

## Chapter 2

# Children's Voices in Early Childhood Education and Care

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### Abstract

Listening to and considering children's voices shows respectful regard for children's needs, interests and experiences, and helps discern what is meaningful for them in a particular subject or situation. Creating opportunities for the expression of children's voices implies child-centred practice: recognising children as active agents, with evolving competences and capacity to understand, think and choose with some degree of autonomy, thus being able to influence decision-making. Therefore, the commitment to listen to children's voices represents a fundamental step towards empowering children and supporting their participation rights. Importantly, children have the right to be heard and to have their voices considered from the earliest ages, in their significant relational contexts, such as early childhood education and care (ECEC). Listening to and valuing children's multiple voices in ECEC can be done in many ways, ensuring the context, children's background, characteristics and preferences are respected. In this chapter, we address the specificities of listening to children's voices and taking them into account in ECEC. We discuss common challenges that may prevent the full expression and consideration of children's voices, and ways to overcome them, to ensure children's meaningful participation in what matters to them and support them in becoming active citizens in society.

*Keywords:* Early childhood education and care (ECEC); ECEC professionals; children's voices; children's rights; child-centred practices; participation

### Introduction

Listening to and considering children's voices is crucial for establishing meaningful and effective child-centred practices, developed for and with children

(Frankel, 2018). The commitment to listen to children's voices represents a fundamental step towards empowering children and supporting their participation rights, in all matters affecting them, and in spaces co-created and shared by children and adults. Moreover, it shows respectful regard for children's needs, interests and experiences, and helps discern what is meaningful for them in a particular subject or situation (Carnevale, 2020). Creating opportunities for the expression of children's voices requires recognising children as active agents, with evolving competences and capacity to understand, think and choose with some degree of autonomy, thus being able to influence decision-making (Burger, 2018; Lansdown, 2005).

In this chapter, we focus on the importance of enabling, considering and amplifying young children's voices in everyday settings. Children have the right to be listened to and to have their voices considered from the earliest ages, in their significant relational contexts, such as early childhood education and care (ECEC) (United Nations, 1989; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005). Indeed, ECEC is especially well suited to support the development, expression and consideration of children's voices in daily activities. Millions of young children spend considerable amounts of time in ECEC settings (European Commission, 2019), where existing pedagogical models, frameworks and traditions already value child-centred and participatory approaches (e.g. Alderson, 2008; Dahlberg et al., 2007; Lloyd-Smith & Tarr, 2000; Prout, 2003; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008).

Listening to and valuing children's voices in ECEC can be achieved in multiple ways, ensuring that context and children's background, characteristics and preferences are respected. In this chapter, we address the concept of children's voices, its emergence and growing recognition, the importance of listening to young children's voices and taking them into account in ECEC, and why and how ECEC can support children's participation. We also discuss challenges that may prevent the full expression and consideration of children's voices and ways to overcome them, which may require re-framing and re-shaping institutional practices. The underlying assumption of this work is that supporting young children's voices ensures children's meaningful participation in what matters to them and supports them in becoming active citizens in society.

## **Emergence of Children's Voices**

When addressing children's voices, it is imperative to consider the paradigm shifts that occurred overtime, which were related with changes in how we understand childhood (Kanyal, 2014). Indeed, until the seventeenth century, childhood was regarded as a period of preparation for adulthood, and existing paradigms described children as underdeveloped adults who were not to be treated differently from adults (Clark, 2010). During the twentieth century, academics and researchers from anthropology and sociology, and particularly from the new sociology of childhood, paved the way to positioning children as social actors,

active agents, competent and rational beings and relevant participants in research (Corsaro, 2005; James & Prout, 2003).

Gradually, other fields of knowledge, namely social pedagogy (e.g. Cameron, 2011), education, social policy and psychology also offered insights regarding children's active role in their own learning and the important role that social structures play in children's learning and development (Correia et al., 2021; Kanyal, 2014). This led to the emergence and recognition of childhood studies as an interdisciplinary field (James & Prout, 2003; Spyrou, 2016). These multiple and interrelated perspectives highlighted children's knowledge, competences and capacities to express their perspectives and voices, as well as their potential to (positively) influence decision-making and shape their own environments, with adult support (Clark & Moss, 2005; Hart & Brando, 2018).

Consequently, concepts such as agency, evolving competences, autonomy and power became crucial to conceive children as active agents, competent to express their voices, views, interests and needs (Burger, 2018; Correia et al., 2021). Eliciting and considering children's voices is a way of respecting them and capturing their realities, thus supporting their agency (Freeman, 2007; Hanson, 2016; Percy-Smith, 2016; Spencer et al., 2020). Further, acknowledging children's evolving competences is vital to recognising them as active agents, while also considering their growing maturity (Lansdown, 2005). In turn, children's autonomy entails their active role and capacity to express themselves and to make choices (Ruck et al., 2014). Finally, power is associated with control and decision-making, and considered the basis of freedom, which is fundamental to the expression of children's voices (Foucault, 2003; Gallagher, 2008).

Changes in the views about childhood entail an increasing demand for listening to and considering children's voices, also at the policy level. In this regard, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) is particularly important, as it set the legal background for children's rights and particularly for children's influence in decision-making (e.g. Tangen, 2008). Specifically, Articles 12 and 13 of the Convention propose, that children have the right to express their views, and the right to have them considered, in the family and in community settings (United Nations, 1989). In other words, the Convention highlights the importance of listening to children and considering their views and voices.

At the European level, the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (European Commission, 2021) marked a new chapter towards a democratic, meaningful and systemic participation of children in decision-making processes. Specifically, the strategy is aimed at putting children and their best interests at the heart of EU policies, by increasing awareness of children's rights, and ensuring the right of the child to be heard and listened to. The Council of Europe (2017) also highlights the importance of considering children's voices and recommended that they be heard since the earliest ages. Relatedly, General Comment No. 7 states that ECEC settings are privileged contexts in which children's voices should be particularly considered and provides a normative framework to monitor the implementation of the CRC (United Nations, 1989) in ECEC (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005). Consistent with these position documents, the Proposal for Key Principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education

and Care (European Commission, 2014) and the European Framework of Quality and Wellbeing Indicators (Moser et al., 2017) underlined the importance of valuing young children's voice(s), as a key principle of high-quality ECEC settings.

### **Listening to Children's Voice(s)**

Children's voices refer to the expression of children's views, feelings and expectations, through verbal communication, but also through other modes, such as visual arts, music, writing, drama, movement, facial expressions or even silences (e.g. Lewis, 2010). Given that children can express themselves in multiple ways, the promotion of children's voices has prompted the emergence of several forms and methods of accessing them (Spyrou, 2011).

Listening to children's voices shows regard for children's needs, interests and experiences, and constitutes a fundamental step towards empowering children and supporting their participation rights (Harris & Manatakis, 2013). Moreover, listening to children is also a way of fulfilling children's right to respect (Korczak, 2017). The concept of children's voices recognises the multiplicity of children's perspectives and goes beyond hearing, to focus on listening to (i.e. paying attention, attending to) children's thoughts, feelings, preferences and needs (Murray, 2019). To effectively listen to children in ECEC, positive adult-child interactions (i.e. characterised by sensitivity and emotional availability) are crucial (e.g. Rinaldi, 2001).

Actively listening to children's voices helps professionals and institutions to know and understand children's needs and interests. Also, it provides information that allows professionals to be more aligned with children's perspectives, positively responding to them. Consequently, professionals can develop practices tailored to children's preferences, thus optimising their development and learning (Murray, 2019). In the end, the process of listening to and considering children's voices has the potential to benefit not only children (e.g. enhancing self-esteem, communication and problem-solving skills) but also adults and institutions (e.g. enhancing professionals' sensitivity) (Shier, 2001; Sinclair, 2004).

Recent studies show that 3- and 5-year-old children were more willing to accept group decisions when their voice was listened to (Grocke et al., 2018). Indeed, voice is one of the conditions that make a procedure or a decision judged as fair (Folger, 1977; Thibaut & Walker, 1975). In addition, being listened to satisfies a need for positive self-regard and a need for belonging (Lind & Tyler, 1988).

Across time, children's voices have been considered both individually (i.e. representing children's will and perspectives) and socially constructed (i.e. not separated from the sociocultural environment in which they occur) (Komulainen, 2007). Children have been historically considered less competent, less mature and without a voice. For this reason, discourses on children's voices contributed to give visibility and power to voices that were previously silenced or marginalised (e.g. by the supremacy of adults' discourses) (James, 2007; Moore & Muller, 1999). In this sense,

supporting the development, expression and influence of children's voices aligns with social empowerment movements (e.g. 'Nothing about us without us', Charlton, 1998). Therefore, discourses on children's voices are described as valuable and well intentioned, as they represent a means of considering perspectives that otherwise would be ignored (L'Anson, 2013).

Importantly, it is not the adult who gives children a voice, as argued by Welty and Lundy (2013). Children have a voice, need to be supported to express it and should have it considered and listened to. Thus, when framing, listening to, and considering children's voices in ECEC, both the multiple forms of expression and communication of each child, and teacher-child interactions must be considered (Mannion, 2007), acknowledging the multidimensional construction of voice (Elden, 2012).

### **Supporting Young Children's Voices in ECEC Settings**

There are multiple reasons why ECEC is a privileged context for supporting young children's voices. Millions of young children around the world spend considerable amounts of time in ECEC settings (European Commission, 2019). Therefore, the types of experiences children have in these settings matter, as illustrated by the positive developmental outcomes associated with attending high-quality ECEC (e.g. Moser et al., 2017; Sylva et al., 2010).

Naturally, what constitutes high-quality ECEC is socially constructed, changes over time and across cultural contexts and may differ depending on the perspectives considered (Katz, 2006). Nevertheless, we propose that children's participation and, specifically, the promotion of children's voices should be considered important dimensions of ECEC quality (Sheridan, 2007), understood broadly as the conditions that ensure and promote young children's development, learning and well-being.

This proposal is consistent with the notion that children's participation should be embedded in their daily lives and community settings, from the earliest ages (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005). Importantly, it is also consistent with existing pedagogical models and frameworks regarding ECEC, that value child-centred and participatory approaches (Alderson, 2008; Dahlberg et al., 2007; Lloyd-Smith & Tarr, 2000; Prout, 2003; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008). Because of its specificities and long-lasting traditions, ECEC is especially well suited to support the development, expression and consideration of children's voices in daily practices, planning and decision-making. Moreover, ECEC has the power to pave the way for other levels of the education system to consider all children's voices, intentionally and systematically.

Considering young children's developmental differences and diverse sociocultural backgrounds, ECEC teachers' sensitivity to multiple forms of expression (e.g. verbal, non-verbal) is paramount to truly listening to all children, regardless of skill level, language spoken at home, temperamental characteristics, among others (e.g. Houen et al., 2016). Ensuring the expression of children's voices requires that children's competence, dignity and responsibility are acknowledged,

respected and promoted. It also requires that relevant information is shared with children in meaningful ways and that children's expression is facilitated by building their capacity to express views, interests and preferences (e.g. Lansdown, 2005).

However, listening to young children's voices alone may not be enough, and ECEC professionals need to consider other interrelated dimensions. Based on Lundy (2007), additional conditions necessary to promote meaningful opportunities for children to express themselves, fully participating in decision-making and exerting their influence in society, include:

- An inclusive ECEC space (e.g. ensuring appropriate access to materials and high-quality emotional support, providing ample opportunities for children to express their views and promoting the motivation to do so).
- A receptive audience (i.e. identifying responsible person(s) who effectively listen to children's views and ensuring there is a process to communicating and giving due weight to children's views).
- Considering multiple levels of children's influence (i.e. consultation, collaboration and child initiation), as appropriate (acting upon children's views at each level and providing children feedback on decision-making processes and outcomes).

These dimensions of space, audience, and influence are important to fully address children's voices in ECEC and may provide guidance to professionals and pedagogical teams in setting a pedagogical agenda (Correia et al., 2021; Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015).

Given its close connections to other key developmental contexts for young children, such as families and the community, ECEC settings are especially well positioned to advocate for young children's participation rights and effective consideration of children's voices, beyond the walls and fences of the setting. Beyond raising awareness, ECEC professionals can support families and relevant community stakeholders in addressing children's voices, ensuring that children's views, preferences, ideas and initiatives on topics relevant to family and community life reach the relevant audiences and are given due weight. However, to support and advocate for children's voices in ECEC, in the family and in the community, ECEC professionals themselves need to be well aware of the importance of children's voices and participation. Thus, professional development is needed to (1) raise ECEC professionals' awareness regarding the benefits of supporting children's voices, promoting positive attitudes towards children's participation and (2) enhance ECEC professionals' skills to design, implement, monitor and evaluate participatory practices. The PARTICIPA project is an example of a European initiative to design and examine the effectiveness of professional development tools supporting participation rights in ECEC (see <https://child-participation.eu/>). Also, some instruments and tools are already available to support assessment, reflection and positive change regarding children's participation and daily experiences. For instance, the Classroom Assessment

Scoring System – Pre-K, a widely used observational tool designed to assess the quality of interactions and practices in ECEC classrooms, includes a dimension that focuses on the extent to which professionals place an emphasis on children's perspectives, interests and motivations, and foster their responsibility, participation and autonomy (Pianta et al., 2008). The Council of Europe (2016) also developed a Child Participation Assessment Tool, with a set of indicators allowing professionals, from practice and policy levels, to measure the implementation and the quality of the participation experiences offered to children and young people under the age of 18.

### **Challenges to the Consideration of Children's Voices in ECEC**

Stereotypes and beliefs that the consideration of children's voices is difficult, costly, demanding and requires expertise are examples of challenges already identified (Bae, 2009; Lundy, 2007; Malone & Hartung, 2010). In effect, despite the multiple benefits foreseen from listening to children, and despite children seeming to be aware of their right to express themselves, only few consider themselves heard and respected (European Commission, 2021).

This applies to the various contexts of children's lives, and the ECEC context is no exception. Two frequently mentioned challenges that may prevent the full consideration of children's voices in ECEC refer to professionals' misconceptions about children's competences to express themselves, and to difficulties in combining professionals' demands and children's voices (e.g. Correia et al., 2020; Kanyal & Gibbs, 2014; Lundy, 2007).

Scepticism, lack of awareness and cultural beliefs regarding adults' authority can hamper professionals from listening to children's voices and to share power with them. For instance, professionals can see children and, consequently, their perspectives, as immature, incompetent and not meaningful (Horwath et al., 2011; Lundy, 2007). Thus, even when listening to and considering children's voices, some professionals may do it without entirely recognising children's voices as agential and without acknowledging their power to positively influence decisions affecting them (e.g. Carnevale, 2020).

Relatedly, some practices of ECEC professionals are characterised by the use of directive language and communication styles, or by interactions characterised by adult power and control (Koran & Avci, 2017). These practices may compromise children's comfort and confidence to express themselves, becoming a deterrent to the consideration of their voices (Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012).

Also, in practice, professionals may encounter difficulties in recognising and understanding young children's modes and purposes of communication. For example, younger children may not use verbal communication; therefore, adults need to be aware of other forms of expression such as smiling, crying or pointing. The recognition and understanding of children's various modes of communication can be facilitated in the context of interactions characterised by sensitivity, reciprocity, reflexivity and intersubjectivity (Murray, 2019). In this regard, professional development initiatives may be fundamental for professionals to reflect

on their practices and become more aware of such interactions (Correia et al., 2021).

Regarding difficulties in conciliating professional demands and children's voices, they are often related with the contextual limits and barriers that ECEC professionals encounter (Vieira, 2017). They may be, for instance, related with bureaucracy, intense workload, the existence of a strict curriculum to follow or with high adult–child ratios that can hinder the effective consideration of children's voices (e.g. Venninen et al., 2014). In this regard, the alignment between macro-policy agendas (e.g. recognising the importance of a pedagogic space providing opportunities for practitioners to listen to and act on children's voices) and children's agendas (i.e. focused on children's views, interests and needs) seems to be crucial to the full consideration of children's voices (Frankel, 2018; Murray, 2019).

Addressing children's voices and child-centred practices in teacher's initial training, professional profiles and ECEC curriculum guidelines may support and encourage professionals to overcome obstacles to the promotion of children's voices and participation in ECEC (Theobald, 2019). In addition, investment in professional development initiatives may be important to disseminate and translate evidence-based knowledge about the promotion of children's voices, thus fostering professionals' positive attitudes and skills towards the adoption of more participatory, child-centred practices (e.g. Emilson & Folkesson, 2006).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we reflected on the meaning of listening to and acting upon young children's voices, on the need to consider multiple expressions of voice and on the importance of acknowledging the capacities of young children to frame a view – a meaningful view – and make their perspectives known. We discussed the importance of ECEC settings, where millions of children all over the world spend considerable amounts of time, as pivotal to ensure children experience their agency as consequential. We also discussed ECEC as a context for implementing opportunities for supporting citizenship from an early age.

ECEC settings are in a privileged position to become beacons for the support and elevation of children's participation rights in their communities. Naturally, building and implementing a shared vision around the importance of children's voices, in ECEC and in the community, requires continuous professional development, teamwork and reflection, and intentionality in planning for and monitoring the extent and meaningfulness of children's participation. However, when these conditions are in place, there is much that ECEC professionals and, preferably, ECEC teams can do to actively support children's voices.

While other participation models are useful, the rationale shared in this chapter was specifically informed by the Lundy model (2007) and its components of space, voice, audience and influence. Each of these dimensions poses relevant questions for ECEC settings regarding how to support the development, expression and consequence of children's voices. The responses to such questions

can both inform the evaluation of current practices and the definition of pedagogical and organizational goals related to children's voices and participation rights. Based on this rationale, Wysłowska et al. (2021) developed a self-assessment tool for ECEC professionals (i.e. teachers, assistants and coordinators) aiming to support them in delivering high-quality ECEC through participatory practices at the classroom and centre level. Drawing from this work, and looking into the future, we propose that ECEC professionals and teams consider the questions below to identify future steps, when seeking positive change in how they support children's voices and participation. Obstacles to the promotion of children's participation have been identified (e.g. Venninen et al., 2014); however, the current understanding of children's rights requires going forward and deeper in promoting children's voices in ECEC. This is both a responsibility and a shared mandate.

### Conversation Starters

- To what extent do we implement child-centred practices, and ensure that every child experiences a *positive, stimulating, accessible and inclusive environment*?
- To what extent do we engage in continuous reflections on the *unique ways each child expresses* his/her perspectives, preferences, needs and expectations?
- To what extent do we provide sufficient and *developmentally appropriate information* to children, to support the formation of their perspectives?
- To what extent do we ensure that children's perspectives are *listened to and considered in decision-making* at the classroom and centre level?
- To what extent do we support children in *identifying who has the responsibility to listen* to their views and ensure that their perspectives reach the target audience?
- Do we ensure that children know the *extent to which their views were considered* and understand the rationale for the decisions eventually made?
- To what extent do we address children's voices and participation in our *mission statement* and ensure the development of a *common vision* about their importance?
- To what extent do we *support and engage families and community stakeholders* in enabling, considering and amplifying young children's voices?

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