Championing the Child’s Voice: a three-part workshop

- **Research**: A Professional Project submitted in August 2014 to The University of Dundee for the BA Childhood Practice Award
- **Practice**: Practice developed throughout the academic year 2014-15 within the same nursery context as the research
- **Theory**: The researcher’s personal search for knowledge and meaning resulting in her *Championing Children’s Voices*
Enabling Young Children’s Participation in Decision Making

An action research project investigating how best to support young children’s participation in decision making

Driven by an ambition for children’s voices to be heard in matters that affect them
Establishing a Rationale for Research

- Contextually a need for children to be more involved in nursery planning was identified.

- Inspiration came from The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: article 12 stipulates a child’s right to express views on matters that affect them and article 13 refers to methods of child expression.

- The researcher’s personal perspective: a belief that all children should ‘have a voice’, by participating in decision making, sharing opinion and by being listened to.
A literature review researched children’s participation in decision making and identified three relevant components of meaningful participation.

The role of the practitioner

- View children as strong and capable
- Develop a pedagogy of listening and responsiveness
- Listen with intent to all forms of child expression
Outcomes for children

- Wellbeing related outcomes of self-worth and confidence
- Highly engaged learning
- Development of co-operative skills and citizenship

Participatory methods

- Meaningful and genuine
- HighScope’s plan-do-review - involves high levels of child involvement
- The Mosaic approach - embraces all forms of child expression
Main research question:

- How are young children enabled to actively participate in decision making and what are the main considerations in the process?
Research Questions

Three sub-questions provided finer detail. Data collection methods and analysis provided answers to the sub-questions, collectively answering the main question.

Sub-questions:

What is the optimum role for a practitioner who supports young children to participate in decision making?

What are the outcomes for children who participate in early years decision making?

What type of participatory method effectively enables children to ‘have a voice’ in early years decision making?
Research Participants

Adult participants were the researcher and the co-researchers, Class Teacher and the Head Teacher.

The nursery children were considered full participants throughout and their assent was of paramount importance.

It was made very clear that they could decide not to take part. However, all children agreed and made a handprint to represent their consent.
Implementation of Research

The implementation stage involved the testing of two similar participatory methods, each following a plan-do-review process based on world renowned practice adapted by the researcher.

*Plan-do-review was influence by the HighScope pre-school approach (Hohmann and Weikart, 2002).*

Children planned their play within small groups. Plans were implemented during play and then reviewed with the same small group. An adult acted as a facilitator.
The children used drawing and verbal communication to plan and review. This was done using a Plan-do-review Sheet.

Children were highly engaged in their plans.
During a three week trial period the children used the sheets twice, producing two sets of Plan-do-reviews.
The second method was called *Map-do-review*, based on the Mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2011). Children used a mapping process to create a representation of the nursery environment.

**Child-led decision making**

Firstly the map was used by the children to plan the resources for a vehicle topic. Children decided where resources should go and how to play with them.
Garden Area
“Get cars outside and play with them... in the bark”.
“A concrete truck in the bark”.
“We could make cars outside using bricks”.
“Look at the real cars... in the car park”.

Display Area/Topic Table
“We could stick them on the wall... pictures”.
“We could look at the pictures”.
“One of xxx’s cars”.
“A few old buses that you could keep”.
“I could bring in my Barbie car... I could put it in the garage”.
“I don’t think I have any useful ones but I have lots of cars... and a tractor”.

Capturing children’s voices when using the map for resource planning.
Each child used the map again to plan their play, with their own speech bubble and face card (photo) placed on their chosen area.

The plans were regularly discussed and on completion the children reviewed their plan with the group.

The Map-do-review process was used twice in this three week trial.
Findings Provided Answers...

Research data were collected using three data collection methods: Professional journal; Focus group; Interviews between researcher and children, which when analysed provided answers.

Sub-question 1: What is the optimum role for a practitioner who supports young children to participate in decision making?

‘Taken as a whole, the data evidences that the optimum role ... involved a combination of: effective listening to different forms of child expression; sensitive interactions based on pedagogical understanding of children’s ability to contribute; acting as facilitators who organised the participation but enabled children to take the lead’ (Laing, 2014: 22).
Sub-question 2: What are the outcomes for children who participate in early years decision making?

‘In conclusion, findings evidence that outcomes for children ... are: increased confidence voicing opinion; good levels of autonomy; high engagement in learning; enjoyment and enthusiasm; pride in work; collaboration; an increase in decision making - children’s voices were heard’ (Laing, 2014: 23-24).
Sub-question 3: What type of participatory method effectively enables children to ‘have a voice’ in early years decision making.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualitative Data</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Plan-do-review</strong></td>
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<td>A small group situation supported quieter children</td>
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<tr>
<td>Promoted drawing ability and a love of drawing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supported children to be independent decision makers</td>
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<td>Increased children’s confidence in voicing opinion</td>
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| **Map-do-review** |
| Supported the sharing of plans to a wider audience |
| Increased opportunities for decision making |
| Children enjoying sitting in front of and looking at the map |
| Children reported it helped them to think about their play |
Interview question 1: How much did you enjoy the Plan-do-review/Map-do-review method?

**Plan-do-review**
100% of children either gave a score of 2 or 1 thumb/s up.

**Map-do-review**
93% of children either gave a score of 2 or 1 thumb/s up.
Interview question 2: How well did the Plan-do-review/Map-do-review method help you to make decisions about your play?

- **Plan-do-review**: 80% success rate
  - 80% of children either gave a score of 2 or 1 thumb/s up.

- **Map-do-review**: 73% success rate
  - 73% of children either gave a score of 2 or 1 thumb/s up.

**Further Data Collection**

Due to interview results being so close a further data collection method, a vote, was used to gain a clearer understanding of the quantitative data.
Children were asked to vote for one participatory method.

The researcher posed this question:

Which method do you want to use again?

The children voted by pointing to their preferred method.
‘...this collection of data indicates that participatory methods which encouraged, supported and provided opportunities for decision making based on different forms of child expression were effective. The participatory methods used in this research enabled children to express themselves in a variety of ways: drawing and mark-making on the sheets; talking about plans/reviews; taking photos; touring the environment; creating a map. All these opportunities enabled children to have a voice in early years decision making’ (Laing, 2014: 26).
Discussion: a Response to the Main Question

How are young children enabled to actively participate in decision making and what are the main considerations in the process?

• The two participatory methods supported different forms of child expression.
• Both methods promoted children’s involvement and maximised their contribution.
• The practitioner’s role was one of responsive interactions involving considerable effort to listen to children.
• Practitioners allowed time for the process of participation.
• The outcomes for children were: enhanced self-worth; motivation and engagement in learning; self-confidence in sharing opinion; collaboration with peers and adults; developing as autonomous learners; attaining long periods of concentration.
In conclusion

‘Children were enabled to actively participate in decision making through the use of participatory methods based on individualistic forms of self-expression, which were facilitated by practitioners who made a genuine effort to involve them...

As a nursery team we intend to continue developing the participatory methods... I look forward with anticipation to what can happen. I believe supporting young children to participate meaningfully, thereby ensuring their voices are heard, is the most worthy and essential endeavour’ (Laing, 2014: 28-31).
Part 2: Practice Development


Development of practice development happened towards the end of the academic year.
Plan...

A child has individual time at the map choosing an area for play and is encouraged to take his/her time.
Plan...

Child formulates a plan for play, with an adult acting as a facilitator who demonstrates true intent to listen. Child is supported to use any ‘voice’ they wish.
“Make Robin... from Batman in Asda... I got it, mummy bought”.

“I will make a potion with it. I will need soap, water and some flowers and some sand.”

Do.....

Child acts upon their plan. Learning involves solitary and collaborative play.
“Play Adventure Ted game again... with A and O. Other children are allowed to join in.”
Review.....

Child has the opportunity to review with peers. They are supported to communicate in any way they wish.

Children tick their plan when it is finished.
Review.....

An Individual review takes place at the map with an adult facilitating. Child’s review is written down and added to the map.

Because I did good. Because I got to play it all week. I just wanted to play it all week.
The participative method, Plan-do-review, received a name change and developed into a sheet that children can access, use and review upon independently. The purpose being to enable them as autonomous learners.

Progression.....

This participative method is still in the early stages of development.
My plan is to be in my house with my family.

A child made a plan on a Friday and took his sheet home with him. On the following Monday he brought it back to nursery to share with the group and to review.
This is me swimming with mummy and daddy. I am going to make this (inflatable slide) with a long box and red.

When it came to the review this child was certain of his feelings, crossing out the thumb images that did not apply and ticking the one that did.
Children progress as planners at an individual rate:

- **Process Planners** are children who are learning the process of planning with the map. How long a child remains at this level depends on the individual.

- **Engaged Planners** are children who use the map to plan on a regular basis and are confident with the whole process. They show signs of being engaged with the process but this can be inconsistent.

- **Confident Planners** are children who use the map often and seem particularly motivated by the process. They gain a lot from the map, use it as a prop to further their learning and act in a highly engaged manner when planning/acting upon their plan.
Data Collection:

- Researcher’s Reflective Diary
- Staff Observations

- The map has enabled all children to have a *voice* in planning; they can participate at their own level by using their own method of communication.

- Individual attention has allowed staff to develop greater insight of children’s developmental successes/issues (formative assessment).

- Motivated autonomous learners: children sustain their own learning for longer periods and return to learning themes to develop ideas further.

- Collaboration: play amongst children has become very inclusive.

- Staff are in agreement that children are so engaged in their play, behavioural issues have almost diminished.
Children’s Reflections: *having a voice in evaluation*

Discussions between the researcher and individual children focused on two questions:

How do you feel about the map and making plans?
(child chose from the thumbs up/down choice sheet)

Why do you say that?
Cos I like it... thumbs up. Because I want to change somewhere else. Play superheroes here and catch everyone and have light coming out of my eyes... like superman.

Because I love playing superheroes with M and O. “How does the map help?” Because I think of stuff and I want to do it... like superheroes, making scary things like robots.

How do the pictures help you? Sometimes they help me the way I’m going (to play).
In summary:

Children have grown in confidence immeasurably to become effective decision makers who know their own mind. They are self-assured when stating intent, become highly engaged in learning and can self-evaluate.

S. Laing

I really think that the Map-do-review is an excellent idea, especially for some of the kids that are young and can’t express much of what they want to do. They have the visual, that gives them a lot of confidence.

a parent
Part 3: Theory

Championing Children’s Voices Theory
A commitment by early years educators to listen to and champion children’s voices in everything they do with and for children.

The Championing Children’s Voices Theoretical Model illustrates the relationship between an adult’s level of commitment to develop practice which champions children’s voices and the subsequent impact for children involved in sharing ideas, opinion, and decisions.
Children’s voices are championed

Championing Children’s Voices
Theoretical Model

Level of adult input and subsequent outcome

Progression of adult commitment

Progression in prevalence of the child’s voice

- A desire and willingness to listen to children
  - Main determinant: belief system

- Development of knowledge and understanding
  - Main determinant: motivation

- Listening to children’s voices in practice
  - Main determinant: pedagogical approach

- The child’s voice is embraced

- The child’s voice is valued

- The child’s voice is promoted

Children’s voices are championed
References


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Enabling Young Children’s Participation in Decision Making

*To access the full research paper and accompanying appendices copy the link above into your browser. The links to the research paper and appendices are found at the end of the overview article.*

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