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Listening to young children: meaningful participation in early childhood settings

This briefing reports on research that looked at how listening to children was put into practice in one early childhood setting. It provides questions to help early years practitioners reflect on and deepen their participatory work with young children.

Background

Promoting children's participation is a popular initiative in research, policy, and practice. Broadly, the concept of children's participation recognises that children are "active in the process of shaping their own lives, learning, and future. They have their own view on their best interests, a growing capacity to make decisions, the right to speak and the right to be heard" (Woodhead 2010). The concept of children's participation is strongly linked to the rights enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

Children's participation can be understood as:

> […] the degree to which the voice, contribution and agency of the child is acknowledged in their many relationships […] it is not enough to have a voice; it is equally important to also be heard in order for one to have a presence in society.
>
> (Moosa-Mitha 2005)

This definition resonates with the popular concept of 'listening to children' in their early years, which also highlights the relationships involved in listening. For example, Moss and colleagues (2005) describe listening as being about "being part of a community and having a sense of belonging". In other words, children's participation and listening to children are not about "giving children a voice" — children already have voices. Instead, participation is about how children's voices, contribution and agency are perceived, heard, and acted upon.

Key points

- Children's participation and 'listening to children' are popular concepts in early learning and childcare. However, a commitment to listening to children does not always translate into the meaningful practice of hearing and acting upon children's voices and contributions.
- Meaningful participation required practitioners to challenge social hierarchies between themselves and young children, and to embed participation into daily life and routines rather than as a separate 'tick box' exercise.
- In order to create a community where children's voices, choices and contributions were central to daily life, practitioners were willing to take risks and challenge mainstream practices they disagreed with in the wider early childhood sector.
- Practitioners resisted the 'schoolification'[1] of early learning and childcare and the tick-box nature of assessment that comes with it. Rather than correct children's thinking, practitioners demonstrated respect for children's own knowledge and ideas. In doing so, practitioners supported children's problem solving and creative thinking.

Despite the popularity of children's participation as a concept, what it means in practice has been variable and contentious (Thomas and Percy-Smith 2010). One danger may be that children's participation becomes a 'tick-box' exercise with

[1]The term 'schoolification' refers to downward pressure from a school-based agenda, making the early childhood setting into an extension of primary schooling.

little reflection on the deeper structures and relationships of participation (Davis and Smith 2012). Tick-box initiatives fail to challenge the underlying hierarchy of the social positions of children and adults, and can mean that participation initiatives have little meaning or impact for children themselves.

The study

The research explored how young children's participation went from rhetoric to practice in one early childhood setting, Castle Nursery[2]. The nursery was local authority-run and located in Scotland. An ethnographic approach was used: the researcher visited Castle Nursery regularly over the course of eight months, observing and participating in everyday life. The research had a particular focus on child-adult relationships. Therefore, the fieldwork involved both children and adults together: children from six months to five years old and the practitioners who worked with them. The researcher also visited the nursery's nature kindergarten setting, called 'Wild Wood'.

Findings

Learning through relationships with people and materials

> Emily Too was sitting at the writing table. She had been drawing on a piece of paper, and now wanted to use some sellotape. She went to get the dispenser and pulled out a length of tape. It promptly got tangled and stuck to itself and to her paper. As she attempted to untwist it and flatten it out, the tape stuck to her hands. She began running her hands over the paper, noticing when they were hampered by the stickiness of the tape. She experimented with sticking her hand to the paper and lifting it up, chuckling to herself.
>
> Another child, Jake was also at the table. When Emily Too began playing with the sellotape, he seemed inspired to join in. He used scissors to cut a length of sellotape which, much like Emily Too's, became tangled and twisted. Jake used his scissors, stuck to the paper with sellotape, to lift the paper up, saying 'Look at this!'
>
> The sun cast a shadow of Jake's paper onto the table. He noticed that he could move the shadow of his own hand so that it merged with the shadow of the paper. 'Can you see my hand?' he asked Emily Too, and then moved his hand so that its shadow emerged. 'Now can you see it?' He and Emily Too found this phenomenon so interesting that they continued to play with their papers, the sellotape and the sunlight until it was time to tidy up for lunch.
>
> (field notes, 17th February 2014)

As this excerpt from the research illustrates, formal learning and adult-planned activities had little place at Castle Nursery. A day at Castle Nursery was structured by long stretches of time for children to play and pursue their interests. Children could move around the space as they wished, including in the outdoor garden area, throughout the day. Practitioners were present and engaged with children, but did not plan monthly themes (e.g. 'dinosaurs' or 'astronauts'). Instead, children's relationships, imagination and creativity drove their learning.

Communication, closeness, and space

> Camilla, one of the very young children, went with Mia, a practitioner, into the preschool room. She had only recently started walking and was still a bit wobbly on her feet. Camilla eventually made her way over to a play structure and began climbing the stairs, which were very tall compared to her own height. In order to climb, she had to hold the railing, lean back, swing her knee up onto the step, and pull herself up. She seemed quite eager to make the climb, looking up to the top level in anticipation of her arrival there.
>
> Seeing Camilla climbing, Mia rushed over. I was ready for Mia to say 'be careful', or perhaps to hold Camilla's
>
> *contd.*

[2]All names of places and people in this briefing are pseudonyms. Some children have chosen their own.

hand as she climbed. Instead, Mia smiled at her and then sat on the step below, close enough so that her body would be a barrier if Camilla fell, but not actually touching Camilla. She did not ask if Camilla needed help, or speak at all.

Camilla moved up a stair, and so did Mia, maintaining the closeness but also the space between them. Camilla looked back from time to time at Mia, who smiled at her but did not say anything. When she reached the top step, Camilla paused for a few moments, looking down at the children in the playroom, who were now very far below her. Then she began to crawl backwards down the stairs. Mia, still behind her, backed down as well, maintaining the closeness between them, but also the space.

(field notes, 28th May 2014)

This example with Mia and Camilla demonstrates how practitioners made a special effort to include the very young children (babies and toddlers) in the participatory ethos. In order to do this, practitioners were attuned to both verbal and non-verbal communication from the very young children. This example describes how Mia helped Camilla to engage in the free-flow play and exploration that was such an important part of life in the nursery, while also ensuring that she was physically safe.

Valuing children's knowledge: 'a prey of birds'

At the nursery's nature kindergarten setting 'Wild Wood', a few of the children had noticed a buzzard flying above the lawn. One of the children had recently begun calling them 'a prey of birds'. Hearing this phrase, a visiting teacher knelt down next to the children and had a 'teachable moment' with them, telling them the bird was actually called a buzzard and that it was flying above the lawn in order to look for some food.

Julie, a Castle Nursery practitioner, told me that she felt the children were silenced by the 'teachable moment'. Instead of listening, the teacher attempted to replace children's knowledge with a fixed, correct terminology. Julie explained to the visiting teacher that at Castle Nursery, practitioners valued children's own words for things.

The two of them could not come to an agreement about this issue. The visiting teacher felt strongly that it was an essential part of her job to teach children facts that they did not know, while Julie felt it was more important for children to go through the process of thought and interpretation that would produce their own knowledge.

(field notes, 6th June 2014)

This example illustrates that children's own knowledge was prioritised. Children's knowledge did not need to meet an adult standard in order to be valued. Instead, children's own experiences and processes of creative thinking were held in high regard, even if not technically correct. Practitioners were willing to engage in dialogue, even when disagreements occurred, in order to defend their beliefs about young children's participation.

"We resisted": pushing back on increasing 'schoolification' of early learning and childcare

When asked by the local authority to adopt a standardised, outcome-driven, tick-box literacy and numeracy assessment tool, practitioners refused, arguing that it left no space for children's own thoughts about their learning. One described the assessments as 'horrible', 'prescriptive', 'against the Curriculum for Excellence' and 'different from everything we do here at Castle Nursery'. Another practitioner at the nursery told me she was annoyed at the implication that narrow, standardised information about literacy and numeracy skills was what primary school teachers needed to know about the children.

After deliberation, the head of centre and the nursery teacher informed the local authority that they would not be using the new forms. The head of centre felt strongly that by rejecting the suggested forms, 'we resisted'—pushing back on a practice that Castle Nursery practitioners strongly disagreed with.

(field notes, 27th and 28th April 2014)

As this example suggests, practitioners at Castle Nursery were willing to challenge mainstream practices in defence of their participatory ways of working, and to push back on increasing 'schoolification' of early learning and childcare. They believed that the tick box assessments diminished children's complex identities down to a simplistic list of judgments about their academic abilities, or perceived lack thereof.

Conclusions

Many early childhood settings adopt an ethos of children's participation or listening to children, and play-based approaches are increasingly the norm in Scottish early learning and childcare settings. However, in practice the commitment to listening may fail to disrupt the traditional social hierarchies between adults and children. At Castle Nursery, in contrast, practitioners were willing to question themselves and challenge 'mainstream' practices in order to flatten those hierarchies, creating a community where children's voices, agency and contributions were held in high regard. At Castle Nursery, children's participation permeated every part of daily life and routines. Young children's participation was not a bolt-on or tick-box activity, but a deeply considered ethos.

contd.

Talking points for practitioners

Practitioners who want to deepen the participatory nature of their work with young children might consider the following questions. These questions will help practitioners explore and reflect on their assumptions and beliefs about young children, the purposes of early learning and childcare, and whether current practices match up with their participatory values.

- **How are children's voices, agency and contributions promoted in your setting?** In what ways are they not acknowledged?
- **What role do spaces, time, and materials play in how children's participation is put into practice in your setting?** Are you willing to make thoughtful changes to daily routines? What do children think about daily life in your setting? Who controls spaces and chooses materials?
- **Are you and your fellow practitioners able to be heard in your setting?** Is your workplace hierarchical or are there more egalitarian relationships? What are the pay and working conditions like for practitioners?
- **Whose knowledge and experience counts in your setting?** Do adults focus on transmitting knowledge to children? How do adults negotiate pressures to achieve top-down learning outcomes in a play-based pedagogy? Are you and your fellow practitioners able to challenge top-down measures that you don't agree with?
- **Does your practice have an ethos that guides your work?** Where does it come from and who created it? What do children think should be included in the ethos?

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