Title of the Work: INCLUDING THE VOICES OF CHILDREN WITH DIVERSE ABILITIES AND YOUNGER CHILDREN IN EDUCATION AND LEARNING THROUGH A PEDAGOGY OF VOICE AND A PEDAGOGY OF LISTENING.

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Abstract

From the 1980s, key policy and legislative developments proposed a radical move towards an inclusive education system globally, which promoted the concept of equal and quality educational experiences for all children. A range of benefits has been associated with this move, however research also indicates that many children continue to experience unequal educational opportunity through social isolation and barriers to curriculum access. While growing consensus exists that consulting with young people enhances their education experience and achievements, the voices of many children continue to remain silent in our education system. Specifically the voices of children with special educational needs and younger children are often ignored and not valued. Based on two research projects, which included children with diverse needs and abilities and younger children, the author argues that reflecting the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, inclusion can only be truly realised where there exists a pedagogy of voice and a pedagogy of listening for all children. Based on the experience of two national research projects, strategies are provided for teachers to use in classrooms to capture and include children’s voices and thereby support the delivery of inclusive, equal and quality education and learning for all children.

Introduction
Globally a move towards providing equality of educational access and opportunity for children with diverse needs and abilities is evident from the 1970s, when the integration movement was finding expression in legislation in many countries including Italy, Denmark and the US (Hegarty, 1993). In 1986, Madeline Will, the then Assistant Secretary for Education in the US, noted the singular challenge facing education at that time was to provide the best, most effective education possible for children and youth with learning problems and proposed an integrated system of education for all children. Similarly in Europe in 1984 ninety-two governments and twenty-five international organisations subscribed to the Salamanca Statement, which asserted that access to mainstream schools should be provided for all children with special educational needs (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 1994). It was stated that mainstream schools with an inclusive orientation were the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building inclusive societies and achieving education for all. All countries globally with the exception of the US, Somalia and South Sudan have ratified the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989).

There is a danger that the rhetoric of the Salamanca Statement and the purist inclusion paradigm creates a risk that the inclusion of children with diverse needs and abilities will be equated solely with the place of education thereby concealing the complexity of addressing what precisely inclusion means for a child’s learning and teaching. According to national and international research, many children continue to experience social isolation, barriers to curriculum access, loneliness, rejection and stigmatisation in mainstream schools (Broer et al 2005; Kerins and Day 2012). There is a perception also that younger children do not have the capacity to contribute to their education and that their views should be less valued than older children or adults. This paper suggests that in order for equality of educational access and opportunity for all children to become a reality internationally, education systems must demonstrate a commitment to embracing both a pedagogy of voice and a pedagogy of listening. This is consonant with prioritising democracy in Education and articulated in Dewey’s concept of the learner as a co-constructor of knowledge (Ring and O’Sullivan, 2016). Through exploring two research studies, the potential contribution of children with
special educational needs and younger children in providing a direction for inclusive education at both policy and practice level is highlighted.

Development

A Research Methodology for Enabling a Pedagogy of Voice and a Pedagogy of Listening

As educators, we have a moral and ethical duty to discover ways to enable a pedagogy of voice and a pedagogy of listening for all learners. Lansdown (2005) cautions that adults are not instinctive listeners and therefore as educators we must cultivate a culture of active listening, where our judgements and prejudices are suspended, our certainties rejected and we remain consistently vigilant to change. In order to hear children’s voices, Coyle (2006) suggests that a method is required that places a value on subjectivity, enhances empowerment and allows the listener to enter the child’s world of meaning and belief. It is suggested that employing a pedagogy of voice and a pedagogy of listening that adopts a rights-based focus; allows the child time and space and creates a listening audience, which he/she can influence can provide this method (Ring, 2018)

![Figure 1. A Model for a Pedagogy of Voice and a Pedagogy of Listening](image)

(Ring, 2018, adapted from Lundy (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015)

Based on the child conferences referred to by Clark and Moss (2011), the research team developed a methodology where conversations were conducted with groups of children, augmented by a draw-and-tell approach, during which students were invited
to draw or construct pictures of their educational experiences (Lambert et al., 2014). Doubts have been expressed in relation to the possibility of truly eliciting the views of individuals with learning disabilities and younger children through conversation due to their perceived limited communication skills (Nind, 2008; Jahoda et al., 2010; Ring, 2018). Taking time to build up rapport and trust with participants and adopting what Medall (1984) refers to as the ‘least adult role’ avoids a power imbalance developing between researchers and participants. Furthermore, it is essential that questions are developmentally appropriate, habitually repeated, rephrased and broken into smaller parts to enhance full participation in the process (Booth and Booth, 1994; Broer et al., 2005). The inclusion of the drawing activity embraces an approach, which is non-hierarchical, inter-subjective and potentially collaborative (Lewis, 2003). As drawing is a familiar activity it relaxes participants and responds to young learners’ preference for hands on activities (Einarsdóttir, 2007; Eldén, 2012). During the research process, emphasis was placed on the narratives children constructed around their representations as adult efforts to analyse drawing rely heavily on inference and what researchers might infer children are representing in their drawings may differ from children’s personal meanings (Einarsdóttir, 2007). Through adopting this methodology in two research projects, the author suggests that valuable lessons for the future inclusion of children with diverse abilities and needs and younger children emerged.

**Listening to the Voices of Children with Diverse Abilities and Needs**

A national evaluation of education provision for children with autism aged 3-18 was commissioned by the government in Ireland and published in 2016 (Daly and Ring et al., 2016). The author was one of the principal investigators involved in the research. A multi-faceted methodological approach was adopted, which included the voices of all stakeholders, in addition to an extensive observational methodology of classroom practice across a range of educational settings. Table 1. below summarises the multiple-case study research approach adopted and the wide range of data sources collected and analysed.
Table 1. Summary of the Multiple-Case Study Research Approach and Data Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal Interview</th>
<th>Teacher Interview</th>
<th>Classroom Assistant Interview</th>
<th>Child Conversation</th>
<th>Child Drawings</th>
<th>Parent Interview (Telephone)</th>
<th>Document Review</th>
<th>Observation of Practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While a range of positive practice was identified in relation to learning and teaching, school management, staff development and the promotion of an inclusive school culture, assessment, planning, the inclusion of the child’s voice, curriculum access, the availability of external support services and parental involvement were identified as areas for further improvement. Conversations were conducted with groups of children, augmented by a draw-and-tell approach where children were invited to draw pictures of their educational setting. Twenty-nine child conversations were conducted with groups of children, augmented by a draw and tell approach where children were invited to draw pictures of their educational setting (Clark and Moss, 2011). Ethical guidelines were strictly adhered to and both parental consent and child assent secured. While conducting the child-conversations, due cognisance was taken of the challenges in communication experienced by children with autism, children’s attention span, motivation and co-operation level and the questions were differentiated with regard to complexity and pace (Ring, Daly and Wall, 2018). Particular attention was directed to the difficulties experienced by children in processing questions and an extended response-time was allowed. The researcher remained sensitive to the children’s responses and terminated the child-conversation if it became apparent that the child was not comfortable with participating.

All children who participated in the research reported their engagement with a range of school activities. As demonstrated in Table 2. below, children’s drawings corroborated the positive findings of the research in relation to the inclusion of children with autism in schools in Ireland both from curriculum and social perspectives. Interestingly, the stereotypical beliefs that children with autism are unaware of, have little interest in their immediate interactional environment and have limited imagination and creativity are challenged in the drawings completed by the children.
Table 2. A Selection and Analysis of Children’s Drawings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drawing by a child at middle-elementary level in a special class in a mainstream school. The child has included all of his class in the drawing and one of his favourite activities, which was working on his IPAD.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Drawing by a child in a senior class in a special school of his school and his class peers. The drawing conveys a positive experience for the child and his sense of belonging to the school community.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The findings suggest that children, when supported in a dialogic manner through this approach, communicated their school-experiences clearly and provided constructive insights in relation to their school experiences for policy makers, schools and critically for parents. These conversations also provide an opportunity for educators to increase their responsivity to children’s needs.

Are Children at Pre-Kindergarten Too Young to Have a Voice?

The author was one of the principal investigators in a research study commissioned to examine concepts of school readiness at pre-kindergarten and kindergarten levels in Ireland (Ring and Mhic Mhathúna et al., 2016). A two-phase sequential exploratory methodological approach was employed, comprising both a qualitative (Phase 1) and a quantitative phase (Phase 2). The mixed-methods approach involved 32 face-to-face interviews with pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers; telephone interviews with 30 parents, 57 children, aged between three and four and an online survey distributed to 500 pre-schools and 500 schools, eliciting a response rate of 29.6% and 23.8% respectively. Child conferencing and ‘draw and tell’ were selected as the most appropriate strategies to elicit the views of 57 children aged between three and four in relation to the transition to kindergarten (Clarke and Moss, 2011). Ethical guidelines were adhered to and both parental consent and children’s assent were secured.

Child conferences as suggested by Clark and Moss (2011) were adapted and the researchers engaged in conversations with groups of children, where children were also invited to draw their image of kindergarten (Lambert and Coad et al., 2014).
Following an indepth analysis of the data through an inductive process informed by theories, themes and concepts examined in the literature review, children’s narratives and drawings demonstrated their unquestionable capacity to communicate their perspectives on transitioning from pre-kindergarten to kindergarten and meaningfully contribute to the research findings. Specifically children’s pre-occupation with the size of the built environment in kindergarten; the limited availability for play and the requirement to do ‘homework’, the importance of making friends, the central role of the teacher, and the role of siblings and parents/carers in providing information in relation to kindergarten emerged as key issues in young children’s lives. These issues which were reflected both in the children’s narratives and in their drawings as summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Capturing Children’s Voices in Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>This is the big school. They have a mountain and they are all scared… No, you have to go in there ‘cos there’s no monsters</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>They only get a tiny bit of playtime…there’s going to be more work… Ah, I am doing homework there.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These findings suggest that there is a requirement for kindergarten teachers and families to support children in these specific areas and clearly demonstrate the capacity of children at pre-kindergarten level to participate in, and generate findings that can enrich education research.

Conclusion

The research findings from these two studies highlight the importance of all children being considered key advocates in the inclusion agenda. Critically the research findings demonstrate that, provided an appropriately responsive methodological approach is adopted, children can be supported in expressing their views in a clear, constructive and meaningful manner. Through a research methodology embedded in a pedagogy of voice and a pedagogy of listening, children identified significant issues for policy makers and schools to address in order to reduce inequality of opportunity and access for children with special educational needs and younger children.
To achieve the promise of equal educational opportunity, it is imperative that the voices of younger children and children with diverse needs and abilities are harnessed throughout their education in order that our understanding of the barriers to equal educational opportunity and access is informed by those who are most likely to be excluded.

**Bibliography**


Nind, M. (2008). *Conducting Qualitative Research with People with Learning, communication and Other Disabilities: Methodological Challenges*. Available at: [http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/491/](http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/491/)


