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Young children have a right to participate actively in shaping their own lives. In reality to what extent are their voices heard? A study in an early years setting

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Abstract

As an early years' practitioner[1], I find myself in the midst of political and social initiatives to raise the profile of children's voices in acknowledging them as fundamental to shaping all aspects of their lives. This focus is reflected in the many early years agendas (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNCRC,1989; the Children Act, Her Majesty's Government 2004, Every Child Matters, DfES, 2004) yet professionally I experience, as asserted by Pascal and Bertram (2009), that despite a paradigm shift in the view of childhood, a gap exists between policy and practice. Despite the declared fundamental principle of the early years curriculum, (DCSF, 2008a, 2008b) to firmly place the interests of the child at the centre, I experience that practice remains predominantly adult-initiated and led. My study includes a focus on illuminating attitudes and beliefs as practitioners towards 'child voice', looking with openness and frankness at the potential and actual enables and disablers, and investigating ways in which we can begin to realistically increase children's participation in creating an authentic child-centred approach that promotes inclusive practice, equal opportunity and respect for the rights of children to be heard (Wood, 2008).

Keywords: rights; voice; curriculum; young children

Exploring knowledge of how children feel about their pre-school experiences

I declared a key focus for my study to be the illumination of children's perspectives towards their pre-school experiences, to explore ways in which individual children are able to respond to the essential question 'what is like to for you to attend this setting, how do you feel?'. I set out to determine children's reactions to pre-school life in general, such as routines and pre-school rules as well as children's reactions to areas of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS[2]) curriculum (DCSF 2008a, 2008b), in terms of which have the most and least appeal. I was keen to determine where and how improvements might be made to enhance children's experiences. Fundamental to the research, I believed, was to explore how we as practitioners, as adults, as individuals, can engage in discourses with the children that enable them, again as individuals, to

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[1] The term 'practitioner', is typically used in England to refer to the staff working with the children in early years settings.
[2] The EYFS is the curriculum in England for early years settings for children from birth to the end of the school year in which they are 5 years old.

express their opinions in ways which are the most appropriate and equally can be interpreted effectively.

An influential initial driver for the study was the UNICEF report (UNICEF, 2008) which provided a league table in 25 OECD countries illuminating the extent, or otherwise, to which early years' providers are meeting measures to protect young children's rights in out of the home childcare. One of the findings related to practitioners playing a central role in the 'quality' of children's experiences – this prompted reflection on the pre-school practices with which I am familiar and within which I have actively practiced (on a full-time basis prior to dedicating effort to this research).

The research context and the significance of a collaborative methodology

My study is situated in a single pre-school in which I was employed as a practitioner until undertaking a   full-time commitment to the research. The setting is currently attended by 62 children, in the age range 2 years 9 months to 4 years 10 months, in the Private, Voluntary and Independent Sector managed by a voluntary committee (of parents). Staffing comprises the setting manager, the deputy manager and 5 practitioners. A recent Ofsted [3] inspection rated the setting overall as 'good'. The setting is located in an area where the majority of families are home owners. The children attending the pre-school are mainly white British with a 3% representation of children from other cultural backgrounds. The contextual implications are to be explored in my research with a key strand being my own positioning in adopting a dualistic insider/outsider role. Some of the implications of the latter are introduced in this paper.

A core belief underpinning my study was the need to actively involve participants in the research process, to aim to construct multiple perspectives on how to support expression of children's accounts of their pre-school experiences as well as how to interpret and act on this. Of significance was my understanding of the challenges this presents to the pre-school staff and to myself, in acknowledging frankly and openly potential and actual disablers, as well as enablers. By aiming to develop a participatory approach, I believed that the study could become more relevant to those directly affected, provide an opportunity for power to be balanced and allow for a sense of shared ownership (MacNaughton and Hughes 2009, Nutbrown, 2002). I felt strongly that such an approach offered the potential for the essence of the study and its' findings to influence practice after the research has completed (Kotter, 1996; Schön 1983, O'Kane, 2008). A key methodology to consulting with children that emerged from the literature review was the Mosaic approach (Clark and Moss 2001, 2005; Bertram and Pascal, 2009; O'Kane, 2005; Christensen and James, 2005, Lancaster, 2003), where the underpinning philosophy is to provide different opportunities for young children to participate in the research through the use of multi-methods, not only in an attempt to create child-friendly methods but to enable children to take the lead, to reverse the adult-child power-balance.

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[3] Ofsted is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. It is the non-ministerial government department of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools In England.

Empowering through participation?

I began to introduce research activities as a practical introduction to the participatory methodology that I had discussed at length with the pre-school staff. Among the introductory activities was an invitation to the children to photograph aspects of the pre-school (Clark and Moss, 2001, 2005; Lancaster, 2003). I was soon to begin to realise that this apparently child-friendly, participatory method was to reveal more than the anticipated children's views on their provision as a basis for action, as the following snapshot of a discussion I had with Jane (4 years, 2 months) illustrates.

> Researcher: So what have you taken here, Jane?
> Jane: A giraffe [giggles] [an alphabet giraffe hanging on wall]
> Researcher: A giraffe? What do you do with the giraffe?
> Jane: Nothing. It stays there [says this wistfully]
> Researcher: Oh, it just stays there, does it? Why do you think you don't do anything with it?
> Jane: Because it always stays up there
> Researcher: Stays up too high?
> Jane: Yes
> Researcher: Ah, I see. Perhaps what we could do is put it lower it so you could reach?
> Jane: Maybe on that hook there? [points to a hook lower down on wall]
> Researcher: That's a great idea! I will ask Eileen [manager] about that.

I felt excited that the photo activity had enabled Jane to highlight an aspect of pre-school provision that was easily remedied. Laura, the deputy, appeared to share my enthusiasm both for the photo activity and for moving the giraffe to make it accessible. Prior to Laura reaching to remove the giraffe from the hook, she hesitated and in that moment suspected that Eileen had moved the giraffe purposely out of the children's reach as she was disapproving that the removable alphabet letters tended to be mislaid. I was eager to show Jane that we had not only listened to what she had to say but had acted on it. Jane beamed.

Towards the end of the session, Eileen's voice could be heard across the room.
Eileen: What is that giraffe doing there?
Laura: [laughs loudly yet apparently nervously] See, Nic, what did I tell you?! [explains rationale to Eileen]
Eileen: I moved that purposely to stop the letters from getting lost! Well if they get lost it's up to you to find them
Laura: [laughs, looks towards me rather sheepishly] Ok then

The following day I notice that the giraffe has been moved back onto the higher hook. Laura sees me looking and remarks with a somewhat resigned laugh "yes, Eileen moved it".

Shortly afterwards, I was working with Jane to cut and stick her photos into her Journal. I took the opportunity to discuss the photo of the giraffe that Jane began cutting out, wondering how she felt about it being assessable briefly than being removed again.

Researcher: Oh yes the giraffe. It was up too high to play with, wasn't it?

Jane: [nods]

Researcher: Did you want to have it on the lower hook so you could reach it?

Jane: No

Researcher: No? Oh I thought you did?

Jane: [shakes head, looks away] It's not allowed.

Researcher: Oh right. In case the pieces go missing, I think... Do you wish it was allowed?

Jane: [shakes head] No

I was surprised by such an unexpected change in Jane's contribution and reflected on the outcomes of the activity. I questioned whether an activity that was intended to support children's rights to express their perspectives had potentially discouraged Jane from further suggestions as she had done so naturally? Had Jane actually regretted making the suggestion, perhaps feeling that she had acted against the pre-school rules? I felt sad for Jane and disappointed that my intention to give Jane a voice appeared to be counterproductive and potentially detrimental. I also considered the deputy's position and her apparent unease at the situation in which I had involved her and her prediction of the outcome. I wondered how she felt in that her decision to take action was quickly undermined?

The influence of assessment, rules and routines on participation

Such early findings gathered significance as the study continued with implications for both actively hearing children's voices and for participation by the practitioners. The weight of the setting rules determined by the management, as well as the rigidity of routines became an increasingly dominant influence in the shaping of the study. Added to this was the emerging realisation that the downward pressure from the introduction of EYFS early learning goals (Butcher and Andrews, 2009; Lee and Eke,2009), and the setting management's determination to show progress towards these in formal paperwork, required huge amounts of the practitioners' time and considerable anxiety. Planning the children's curriculum became increasingly focused on demonstrating achievement in line with the EYFS, in particular literacy and numeracy, as the setting management developed a greater understanding of the curriculum requirements since its introduction in 2008. Despite my concerted efforts to integrate data from my research with the documentation required to be produced by the practitioners, both from a practical viewpoint and in an attempt to encourage participation in the study as a natural part of the assessment process, it became apparent that I could not expect any significant participation in terms of action research from the practitioners.

This was a key moment in the study when I realised that a change of focus was realistic. Although I had every intention of making the study as visible as possible by sharing my findings, for the most part informally, as they occurred where practical, and involving

practitioners in verbal and some written evaluation of practice, I moved away from an explicit change agenda. Instead I re-focused my efforts on the participation with the children, which had been increasingly providing rich data, not in an attempt to affect change in the moment but to better understand the children's perspectives in the first instance.

Re-focusing approach to genuinely participate with children

My field notes became more and more crammed full of my excited findings once I relaxed my attentions towards encouraging practitioner participation. I quickly realised that 'time' was the factor here, time away from the pressures of the daily routine, the rotas, the 'rules', the required paperwork for specifically identified children against specific targets. I was able to take advantage of spontaneity, stand back and take an overall view or focus intently on an area that intrigued me. I likened my position to one of participant-observer but often with an intimacy of detail that reminded me of ethnographic approaches (such as Corsaro and Molinari, 2008 and Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford, 2001). I took a fluid approach to employing aspects of methodologies that supported my study and analysis of whichever situation(s) arose in a fast-moving, dynamic, complex environment. At times I looked for specific themes in the situations in which I might be observing or participating in – one notable being the dynamic of power and its interplay, at other times I was open to seeing whatever chose to present itself through a wider lens approach (Delamont, 2002). The methodology and specific methods were often driven by the children.

I became fascinated with exploring the changing dynamics of the role that I took in sharing experiences with the children and how this impacted on the data collection. My planned research activities in the earlier part of the study largely revealed to me how I am influenced by the notion of rules and correctness such as mess, keeping order, other adult's perceptions of me, behaving and conducting the children in an acceptable manner in the setting context. Analysing my written account of one such activity, sadly too lengthy to include here, where I attempted to develop a 'Tree of Feelings' (adapted from the Lancaster toolkit, 2003) by introducing a rather large potted branch for the children to paint and on which to hang designs representing their feelings through colours, revealed my sheer anxiety in attempting to single-handedly be co-designer, cleaner (of floors, wash basins, walls and fabric towel holder in the bathroom, children's hair, embroidered shoes and other rather beautiful pale coloured clothes some of which were immediately to travel abroad directly after pre-school) and genuine, interested audience for the children's expressions. The following (significantly reduced) extracts from my research journal illustrate some real promise of insight into children's wonderful thought processes that I did manage to capture earlier in the earlier stages of the activity.

> Researcher: What colours have you chosen Justin?
> James: (4 years and 7 months) Orange
> Researcher: And how does orange make you feel?
> James: Makes me think of the sunset

Researcher: Oh yes, the sunset… And how does the sunset feel to you?
James: Happy, as think of bedtime and going to sleep
Researcher: And yellow, is that one of the colours you chose?
James: Yes, it makes me think of the sun… bright outside, hotter
Researcher: How about this black leaf you've painted?
James: Reminds me of night…and sleeping
Researcher: Oh yes, sleeping. You said you like sleeping.
 Ruben, how about you? What colours have you chosen?
Ruben: (3 years and 9 months) Yellow makes me happy, pink makes me happy. All colours make me happy
Researcher: How about the green bit? How does green feel to you?
Ruben: Green is in my dreams…Saturdays and Sundays.
Researcher: And the black part of the branch here?
Ruben: Black reminds the tree of thunder…some trees die…ok to be sad

I pondered on my 'adult' reactions and the how these influenced both the children's freedom to express and my ability to genuinely hear their expressions. Other opportunities afforded me exploration of children's perspectives from an arguably less adult position. An example of such an occasion was during a later stage in the study when I had relaxed my change agenda and was spending significant time enjoying the children's company. I was finding myself joining in play without any direct efforts to collect specific data through planned activities. I noticed how I was spending more time on the floor with the children, crawling around often, following the children's lead in role play (Corsaro and Molinari, 2008), being various pets, a baby, a rather noisy superhero (probably a bit too noisy or maybe energetic judging by the glances from some of the staff). I joined the children in taking a picnic from the home corner resources to the book corner; then realised the implications of moving resources and hoped not to be observed by the staff immediately so the play could continue a while. I occasionally whispered at carpet time then thought better of it as it was unfair that I should 'get away with it' when the children were often corrected and reminded through chanting 'carpet time is quiet time'. Children appeared to accept me in my 'least adult role'; I was not called upon to settle altercations, children initiated more conversation with me and conversely sometimes ignored my presence. There was a sense of easiness in our interactions. Whereas I cannot claim to have lived children's experiences, I felt I could identify with them more intimately.

Conclusions and Reflections

Whereas I accept that concepts cannot be adopted 'wholesale' from one context to another without 'extensive change and adaptation' (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 1998: 13), it seems such a shame that the inspiring work from initiatives such as Reggio Emilia (Edwards et al, 1998) and Te Whariki (Carr and May, 2002) struggle to find similar expression in many of England's early years settings (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999). The concept that children's voices are heard in many different ways, through diverse media, is one which seems to be lacking and certainly a substantial area for further research (Eke and Lee, 2009, Kress 1997). Although not intending to generalise,

and I am aware of some excellent early years provision, there appears to be a trend, seen in my own observations, and reported by other research, to focus on verbal communications. I will take the brave step further and say that, in my experience, although specific to the pre-school context, verbal communications are the focus where what is being said aligns with what is required by the curriculum. Although this is certainly not the only contributory factor it appears to be a significant one (Lee and Eke, 2009). Hopefully the multi-method approach to researching with children that I have adopted begins to illustrate that power relations, both between adults and between adults and children (and of course between children themselves), is another highly complex area that affects what children say, wish to say, and what is actually respected and heard. However such challenges should not prevent us from continuing to raise awareness of the need to hear and value the active participation of our young citizens at a most crucial stage in their lives, at a stage when essential life skills are being developed, one of the most fundamental being self-esteem and self-expression. It is clear that the environment created in early years settings can be a substantial and often unwitting influence. I hope my study will play its part in raising this awareness (not least by informing early years training programmes) and will add to the efforts of some early years practitioners in the making, as well as those already in practice, in closing the gap between children's rights policies and reality.

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