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**Bridging the theory and practice of eliciting the voices of young children:  
findings from the *Look Who's Talking* Project**

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**Abstract**

To foster children and young people's skills, dispositions and understanding that underpin a voice agenda, practices need to be developed that support this from the earliest age. This article explores issues relating to this complex, challenging and under-researched area from the perspective of practitioners working with children aged from birth to seven. Using vignettes of practice, we explore practical and pedagogical examples and take the opportunity to deepen our understanding of the elicitation of voice through the lens of the eight factors previously identified in the *Look Who's Talking* Project. Through this approach we highlight practices that elicit voice as a key element of children's rights in a localised way, and exemplify productive connections between theory and practice.

**Keywords:** young children's voice, children's rights, early childhood, early years practice, *Look Who's Talking*

## **Introduction**

The article is grounded in the field of children's rights and the drive to ensure children's voices are heard. Specifically, we are concerned with children's right to be heard as advocated in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations 1989) which states:

*States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, **the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child** (our emphasis).*

Implementing Article 12, however, is neither simple nor straightforward. As Stern (2017) notes, challenges around translating Article 12 in practice are associated with the extent to which professionals perceive children as rights' holders. Traditionally, early years' pedagogy has been framed in terms of inter-subjective and relational practice, which, while congruent with Article 12, arguably over-shadows broader representations of voice as presented in this article. While young children are often considered to be social actors who have agency and autonomy (Smith 2011; Kellett 2014) and who can 'create and communicate valid views about the social world' (MacNaughton, Hughes and Smith 2007, 164), these views often do not impact upon practice or pertain to how practitioners view all children. Indeed, young children are often seen as deficient in some regards when compared with adults (Hendrick, 2000;

Hammersley 2017), and we hear of children's voices having been filtered by well-meaning adults (Roberts 2000; Komulainen 2007; Bucknall 2014). This is particularly true for younger children (Wall 2017). It is this gap between the principles underpinning children's rights as articulated in Article 12 of the UNCRC and the enactment of this in practice (Robinson, Quennerstedt and I'Anson 2020.) with which we are concerned.

The key question driving this article is: How do early years practice communities understand voice in relation to children's rights and professional responsibilities? The goal is to advance understanding that is framed as collaborative and experiential rather than offering a synthesis or framework for action, techniques or toolkits. If, as Bartels, Onstenk and Veugelers (2016, 681) assert, very young children are 'involved in social life and society', and if their voices are to have influence (Lundy 2007), then it is important that this is facilitated. Furthermore, Lansdown (2005, 19) argues that the culture in early years settings should be rooted in a presumption that children can have the competence to make a unique, valid and valuable contribution to influence the world around them. While much has been written about children's voice and supporting children to air their views, little has been written that focuses specifically on the practices aimed at *eliciting* the voices of young children as an end in itself (Clark 2005; Wall 2017), rather than in pursuit of research or other adult agendas. We assert that practices that uphold Articles 12 (United Nations 1989) should be fundamental when working with young children. However, for this to happen, practitioners firstly need to recognise the potential of engaging with productive approaches to eliciting voice and then must work to develop the skills, language and dispositions of voice.

In order to elicit young children's voices in all early years contexts, we argue two shifts are required:

- 1) An acknowledgement of young children as capable social agents (James, Jenks and Prout 1998; MacNaughton, et al. 2007; Bacon and Frankel 2014; Cassidy 2017); and
- 2) A reflexive re-examination of the ways in which we conceptualise and gauge capacity.

Just as adults differ in their abilities to articulate their voices at different times and in varying contexts due to a range of internal, social and political factors, the same is true for young children. If we accept that children 'are part of the social fabric' (Biesta, Lawy and Kelly 2009, 20), we need to move beyond the notion of adults as gatekeepers who determine where, when and how children participate, to one where they are facilitators who enable children's participation. Through examining a diverse range of practices, this article demonstrates how practitioners might act in this capacity. We reflect on lessons learned from practice that illustrate the successes and challenges of eliciting the voices of young children from birth to seven years.

## **Methods**

This article arises from ongoing dialogue originating from the *Look Who's Talking* international seminar series ([www.whoistalking.org](http://www.whoistalking.org)). These seminars brought together researchers and practitioners who work to enable young children's 'voices'. The intention was to create a space to progress thinking and 'the journey to a more respectful and meaningful engagement with children' (Lundy 2018, 341) through developing guidelines and provocations for practice, and advancing theory and understanding

about facilitating the voices of young children including elements that constrain these. We adopted an inductive approach to the understanding of voice, drawing on discussions in the seminars, examples from practice, and philosophical dialogue.

The seminar series enabled us to define eight principles for eliciting voice with young children from birth to seven: Definition; Power; Inclusivity; Listening; Time and Space; Approaches; Processes; and Purposes (Wall et al. 2017; Wall et al. 2018).

These principles, while helpful for academic dialogue required translation to support practice. As such, eight discussion posters were produced to complement how each of these eight principles might relate to practice (see Figure 1). In some cases, the terminology on the talking point posters and the factors as listed here differ due to the different intended audience and how the posters might be utilised. Nevertheless, the concepts align as the principles and posters were derived from the dialogue and graphic notes from the seminars.



Figure 1: Talking point posters (larger version available at [www.](http://www.))

The posters were not intended as the final word on the topic or a synthesis of practitioners' thinking, but as a stimulus to enhance and support theory and practice when working with young children, giving warrant to the claim that the diversity of practitioners' experiences are necessary. The posters were intended to be used by practitioners to prompt their thinking, to draw on their existing knowledge and experience (including use of specific approaches or tools), and to provide scaffolds for collegial conversations. This article develops this work, with the focus being to explore these principles and their translation into practice. In order to exemplify how voice may be elicited, we present narratives and vignettes from practice (Jalango, Isenberg and Gerbracht 1995), stimulated in particular by the posters and definitions. This allowed participants to identify which theme(s) they wished to respond to with their vignettes, thereby offering multiple data sets that have a congruence despite their diverse contexts.

A qualitative inquiry (Cresswell and Poth 2016) project was established in order to elicit multiple narratives to engage, challenge and potentially re-shape the existing principles. We, therefore, purposefully did not set strict boundaries on who participated or the form in which they participated. The goal was to gather vignettes *to exemplify how voice is elicited with young children* from across the sector: including teachers, early years officers/practitioners/pedagogues, researchers and those working with children in the third sector, University or health services through five data collection routes. This involved an open invitation to submit examples to the project website (www), the completion of a feedback form at the *Look Who's Talking* public lecture, submissions to an edited book building on the talking point posters (Arnott and Wall 2021), documented conversations with practitioners, and responses



from participants at an European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) workshop. This opportunistic stance was intentional, to encourage the widest possible participation and range of views. The data used for analysis can be summarised as follows, although exemplification may not come from all data sets.

Data set 1	Submissions to the project website	2 case studies	1 school and 1 charity setting, both Scotland-based, examples of practice characterising eliciting young children's voices
Data set 2	Submissions at the public lecture	36 completed templates	Anonymous voluntary submissions from lecture audience to prompts including 'I think voice with children 0-7 is...', 'Eliciting voice with children 0-7 is when...', and 'An example of voice was ...'
Data set 3	Submissions to the edited book on the talking point posters	25 submissions	Academic and practice-based voluntary submissions from various international early years contexts and projects

Data set 4	Conversations with 0-3 practitioners	3 case studies	3 partner nurseries (to the University), conversations lasting around 2 hours each plus visits to the nursery by researchers.
Data set 5	EECERA consultation	19 participants	International academic conference workshop activity (annotating and commenting on the 8 factors and their definitions) and question and answer session.

Table 1: *Data Set Summary*

An analysis was undertaken using the eight factors (Wall et al. 2018), as *a priori* codes for organising the examples by theme. The examples from practice represented qualitative narrative data (Cresswell and Poth 2016) which was unpicked, interpreted and re-constructed into key categories for consideration according to the eight factors introduced earlier. However, this paper presents the data according to the key themes and coding structure and therefore the data has been dissected to exemplify an extended practice-orientation to the factors, but also further engage with the embedded concepts. In this sense, chronological discussions or narrative stories from each individual context or submission are not presented in this article, as may often be the case with narrative data. Instead, the overarching picture is demonstrated across contexts, settings and data sets.

## ***Ethics***

The data collection was guided by the project leader's University Ethical Approval Process and followed EECERA (2015) ethical guidance. Those submitting examples were provided with strict ethical protocols to ensure data were appropriately anonymised on submission. For the practitioners' narratives generated through field research, such as the conversations in nursery, relevant information sheets and consent forms were signed and all narratives were subsequently anonymised. For those submitting examples to the edited book, authors were contacted to confirm written consent for their examples to form part of this data set. Authors' names and organisations are used where agreement was given; however, all children's names are pseudonyms.

## **Discussion**

The eight principles for eliciting voice with young children are dynamically interconnected (Wall et al. 2018). However, by treating them separately and identifying key vignettes for each, we aim to deepen our understanding of how the principles might be enacted in practice. This discussion is less about aligning the principles with existing theory; rather, it is concerned with encouraging existing theoretical positions to take account of the experiences and voices of practitioners.

***1. DEFINITION:*** *It is essential to address the question of what 'voice' is.*

Voice is considered as more than verbal utterances; it allows individuals to express who they are. Voice, therefore, 'includes, but is not limited to words; behaviour; actions; pauses in action; silences; body language; glances; movement; and artistic expression' (Wall et al. 2019). This is indicative of the way in which voice is

understood in early years settings and has been widely received as productive, especially when working with the youngest children (see the work of Elizabeth Rouse below), but it has also been shown to be a useful consideration for voice work more generally.

*The practice of infant massage... supported the acknowledgement of the infant's range of modes of communication from an early age... the responsive use communicates a very important message from the early weeks and months of life; that they are respected and recognised as capable human beings with rights. My research used video... reflect[ing] with parents and carers on their shared experiences, their developing relationships with their children, and the experience from the child's perspective. (Elizabeth Rouse, England, Data set 3)*

This is a challenging vignette in terms of identifying the presence of children's voice given that the children are very obviously pre-verbal. Communication is central: the infant is not able to articulate responses in recognisable words, but utterances, cries, and features of body language can communicate pleasure –or discomfort – to the person delivering the massage. In order to 'hear' the child's voice, the carer must be attuned to how the child communicates their experience of the massage.

Similarly, in Data Set 4, within a setting catering for children from birth to three, the practitioners also clearly saw voice as something more than spoken words. They wrote about "*reading cues, unspoken communication and facial expression*", paying

attention to children's 'gaze', and "communication through body language and eye contact" such as in the example they offer of "A child grabbing my hand and taking me to the fridge".

In offering such an open, inclusive definition of voice, it is helpful to explore the idea that there will be voice practice without knowledge of the UNCRC, as in Satenik from Armenia's contribution below.

*Among many of my duties as a Child Protection and Education Regional Coordinator is spreading UNCRC among children, teachers and state officials, making sure that children's rights are realized. I conducted numerous child initiated projects where issues in the community were identified and solutions decided and implemented jointly with children ... The case study represents collectivist rural culture, where very often teachers working in a kindergarten or school may not know about UNCRC and Article 12. It is interesting to study their approaches in listening to young children's voices in this "virgin" environment, which is unique context in its kind. (Satenik Khachatryan, Armenia, Data set 3)*

This example suggests that a definition of voice requires on-going dialogue between practitioners as they develop understanding of what voice means for them. For example, for those who are unfamiliar with the UNCRC or have not previously considered voice in their practice, the notion of voice work may be challenging initially. Equally, there will be practitioners not familiar with the formal discourse on

children's rights who will have a clear sense of what voice might mean and how one facilitates and listens to children's voice within their context.

Regardless of the context, definitions of voice, throughout the project, highlight sensitivity to the actions of the speaker but they also illustrate that voice is fundamentally relational. The reciprocal nature of the dialogue is a communication where all parties are mutually and actively engaged. The nature of this action can be considered with regard to the principles of power and listening:

*“Voice is about someone listening and acting on what has been said. Voice requires a response if it is to be valued.” (Data set 5)*

The relational element was also emphasised in Data Set 4 (below) as practitioners use words including ‘reciprocal’, ‘communication’ and ‘relationships’. Here, practitioners in an Early Learning and Childcare Centre (0-3 years) considered their practice during a discussion on the concept of voice, questioning whether it was possible to develop a relationship without communication and vice versa. When defining communication they spoke of ‘bodily and physical communication such as eye contact, expressions and facial movement’ and for an 18 month-old they argued communication was demonstrated through action. They provided several examples of babies’ embodied communication:

*“if a stranger comes into a room and bodily the child moved away to [be with] a child  
he knows”*

*“A snack they move the plate away”*

*“A baby spits a bottle out”*

The practitioners continued by describing the importance of developing *relationships* grounded in nurture principles in order to interpret young children's actions.

*“You build that relationship up – you get to know when things aren't right”*

*“building up the child's trust”*

In these examples, we see the significance of intersubjectivity and acknowledgement of the power dynamics within the situation. This is particularly important when considering voices of the very young.

**2. POWER:** *Voice is about power; it is relational.*

Power imbalance may exist amongst adults, between adults and children, and between the children themselves. The power dynamic is perhaps at its most obvious when working with pre or non-verbal children. However, practitioners across our sample recognise the importance of,

*“appreciate[ing] the ‘voice’ of the young child and promot[ing] opportunities for babies and toddlers to be active decision makers in their own learning and care”* (Erica Evans, England, Data set 3).

Erica highlights that what is important in this dynamic is that one must

*“appreciate babies as competent beings with the potential to communicate in meaningful ways”* (Data set 3).

Another participant noted that power was flattened in the context of a child asking “*why a caravan doesn’t have stairs*” (Data set 2). The practitioner was unable to answer the question, so agreed to research it with the child:

*“The research was led by the child and taken forward for a few days with a variety of activities. Both of us and the other children were learners. I was not the ‘teacher’ but took the lead from the child, facilitating materials, etc...”*

(Data set 2)

We see the practitioner here as a co-enquirer, sharing power with the children, responding positively to the child, initiating and directing the activity.

The same may also be true for children who choose not to share their views when invited to do so by an adult. One group of participants at the EECERA consultation noted “*silence as a form of voice*” (Data set 5), thus recognising children’s right to privacy and silence. Silence may also be a way for the child to exert power in a situation. Understanding the power dynamics within young children’s settings requires practitioners to reflect on interactions with, and between, children.

### ***3. INCLUSIVITY: Everyone has an equal voice.***

Once power is acknowledged, it is important to consider the inclusiveness of practices. The notion of inclusivity allows for everyone, both adults and children, to be seen as competent actors and holders of rights. In an inclusive approach, diversity is celebrated and dignity and respect are key.



The inseparability of rights and voice are seen by the participants in the EECERA consultation when they responded to a prompt question about equal voice:

*“No. Everyone has the right to an equal voice but don’t always have it”* (Data set 5).

What is important is the recognition that everyone’s entitlement is not always realised. Significantly, the participants also acknowledged that inclusion is *“the fundamental foundation”* of children’s voice, but that being inclusive allows children the option of being silent, of opting out or of having *“silence as a form of voice”*, as noted above.

Researchers working with a nursery in Jordan recognised the need for an inclusive approach to children’s voice. In the example shared, they note that in asking the children about the activities that are liked and disliked within the setting, that a goal was

*“to encourage all people involved... to hear their voices with love, respect, and seriousness”* (Omayya Al-Hassan, Jordan, Data set 3).

In the above example, the notion of respect was highlighted as central, alongside notions of love, and children’s views were taken as seriously as the adults.

Practitioners who work closely with parents/caregivers also stressed that an inclusive environment is one where the

*“Children need to feel secure and confident in their environment in order to learn actively and develop positive self-esteem and self-worth” (Data set 3).*

An inclusive approach is one that recognises both the agency and identity of all. Looking beyond verbal communication to ensure that all children in a day nursery setting were included, the staff in a submission for the edited book employed “symbolic gesturing, more commonly known as baby signing”. While baby signing is relatively new and not uncontentious in parenting, in early childhood education the use of appropriate non-verbal communications, such as Makaton signing (visual hand shapes and movements which represent meaning similar to a Key Word Signing approach combining signs, symbols and speech), is gaining momentum and is now quite common as a form of early childhood non-verbal communication or for children who have English as an additional language (Mistry and Barnes 2013; Mueller and Sepulveda 2014). The practice of baby signing reveals the importance the staff in the day nursery setting placed on ensuring that those who could not speak in sentences, or even words, were included and consulted on their care. Indeed, the approach taken allows for, and actively promotes, that very young children initiate activity in response to their needs and emotions.

*“The aim was also for infants, as they became familiar with the signs, to also be able to initiate their own requests and emotions using signs alongside vocalisations” (Amanda Norman, England, Data set 3).*

According to Amanda, the academic sharing the example, this approach was

important in supporting everyone engaging with the children to reflect on their practice. One key focus of this work was in considering

*“how using symbolic gestures enhanced the practitioners’ own thinking about how they convey messages, communicate, tune in and create good quality emotional interactions when working in group care”* (Amanda Norton, England, Data set 3).

**4. LISTENING:** *Voices should not have to be loud to be heard.*

Listening is an active and responsive process which relies on tuning-in to voices, having a shared purpose and providing recognition that voices have been heard. This will occur if time is given to voice and will, inevitably, lead to voice having impact or influence.

The culture of listening focuses on relational approaches where all voices are respected and valued. Where practitioners are listening to requests, it need not mean that every request is granted but that they are taken seriously and that the child’s contribution is valued and, wherever possible, the child sees and understands their contribution has been taken seriously. A listening culture is usefully described by a group of EECERA respondents when they recorded that listening is *“a fundamental way of being”* (Data set 5), suggesting that it is a disposition that must be cultivated in those working with young children if their voices are to be taken seriously.

This cultural dimension is also stressed by the Jordanian example referred to earlier when it is emphasised that adults must *“listen to those [children’s] views with respect*

*and consider them seriously”* (Data set 3). Respect is a thread that runs through the majority of the responses, and this is evidenced in practice through the careful attendance to children and what they have to say.

The Glasgow Infant and Family Team that supports children under five in foster care, and their families, provide an illustration of the kind of respect shown and their focus on listening:

*“place the child’s voice at the centre of decision-making about where a child will live by working at multiple levels (with child, foster parents, birth parents, professionals and systems) to promote the child’s ‘voice’ and to enhance ‘listening’ by those around the child”* (Bea Anderson, Scotland, Data set 3).

The influence of this activity is felt by the team when they use what children tell them,

*“to inform plans for providing support to the child and all caregivers to ensure that the child’s needs are met”* (Data set 3).

Children’s views having influence is also illustrated through the UK-wide initiative Families Connect. In recognition of the need to create links between home and early years settings, the programme *“aims to provide parents with practical skills, tools and support to enhance their child’s learning at home”* (James Bowden-King and Lucy Williams, Save the Children, UK, Data set 3). The work, initially focusing on children between the ages of four and six, has been extended to younger children. In

supporting the programme, Save the Children has situated Article 12 of the UNCRC at the centre of its approach, with “*a range of children’s perspectives aged 3-8 informing the design and adaptations*” (Data set 3).

**5. TIME and SPACE:** *There is always time for voice.*

It is important to acknowledge the pressures under which education professionals are working, in an age when accountability and formal assessments are prime foci.

However, establishments’ formal and informal structures have to allow space and time for voice if it is to be taken seriously. This will allow patience to be practised by the listeners and curiosity to be expressed by the children and the adults with whom they work.

Fi from New Zealand, in her submission to the edited book, introduces Frankie, a four year-old “*who had great difficulty in communicating verbally*” (Data set 3) with whom she collaborated to explore ‘work’. In the context of her workplace research, Fi illustrates how space was created where Frankie could find and exercise his voice through a range of media, notably through using a camera. Giving Frankie time to explore the ideas in which he was interested and creating conditions across the educational establishment and his home allowed him to work “*in contexts he was familiar with and felt safe in*”. In creating and ensuring a safe, familiar space in which Frankie could work demonstrates

*“The importance of participating alongside his peers and his family, [which] strengthened his learning and involvement. Understanding the*

*interconnectedness of community, interpersonal relationships and Frankie's own understandings of the world helped to share Frankie's voice"* (Fi McAlevey, New Zealand, submission to edited book).

Several early years settings "*start with knowing the child*" (contributions from public lecture). This, for the practitioners, necessarily involves links with the child's home environment, the space most familiar to the child. Time is taken to engage in a cycle that lasts at least six weeks where staff undertake 'Stay and play visits' alongside home visits and visits where children settle into the early years establishment. These stages, they say, "*may be repeated depending on the child's needs*" (contributions from public lecture). Clearly, an investment of time that straddles the home and more formal learning environment is important in recognising the child's needs and in creating opportunities to consult with and respond to children's voice.

It is worth noting that children's voice and the issues pertaining to its elicitation go beyond the confines of home and formal education settings. One respondent to the consultation at EECERA spoke about her work as a neonatal nurse in the intensive care unit. In giving an injection to a pre-term baby only hours old, she took time to

*"explain to the baby throughout the procedure what she was doing and why, and that it will only hurt for a small time and help to make them better"* (Data set 5).

In doing so, she was responding to the baby's voice through its reactions, while, crucially, recognising the baby's need for respect. A sensitive and patient approach

was adopted in this instance that demonstrates careful attention to the child's dignity and voice.

**6. APPROACHES:** *Open dispositions support voice.*

In being open to a wide range of practices, there is more likelihood that there will be greater opportunities for young children's participation. Approaches to eliciting voice ought to be flexible and meaningful for all participants. The context must be taken into consideration, as should the particular children with whom one is working; a one-size fits all approach would not be appropriate. This is especially true for the young children whose voices are to be heard.

It should be acknowledged that there can be messiness between the adult and child's agenda when eliciting voice. This is well-illustrated through examples provided during the EECERA consultation. Tied to the notion of there being a need for time in enabling children's voices, one group recorded that often "*Our own research aims can sometimes get in the way of patient and open listening*" (Data set 5). This lack of shared endeavour is also evident when accepting that children have the right to be silent or not to contribute in the way that the adult wishes: "*If a child doesn't want to share, we have to move on!*" (Data set 5).

Creating opportunities, though, for children to have their voices heard is important in order that children can choose the extent to which they wish to share their voice. A Nursery in Scotland, for example, developed Map-do-review, an innovative practice that facilitated children's involvement in planning their own learning. They suggested that:

*“Map-do-review has been used as an effective tool to ensure each child’s voice is heard in our setting, irrespective of their language ability or developmental stage. Children are empowered to express ideas about play and learning using their own method of communication - verbal or non-verbal - resulting in experiences that are meaningful to them. Using a cycle of engagement, children communicate intent for play, develop ideas during play and reflect afterwards.” (Sarah Laing, Practitioner Scotland, Data set 3).*

Play is a key approach to ensuring children have opportunities to have their voices heard. A researcher attending the EECERA consultation describes how she uses

*“videos of dramatic play ... I believe the chosen play themes and dialogue in social dramatic play can reveal the voices – the choices – the interests and concerns of the players” (Data set 5).*

Caution must be taken in considering the processes employed, to take time to interpret children’s voice authentically, where children may not be able to be explicit about what they wish to communicate; it often requires careful listening and an openness to what is being presented to ensure authentic voice is enabled and heard.

#### **7. PROCESSES:** *Processes should enable voice.*

While the approaches adopted pertain to the choices individuals make, processes are the structures and conditions under which they work. The structures should provide opportunities for consultation, collaboration and dialogue in order to facilitate the



reflective and strategic action mentioned above. Processes should be dynamic and have a forward momentum and often require innovation and risk-taking, thereby feeding back into approaches taken and notions of inclusivity.

One early years setting in Norway adopts an interesting approach taking children on regular outings lasting from an hour to four hours outside. They observed that the dynamics between the children, aged between five and six, “*change when they play together at the preschool and when they are on a trip*”. (Daisy Picardal, Norway, Data set 3). To capitalise on this, and to ensure that a range of voices are heard, they considered how the children’s relationships and their interactions were being heard and facilitated both in the context of the formal setting and in the outdoors, demonstrating a shift in processes that are more responsive to the children and the context.

In a similar vein, Gemma from Bowhouse Early Learning Centre, Scotland, also recognised the need for processes to elicit and support children’s voices in a context that was not traditionally seen as educational in nature. With the advent of children staying in the Centre for their lunch, the team recognised that “*our approach to mealtimes was lacking in creativity and innovation*” (Gemma Paterson, Bowhouse Early Learning Centre, Data set 3) and that this would make “*the perfect opportunity where practitioners could cultivate...opportunities for children to express their voice*” (Data set 3). This focus on the structure within the setting allowed them to establish Marvellous Mealtimes where children were encouraged to be involved:

*“in choosing foods, evaluating their experiences and providing safe and*

*creative spaces where children's many voices shape the decisions and practice demonstrated by practitioners" (Data set 3).*

The Centre, in creating clear processes for children's voices to be facilitated, has the ultimate goal of building the children's capacities *"to confidently make choices and make their voice heard"* (Data set 3).

More traditional consultation exercises are also utilised in eliciting children's voice, particularly in relation to gathering their views with the aim of influencing practice. At the *Look Who's Talking* public lecture, one participant wrote that she had asked a group of children and their parents what they want to learn/achieve from afterschool workshops. These workshops provided information to *"inform the programme of work"* (Data set 2). Further, they *"invited children to voice their thoughts on the school's behavioural policy"* through a survey and class discussion *"and then chang[ed] the policy to include parents, as they [the children] had suggested"* (Data set 2).

**8. PURPOSES:** *Shared goals will advance children's voices.*

Discussion is needed about why it is important to elicit children's voices. There could be a range of purposes for the elicitation of children's voice; for instance, the goal may be to promote democracy, consultation or activism, or to assist with planning, evaluation, or to effect change. What is common, though, is that the purposes and goals in facilitating young children's voices need to be clear, agreed upon and carefully communicated.

There are several instances in the previous examples where those working with children have been clear about the purpose of seeking and supporting children's voice. They may wish to amend their school behaviour policy, they may seek to take account of children's relationships, to plan a programme of learning, to support children in their transition to the early years setting or school, or to enable children's 'way of being'. The purposes are many and various, and are adopted for those children who can articulate their thoughts and feelings through the spoken word, and those who are pre-verbal or who have challenges in communicating. It is important, too, to enable children to be the initiators of voice, that the purpose need not always be set or initiated by the adults in the situation.

One of the participants at the public lecture draws attention to the need to explore the ways in which "*the formal and the non-formal settings interact and influence each another*" (Data set 2). This is an important point, and one that some of the examples above, such as that supporting the home-school visits seems to have taken on board very successfully. Another participant makes the link to children's rights very explicitly and states that "*to avoid it becoming a tick box exercise we need to view it [voice] as an element/product of rights*" (Data set 2). This seems to suggest an overarching purpose in eliciting children's voice, that we ensure children's rights are being met and that this is being done in an authentic manner.

## **Conclusions**

In concluding this article, we acknowledge that we are not yet in a position to offer a blueprint for practice, but consider this extensive discussion as a further prompt to

support advancing productive connections between theory and practice. Ideological perspectives on the need to understand children's voices are well documented in Educational and Sociological literature (James et al. 1998; Clark 2005; Komulainen 2007), with links to work relating to social pedagogy (Taylor and Robinson 2009) and a listening culture (Mitra 2008; Glazzard 2012) that are well-theorised. Yet, all agree that translating the ideology into reality is complex and fraught with challenge.

Within this paper we sought to surface and acknowledge examples of practice from practitioners who are already engaged in translating the ideological aspiration of voice work. The examples provided are rooted in specific contexts and situations, they demonstrate practices which realise children's rights in a localised way and exemplify connections between theory and practice relating to implementing Article 12 of the UNCRC.

Underlying the practices exemplified in the vignettes are a myriad complex ethical issues relating to the enactment of human rights with young children which practitioners may have, consciously or subconsciously, considered. If practitioners and researchers are to place children's rights squarely at the centre of working with young children, we consider such ethical issues need to be brought to the fore. Based on the insights and provocations offered in the paper, we assert a call for action if we are to advance young children's voice beyond the purely ideological. There is an urgent need to reflect on how work with young children can be reconsidered to enable a focus on ethical principles related to human rights. As part of this, a reflexive re-examination of the ways in which we understand and gauge young children's capacity is needed, and practitioners need to be encouraged, and allowed, to use their professional judgments to work in an ethically integral way.

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