in Northern Italy [8]. However as observed by Deegan (2015) the role of child voice remains a contested phenomenon with unresolved dilemmas related to who speaks, how they speak, why they speak, when and where they speak persisting [9]. Indeed Deegan queries whether we are truly, as educators convinced that the voice of the child matters.

2. A Pedagogy of Voice and a Pedagogy of Listening

Ring and O'Sullivan (2016) suggest that prioritising democracy as a concept in Education places a value on childhood and on children [10]. Participation lies at the heart of a democratic education system and enhances children's self-esteem and confidence, promotes their overall development, develops children's sense of autonomy, independence, social competence and resilience [11]. Research suggests that the development of children's higher-order thinking skills is significantly enhanced when children are afforded opportunities to verbalise, explain and justify their decisions [12]. Lansdown points out that 'the benefits are significant and advises that adults need to acquire a greater humility in recognising that they have a great deal to learn from children' (p,40) [11]. She further argues that the rationale for capturing the voice of the child is a matter of human rights and social justice, which goes beyond the identified benefits. In the 21st century, the quality of the values a society espouses is inextricably linked to how it views the entitlement of all of its citizens to actively participate in, and influence their own lives, to exercise choice and to be listened to, and have their views valued and respected. However, while children communicate instinctively, all adults are not

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instinctive listeners [11]. Listening is not easy and has to be mindfully cultivated and developed. It requires us to develop a deep awareness, to suspend our judgements and prejudicies, value the unknown, reject our certainties and be consistently open to change [8]. Particular barriers have been identified in capturing the voices of children with special educational needs [5] and young children [4]. As adults, it is critical that we adopt both a pedagogy of listening [8] and a pedagogy of voice [9], which involve taking responsibility for developing ways to listen to the voices of all children

3. Including the Voice of Children with Special Educational Needs: Endless Possibilities

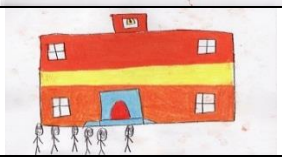
A recent national evaluation of education provision for children with autism, commissioned by the Ministry for Education was conducted in Ireland [5]. A rigorous, multi-faceted methodological approach was adopted, concerned with capturing the voices of all stakeholders, in addition to reflecting the range of state-funded education provision for children with autism in Ireland. A summary of the multiple-case study research approach and the range of data sources collected and analysed are detailed at Table 1. below.

Table 1. Summary of the Multiple-Case Study Research Approach and Data Sources

Principal Interview	Teacher Interview	Classroom Assistant Interview	Child Conversation	Child Drawings	Parent Interview **(Telephone)**	Document Review	Observation of Practice
21	48	33	29	41	60	24	35

The research identified a wide range of positive practice in relation to learning and teaching, school management, staff development and the promotion of an inclusive school culture. Assessment, planning, the inclusion of the child's voice, curriculum access, the availability of external support services and parental involvement were identified as areas for further improvement. Child conversations were conducted with groups of children, augmented by a draw and tell approach where children were invited to draw pictures of their educational setting [6]. These conversations were a derivative of the child conferences referred to by Clark and Moss [6] and were designed to be flexible and responsive to children's needs. Including the drawing element in the study was designed to accommodate the challenges children with autism experience in communicating verbally. The findings suggest that children, when supported in a dialogic manner through this approach, communicated their school-experiences coherently, meaningfully and informatively and constructively augmented the research findings. As demonstrated in Table 2. below, children's drawings corroborated the positive findings of the research in relation to the inclusion of children with autism in schools in Ireland both from curriculum and social perspectives. The drawings also challenge the certainties stemming from the social and imagination deficits associated with autism [13], suggesting that children with autism are aware of, and have an interest in their immediate interactional environments and display creativity and innovation in the manner in which this is represented.

Table 2. A Selection and Analysis of Children's Drawings

	Drawing by a child at middle-primary level in a special class in a mainstream school. The child has included all of his class in the drawing and one of his favourite activities, which was working on his IPAD.
	Drawing by a child in a senior class in a special school. The child has drawn the school and his class. The drawing has a positive aura and reflects the child's sense of belonging to the school community.

Conversely research conducted by Ring [2] and Boland [3] using similar methodologies identified a number of dilemmas in seeking to secure the successful inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools in Ireland. These dilemmas included the limited availability of specialist teaching materials, mainstream teachers' perception of meeting the needs of children with special educational needs as constituting an esoteric specialist domain, peers' lack of knowledge and understanding of learning disability, and the extent to which the child was included socially. While the child in Ring's study articulated a positive experience of schooling during child conversations,

schoolyard observation indicated that the child was often socially isolated during the recess periods of the school day. The child's drawing in Table 3. below reflects both the child's positive experience and isolation from his peers during football. The child has drawn himself with a ball in the top centre area of the drawing.

Table 3. Analysis of the Drawing of a Child with a Severe General Learning Disability included in a Mainstream Primary Rural School in Ireland	
	Drawing by a child at senior primary level in a mainstream rural school in Ireland. The child has included all of his class in the drawing and one of his favourite activities, which was working on his IPAD.

These findings further consolidate the position that children with special educational needs should be key advocates in the inclusion agenda and have demonstrated that they are in a position to express their views in a clear, coherent and constructive manner. Boland and Ring suggest that it is imperative that research continues to elicit the perspectives of individuals with special educational needs, in order to enfranchise these individuals and allow them their voices to be heard on important matters relating to their lives at both policy and practice level [3].

4. How Young Can we Begin to Harness the Child's Voice?

Rinaldi points out that listening begins in the womb, with listening becoming a natural attitude involving sensitivity to everything that connects us to others [8]. From the beginning, children are both listeners and communicators and amenable to both a pedagogy of listening and a pedagogy of voice. A recent research study in Ireland, sought to listen to, and record the voices of children at pre-primary level in order to identify what mattered most to children prior to their transition to primary school [4]. In this study, child conferencing and 'draw and tell' were selected as the most appropriate strategies to explore children's views [6]. Child conferences are described as informal structured interviews, designed specifically to support young children in communicating their views [14]. Fifty-seven children, aged between three and four, participated in ten child conferences, which adopted a semi-structured discussion format combined with the children's commentary on their drawings to elicit children's views in relation to starting primary school. A key finding related to how the children viewed the scale of the transition process, with some indication in the narrative that children ascribed the experience to the world of fantasy as exemplified in the following extracts from the data: '[The school is] big … bigger than any school in the world … bigger than a giant [and the children would need] help finding their way around by the teacher … and we saw some hot wheels and transformers and cool things.' Primary school was perceived as physically 'big' and children appeared to struggle with representing the dimensions of the buildings in their drawings, with one child noting 'I want to make it bigger'. The scale of how children perceived primary school is evident in the drawings in Table 4. below.

Table 4. Drawings of a Children at Pre-Primary Level in Ireland	
	

An analysis of the child conversations further indicated young children's pre-occupation with curriculum, the limited availability for play in primary school, the requirement to do 'homework', making friends, the teacher, and the role of siblings and parents/carers in providing information in relation to primary school. Children therefore clearly communicated the value of play in their lives, the importance of their relationships with their peers, teachers and family. These findings enable us as educators to

focus on children's concepts of primary school and their dispositions at this critical transitionary phase, while simultaneously highlighting the key role of effective transitions and curriculum continuity for young children.

7. Conclusion

It is timely at the 100th anniversary of John Dewey's *Democracy and Education* [7] to remind ourselves of the concept of the child as the starting point, the centre, and the end. The realisation of this concept is dependant on our commitment as educators to continuing to develop a pedagogy of listening [8] and a pedagogy of voice [9], which adopt innovative strategies and approaches to enable the child to express his/her voice. The author suggests, based on the analysis presented in this chapter, that all children irrespective of age, or ability, can and should be included in this process.

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