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The voice of the child in 21st Century education matters, now more than ever

By Emer Ring

In education systems today there is a real danger of children's voices being swamped by those of bureaucrats, economists and politicians. I believe to ensure we remain responsive to learners we have to listen and respond to what children have to say about the world around them. My particular concern is for the voices of young children and children with autism to be heard.

The right to be heard

The great educationalist John Dewey's concept of the centrality of the voice of the learner in the teaching process is mirrored in Article 12 of The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which 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. 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.

However based on my extensive experience in education for thirty-five years as a teacher, a schools' inspector, a lecturer and researcher, I believe the voice of the child continues to be largely absent from practice and policy contexts.

In an attempt to highlight this gap, I have worked on four research projects to demonstrate that all children, irrespective of age or ability, can contribute to the teaching and learning process. As parents, teachers and researchers, we need to develop innovative and creative ways to support children in expressing their views and in doing so, develop both a pedagogy of voice and a pedagogy of listening.

Why children should have a voice

Increasingly research is demonstrating that meaningful participation enhances children's self-esteem and confidence, promotes overall development and develops autonomy, independence, social competence and resilience.

Furthermore children's higher-order thinking skills are significantly enhanced when children are afforded opportunities to verbalise. The socially shared process is particularly important for learning as children explain and justify their ideas, opinions and decisions.

Pedagogy of listening

Implementing a pedagogy of voice requires an associated pedagogy of listening. For all of us, listening is not easy and has to be mindfully cultivated and developed. If we are prepared to do this, the possibilities for our children become endless. Conscious that the voices of young children and children with special educational needs are notably absent from research and

practice, my research (on which this article is based) focused specifically on capturing, and including these voices, through a methodological approach derived from the child conferences described by Clark and Moss.

My research involving the voice of children with autism

As co-principal investigator in a recent national evaluation of education provision for children with autism in Ireland, commissioned by the Ministry for Education in Ireland, I was concerned that children with autism would be provided with an opportunity to contribute to the process.

My research involved having conversations with groups of children. The children were also invited to draw pictures related to their education experiences. These drawings were particularly revealing to us.

Children readily participated in the research and enthusiastically communicated their school-experiences in a coherent and meaningful manner. Some of the children's drawings and descriptors are included in Table 1. below and convey children's positive curriculum and social experiences.

Interestingly the drawings challenge the diagnostic certainties of the social and imagination deficits associated with autism, suggesting that children with autism are aware of, and have an interest in their immediate interactional environments, which they creatively and imaginatively depicted.

Table 1. A Selection and Analysis of the Drawings of Children with Autism



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.

I was involved in two other research projects involving children with special educational needs included in mainstream schools. While children reported positive experiences, children also reported experiencing social isolation, curriculum exclusion and bullying in mainstream schools. The child's drawing in Table 2. 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 2. 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 playing football with his friends in the yard during recess period of the school day.

Fifty-seven children, aged between three and four, transitioning from pre-school to kindergarten, participated in the final research study. The significance of this transition for children was captured both in the narrative and in the drawings included in Table 3. below, with children noting that ‘[The school is] big ... bigger than any school in the world ... bigger than a giant’.

Table 3. Drawings of a Children at Pre-School Level in Ireland



Children were particularly concerned about the limited availability for play in primary school, the requirement to do ‘homework’, making friends and the kindergarten teacher.

The child is the starting point, centre and end of what we do as educators

It is timely at the 100th anniversary of the publication of John Dewey’s *Democracy and Education* to remind ourselves that the child is the starting point, the centre, and the end of what we do. Listening and responding to the voices of children irrespective of age, or ability, enriches the learning and teaching process and supports both teacher and child-autonomy in an era where education is increasingly being driven by marketisation, standardisation and politicisation.

As parents, teachers and researchers we have a particular moral and ethical responsibility to ensure that the inclusion of children’s voices remains a priority in education in this era of global unrest and uncertainty.



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Recently Emer attended the Future of Education Conference in Florence, Italy (June 31st – July 1st 2016) and presented a paper entitled 'Why the Voice of the Child Matters for Education in the 21st Century'. She was also invited to present the closing address, for which she chose the title: 'Back to the Future: On Democracy and Education in the 21st Century: What would John Dewey say a 100 years later'.