The Look Who’s Talking Project

Look who’s talking: Eliciting the voices of children from birth to seven was an international seminar series funded by the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland, that brought together researchers and practitioners who work to elicit voice with young children (birth to seven). The intention was to create a space for individuals working in this relatively underdeveloped field to work in a collaborative process, engaging with relevant theory and practice. The aims of the seminars were to move debate forwards, developing guidelines and provocations for practice, and to advance theory to understand the affordances and constraints on the implementation of Article 12 of the UNCRC with young children.

Subsequently, the seminar series and international network evolved into a series of research projects. The objectives of the projects are to pay special attention to the voices of those under seven years of age, and to share factors designed to support those working with the under–sevens in facilitating children’s voices. The decision to focus on young children was driven by our knowledge that this group is often ignored or marginalised in the wider drive to address children’s participation and children’s broader rights. Young children’s participation may be disregarded because they are viewed as ‘pre-social’ (Alderson et al., 2005: 33) and ‘too innocent and/or immature to participate meaningfully’ (MacNaughton et al., 2007: 164).

This research briefing details the findings from one of those projects: Using Creative, Playful Arts-Based Methods in Research with Young Children to Understand their perspectives on Voice.

In This Briefing
- An overview of the Look Who’s Talking Network and Project
- Summary of the arts based methods
- Findings about the arts based methods for eliciting children’s voice.
Listening to Children

During the original Look Who’s Talking project, to aid the discussions and ensure that we had an appropriate practice base to the discussions, we collected vignettes of practice from across our networks to exemplify how voice is being elicited from children aged from birth to seven years. However, the vignettes we collected dealt mainly with practitioners’ ideas of voice. In this supplementary piece of work, we wanted to find out what children themselves think about voice and listening.

We decided to use an art-based approach to understand children’s perspectives. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2005, para. 14c) reminds us that it is the responsibility of adults to create opportunities for young children to express their views, rather than expecting children to prove their capabilities. This means adapting to the child’s ‘interests, levels of understanding and preferred ways of communicating’. Creative, arts-based methods offer great potential to adapt to children’s own ‘ways of being’ (Alderson 2008).

Research Questions
1. What does ‘voice’ mean, with children aged from birth to seven?
2. How do practitioners conceptualise what it means to listen to young children?
3. What are some areas of success and of difficulty in listening to young children?

We provided open-ended, process-focused activities with a variety of materials involved, including:

- Fine arts (drawing; craft-making with glue, glitter, pipe cleaners, popsicle sticks, foam shapes; sculpting with soft ‘air dough’ style clay).
- A themed ‘play basket’ containing provocations affiliated with ‘voice’ (microphones, megaphones, walkie talkies, toy ears attached to headbands)
- Videography
- Puppetry and role play in relation to ‘voice’
- Informal conversations with children.

We hoped that these materials allowed children express their ideas about voice.
Defining Voice

In this project, voice is considered to be more than verbal utterances; it allows us to express who we are. Voice, therefore, includes, but is not limited to: words; behaviour; actions; pauses in action; silences; body language; glances; movement; and artistic expression.

Key Findings

Three key findings emerged from this pilot study, which will guide our future research going forward.

1. Arts-based methods offered varied opportunities in facilitating creativity, playfulness and inclusion;
2. There was a tendency for researchers to default to ‘authentic verbal voice’ as a means of extracting data to address our research questions; and
3. There was potential for responsivity and an intergenerational approach to data collection using arts-based methods when grounded in a relational approach.

Look Who’s Talking

Reflections from arts based approach

**Definition**
With the drama and performance activities we didn’t get a sense of children’s perspectives about how to ‘define’ voice.

**Inclusivity**
The process was relatively ‘inclusive’ both in terms of research participation (and negotiating not to take part as discussed by (Horstman et al., 2008)) and children’s ability to drive and shape the agenda for the project.

**Power**
Children appeared ‘empowered’ by the variety in resources provided to engage in the project, and the ability to determine their own involvement. Simultaneously, the open methods produced exclusions for some children.

**Listening**
In terms of the larger research project, there was potential that the methods created disadvantage in the lack of opportunity for adults and children to ‘listen’ to each other about the specific topic of voice. Nevertheless, within the Arts-Based Methods themselves there were many opportunities for listening and potential for future development.

**Process**
A relational approach over extended time is required to develop ‘processes’ of trust. Some children returned to us on each visit and we began to understand their voices better. Other children’s engagements were fleeting and harder for us to interpret.

**Time and Space**
The spaces of the nursery and materials of the research worked well together, creating flexible structure—but more time was needed to develop relationships between researchers and children in order to sensitively shape the research agenda.

**Approach**
Arts-Based Methods provided a variety of ‘approaches’ for eliciting voice, allowing for the unexpected and provoking reflection by the researchers. To some extent, drawing and crafting seemed to create particular space for talk about the research topic, perhaps because children were familiar with these activities already.

**Purpose**
What children get from this process varied. Many seemed to enjoy the creative activities. However, in terms of meeting the ‘purpose’ of the project—to include children’s perspectives in the larger project—more time and development is needed.
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Future Projects

1. A follow up study is planned to work with more arts-based approaches to understand children's idea of spaces and inclusion.


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References
