Hearing Young Children's Voices
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Jane Murray

A team of early childhood leaders recently asked me for help with their funded research project. Their aim was to investigate if 'eliciting their children's voices impacts on the children's learning, development and well-being, and if so, how'. Children have a right to 'freedom of expression' and 'right to be heard' (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 1989) and these are experienced, highly qualified early childhood practitioners. They lead provision characterised by statements of vision which refer variously to every child as unique, with individual needs and ways of learning which are recognised, appreciated and met and who is enabled to be confident, caring, valued, independent, motivated, supported, self-disciplined and respected. Nevertheless, these experts who advocate for children every day could not be sure if - and how - listening to young children's voices affects the children's well-being, development and learning. In this editorial, I consider why this might be the case and explore some messages that the wider field of early childhood education may have for these early childhood leaders.

Defining Children's Voices

A significant problem is lack of consensus concerning the definition or vocabulary for listening to children's views (Brooks and Murray 2016). The terms 'student voice' and 'pupil voice' reflect a hierarchy where 'students' or 'pupils' are othered as less powerful than teachers (Cruddas 2007). Such positioning seems at odds with claims that practice recognises, appreciates and meets children's needs. Moreover, the phrase 'children's voice' assumes that all children always share one view (Bakhtin 1963); discourse concerning 'voice' aligns with 'identity, agency and empowerment' (Maybin 2013, 383), so individual children may have their own views. Evidently, then, confusion exists concerning children's perspectives, a situation which often results in children's voices being ignored or addressed only superficially (Singer, 2014; Whitty and Wisby 2007). A definition of children's voices that recognises pluralism in children's perspectives and puts the onus on not only hearing - but attending to - children's feelings, beliefs, thoughts, wishes, preferences and attitudes is indicated, perhaps along the lines of '…views of children that are actively received and acknowledged as valuable contributions to decision-making affecting the children's lives'.

Should we listen to children's voices?

The statements of vision for the early childhood settings led by the team I have worked with indicate they are aware that those who listen actively to children's voices come to know and understand the children's needs and interests and that this provides information that enables adults to respond positively to children's needs and interests, if they choose to do so. That information is a basis of evidence on which provision can be tailored to each child's interests and needs, in turn, offering opportunities to optimise each child's development and learning. If children experience provision that is attuned to their interests and needs, they are more likely to find it has meaning for them. As a sense of meaning is a key aspect of subjective well-being (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2018, 10)., it may be argued that children's well-being can be enhanced when their own views are taken into account to inform their educational provision.

If we do not listen actively and attend to each child's voice, we convey to the child and others that we do not value the child's perspective, and ultimately, that we do not value the child. By choosing to act in this way, we teach children to be undemocratic: they learn that the individual's view is not important for the group. We incubate within each child the expectation of self as an insignificant component of an homogeneous mass, and that groupthink must be followed. Yet paradoxically, such actions also exclude children from the sense of belonging that they gain when they are recognised as a citizen in a context where individuals' views are considered important, so their well-being, identity and development are inhibited (Woodhead and Brooker, 2008). Disregard for children's voices diminishes their experiences of autonomy and self-regulation which in turn reduces their motivation to learn (Murray and Cousens, 2019).

Challenges and possibilities when listening to young children's voices
Some issues present challenges to adults who wish to listen to young children's voices. For example, practitioners may be required to follow macro-policy agenda which are not congruent with children's agenda. Early childhood macro-policies focused on investment return may overlook what is important for a young child now, yet they may intrude so powerfully into the pedagogic space that there is little or no opportunity for practitioners to listen to children's views or act on them. This danger is more prominent now than was the case five years ago, as global organisations have become increasingly interested in early childhood development (G20, 2018; OECD, 2018; United Nations, 2015). Yet even the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (OHCHR, 1989) has presented barriers to young children's voices being heard or acted upon (Lansdown, 2006). Article 12 states that a child must be 'capable of forming his or her own views' to be afforded the 'right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child', and that those views are 'given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'. The caveats in Article 12 reflect a view that agency does not begin at birth (James and Prout, 1997). Twenty years after the original convention, OHCHR (2009) added clarification: 'States parties should presume that a child has the capacity to form her or his own views

and recognize that she or he has the right to express them' (p.6), but this is only is a recommendation. The original Convention remains the legally binding document.

As I have suggested elsewhere (Murray, 2017a), adults may encounter problems in recognising and understanding young children's modes and purposes of communication. Not all children use oral language, particularly the youngest children, so 'children's voices' may feature multiple modalities that children adopt to express their views, including - but not limited to - laughing, crying, smiling, gaze, grasping, touching, pointing and uses of materials. To recognise and understand the multiple modes of communication children may use requires the adult and child to co-create a context characterised by reciprocity, reflexivity and intersubjectivity. Within such a context, the adult must embody attributes including sensitivity, emotional literacy, motivation, an ethics of care (Fielding and Moss, 2011) and a pedagogy of listening (Rinaldi, 2006, 12). To maximise a child's opportunities for learning, the adult also needs advanced knowledge of child development and a secure knowledge of the individual child, for which the adult must spend sufficient time with the child - and parents - to build trust, understanding and positive relationships.

Research can hinder young children's voices being heard if it is undertaken on - or about - young children by adult researchers who do not know each child participant well. Whilst an adult researcher may report a child's actions or words *per se*, without knowing the child and his or her context, they may make assumptions in their interpretations of the child's actions or words which result in the meanings inherent in them being misrepresented. Such assumptions produce poor evidence, which, if used to inform policy, can lead to services for children which are not based on what children want or need. It is therefore important for research concerned with matters affecting children to be undertaken with children, or by them. Research conducted with or by children does not mean training children to follow adult research agenda: it means taking time and care to understand children's agentic engagements with what matters to them (Murray, 2017b).

Hearing Young Children's Voices: A short summary
In summary, then, what messages might the wider field of early childhood education have for the early childhood leaders who asked me to help them with their research about children's voices in their early childhood settings? Firstly, in order to engage authentically with children's voices, we must define what we mean by the term 'children's voices'; as part of this, we must recognise whether or not we regard each child as a unique individual with his or her own views. Secondly, if early childhood educators are to optimise children's well-being, development and learning in their early childhood settings, and enhance their chances of experiencing positive lifetime outcomes, they must find ways to listen actively to young children's views, and to understand and respond to them, however they may be expressed. This is highly skilled work which requires educators to have advanced knowledge of

child development and secure knowledge of each individual child. Thirdly, if early childhood leaders and practitioners are to advocate effectively for young children, they may need to mediate macropolicies that are not congruent with what young children consider important. One tool that can be used to do this is research that practitioners undertake with children or support children to conduct; findings from such research can produce evidence for policymaking that is based on children's authentic views.

Hearing young children's voices is one important tool at the early childhood practitioner's disposal. Each article in this first 2019 issue of the International Journal of Early Years Education highlights different tools that early childhood educators might use to support young children's development and learning.

Articles in this Issue
In their article '*Tablets as an educational tool for enhancing preschool science*', Melina Furman, Susan De Angelis, Enzo Dominguez Prost and Inés Taylor report findings from their quasiexperimental study that explored the impact hand-held tablets may have on science learning outcomes among five-year-olds in Argentina. During a six-week intervention, they found that all children in the study 'showed significant improvements in science outcomes', but that tablets made no difference to those outcomes. Lai Ha Yuen then discusses a parent education programme. She reports on how data were collected for a qualitative study; in her article *'New immigrant parents' experiences in a parent education programme*', she identifies that the study results indicate that opportunities for parents to support one another, are linked with enhanced parenting attitudes and practices. Soern Finn Menning explores curiosity as a tool to support young children's learning in her article '*Why nurturing curiosity is an ethical endeavour: exploring practitioners' reflections on the importance of curiosity'*. Using an ethnographic approach and video-stimulated recall focus-group interviews, her study captured Norwegian ECEC practitioners' reflections on the importance of curiosity and highlighting the need to capture practitioners' reflections on values associated with curiosity. Anita Soni considers supervision of early childhood educators as an instrument to enhance their skills and knowledge for supporting young children's learning. In her article *'Opportunities for development: the practice of supervision in early years' provision in England'*, she reports that she using a mixed methods research design, enabled her to find that educators' opportunities for reflection on their own practice was disrupted by focus on managerialism.

Majida Mohammed Yousef Dajani and Daniel R. Meier explore narrative as a pedagogic tool in their article 'The role of narrative in culturally responsive literacy education – a collaborative project in U.S. and Palestinian preschools'. Conducted by two teachers, this qualitative study found that minor changes to the ways narrative is used in literacy pedagogy may enhance young children's literacy

experiences. Aiko Oshiro, Agneta Pihl, Louise Peterson and Niklas Pramling report on a study concerned with scaffolding used as a literacy tool in their article '*Scaffolding 5-year-old children in Japanese kindergarten collaboratively retelling a tale'*. Using qualitative analysis of data that comprised observational recordings captured in a Japanese setting, the researchers identify that cultural and practical differences may affect the ways teachers adopt scaffolding for supporting young children's learning.

The final article in this issue focuses on a national policy in Great Britain that requires teachers to use pedagogic practice in their educational settings as a tool to counter terrorism. In her paper *'How do practitioners in early years provision promote Fundamental British Values'*, Jennifer van Krieken Robson reports findings from her qualitative study which used interviews and walking tours of the study settings to explore was early childhood practitioners mediated this policy requirement. Robson identifies that the educators' responses were 'complex and multi-layered' and that they encouraged children to develop values and practices in the context of democratic discourse.

The focus of the ERA Abstracts for this issue is on language as a learning tool. Curated by Elizabeth Coates, the ERA Abstracts complete this issue of the International Journal of Early Years Education which is concerned with tools that may support young children's well-being, development and learning.

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Jane Murray

Centre for Education and Research, University of Northampton, UK

IJEYE@northampton.ac.uk

ORCiD ID: 0000-0001-7000-0901