

# **Understanding children's voice from birth to five: Dilemmas in participation and rights**

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Young children are often marginalised in the drive to address children's participation and their wider set of rights (Alderson et al., 2005). This talk will discuss the role of our youngest citizens in 'voice' discussions and the participatory rights-based agenda. It is grounded in a research project titled *Look Who's Talking: Eliciting Voice from Birth to Seven* (Wall et al., 2017). Seeking to connect with children's play-based nursery experiences, we invited children to conduct a range of arts-based activities including drawing, craft-making, sculpting, a themed 'play basket' with various props, puppetry, videography, and informal conversations as a route to understand children's own perceptions of 'voice'. We were keen to establish ways of working with children that centred on their own creativity and play, shaped by the materials we provided but not directed by us. However, we struggled to balance our own agenda with the more open-ended methods we had used. We argue that an intergenerational approach to eliciting voices—in which adults are not afraid to shape the agenda, but do so in responsive, gradual, and sensitive ways—creates the potential for a more inclusive experience for children that also meets researcher needs. Yet, as part of this project we were left questioning whether children were actually interested in consultation about voice, or whether we as researchers were imposing this 'right' on them. We questioned who we were consulting for, as we positioned ourselves as experts. This dilemma of balancing children's interests alongside the researcher/adult as 'expert' will underpin this talk.