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Look Who's Talking: Eliciting the Voices of Children from Birth to Seven

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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 with young children (birth to seven) to give and support "voice" in respect to different aspects of their lived experience; in other words, to elicit voice. The intention was to create a space for individuals working in this relatively underdeveloped field to work in a collaborative process, engaging with associated theory and practice. The aims of the seminars were: to move debate forward; to develop guidelines and provocations for practice; and to advance understandings of the affordances and constraints on the implementation of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) with young children.

The series was comprised of two seminars, one in January and one in June 2017, each of three and a half days' duration. The first focused predominantly on mapping the field, sharing and discussing experiences and practices, and exploring the affordances and constraints of eliciting the voices of those aged seven and under. It is this seminar on which this commentary focuses. The second, held in June 2017, aimed to synthesize participants' thinking and identify the needs and opportunities for development within the field.

The January seminar started with a range of prompt questions, as listed below, but there was also a freedom and openness within the sessions that enabled the discussions to be flexible according to the needs and views of the group. These prompts were a guide only, developed by a subset of the participants at the point of applying for funding. They were used as a prompt to engage potential participants and

then as an aide memoire within the discussion. They are useful here as providing a snapshot of the kinds of enquiries that were ongoing.

- How do experts understand the concept of “voice” (in terms of Article 12) when working with young children?
- What does “authentic voice” mean in relation to children aged seven and under?
- Can children aged seven and under have an informed voice?
- In what areas might children aged seven and under have an informed voice, and in what areas might they not—and how is this decision made?
- How are current practices (pedagogic and methodological) being used to elicit voice with young children?
- What range of specific tools and practices are there that facilitate the elicitation of voices when researching the perspectives of children aged seven and under?
- What are the overarching ethical considerations of eliciting voice?

The commitment in the seminars was for open dialogue; this was achieved through creating spaces with minimum structure so as not to curtail or limit conversations. Although challenging in many ways, this was an attempt to allow for a natural evolution in discussions. This was particularly important, given that the group had previously not worked together in this form and represented a diversity of approaches in working with young children. To predetermine activities and topics would have limited the authenticity of the exploratory intent of the seminar. On reflection, and this can be seen in some of the discussion represented by the fourth graphic, and most

participants could see that there were interesting parallels between the way the group worked in this academic context and the methods and approaches used to elicit the voice of young children, such as in the kinds of scaffolding used and the dispositions facilitated in participants. There were aspects of the way meaningful dialogue was created that were essentially consistent regardless of age, including the use of open questions, tools that are supportive of thinking and speaking, avoidance of jargon and shared vocabulary, and the importance of authenticity and recognition of the listener an equally important to the speaker.

In a similar productive parallel to the visual techniques used by many of us to elicit voice, a graphic facilitator was employed to support reflective and strategic thinking across the days within each seminar, and to create the link between the seminars in January and July. She created graphic minutes of each of the individual sessions by capturing and representing the key ideas, points of discussion and the flow of concepts. These were reviewed regularly by seminar participants. The graphics presented here emerged from the first seminar; one per day for each of the of the three and a half days, focusing predominantly on mapping the field, sharing and discussing experiences and practices, and exploring the affordances and constraints of participants' experiences.

There are four graphics organized under the following loose headings.

1. **Introductions.** The first time we all met was the first session of the first seminar, and although many of us were familiar with each other's work, only some of us had met previously, so this element of the seminar was characterized by a sharing of tentative thinking and ways of working—a general familiarization process. In the graphic, it is possible to see us playing

with terminology common to the field, such as participation, civic engagement, voice, rights, democracy, and co-construction. This allowed us tentatively to debate and question each other's understandings. It was very evident at this point that the term voice was challenging, not just with regard to the target age group, but also in our conceptual understandings of what it means to have a voice, to be listened to, and what this meant in regard to different contexts and in relation to the "listener." The favorite alternative to "voice" was "perspectives," but the group could not reach an agreement as to which was the most preferable term to use. Although the conversation was very conceptual, we could not move too far away from the practices we had seen that facilitated voice and this is where we decided, as a group, to head.

2. **Starting with practice.** After day one's quite conceptual examination of the topic, and with better knowledge of each other, the group collectively decided that day two should focus on practice, although whether this should be research or pedagogic practice, or both, was an early aspect of the conversation. The discussion revolved around our own experiences of eliciting voice, successes and failures. Particular attention was given to the Scottish system, which has enshrined the UNCRC within its policy guidelines, although the extent to which this manifests in practice across institutions and age phases is open to debate. From this we were able to look at the characteristics of spaces, of adults, and of the children involved. A variety of examples were given and explored critically. This allowed, as evidenced in

the graphic minutes, key characteristics of contexts and associated practices to emerge.

3. **Reflecting.** In the morning of day three we all visited Glasgow City Council early years or primary school settings that were identified as having interesting practice around eliciting voice. These settings included Family Learning Centres that were committed to community participation and support, and Rights Respecting Schools. This proved to be very motivational and inspiring for the afternoon's discussion. It is interesting to note that the graphic minutes only represent half a day's dialogue and yet are the same length as those recording a full day's session. The focus for the discussion was our observations from the morning visits. Within the graphic minutes, it is possible to see that the beliefs, dispositions, understandings, and skills of the adults working with the young children were very much foregrounded in our reflections of what we had seen. It often came down to whether the adults themselves had a voice, within their organization or more widely, as to whether they reciprocated in providing spaces for the children. The role that they took in modeling, encouraging, supporting, and facilitating a child to take an active role and how they provided a response or shared action based on this dialogue was fundamental. The extent to which this role was more or less important with young children was discussed with quite a lot of disagreement, once more highlighting our different understandings of the term voice.

As a result, the last part of the afternoon was dedicated to a Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CoPI) session (Cassidy, 2007) in which

- we engaged with the question, what do we mean by voice? This can be seen documented in the last third of the graphic minutes. This process was particularly fruitful in allowing delegates to challenge their own conceptualization of voice because the structure of CoPI necessitated that individuals make connections with previous contributions to the dialogue, therefore placing a relational expectation on our thinking. We were unable to argue a stance in isolation, or to refer to external authority for our reasoning, so the understandings that emerged were genuinely co-constructed. With CoPI, there need not be a final consensus or agreement, however, the dialogue between the group served to make transparent assumptions and where terms were being conflated, confused, elucidated, and consistent, thereby facilitating future discussions in the seminar by engaging in a more thorough interrogation of the key concepts.
4. **Planning.** In the last day of the January seminar (captured in graphic four) we looked forward, considering how we should develop and share our thinking over the short term (between the two seminars), at the June event and beyond. A key consideration was how to include the voices of children and practitioners in our musings and to fulfil a commitment to partnership working. We were keen that this was not solely an academic exercise and that we took opportunities to share what we had been talking about with colleagues, students, and practitioners in an attempt to codify our outcomes and also to explore further areas of dissonance. There was a strong ethical and moral prerogative about this.

The next seminar was scheduled for June 2017, when these conversations will be developed and extended. Key to this event will be the input of practitioners whose views will be solicited in a range of different ways. In addition, we will be presenting at conferences to further validate and also challenge the group's thinking. The project will soon have a website on which these discussions can be shared and wider participation prompted. We encourage you to share your experiences:

<http://www.voicebirthtoseven.co.uk> (coming May 2017).

Reference

Cassidy, C. (2007). *Thinking children*. London, UK: Continuum.