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Title

Engaging with young children's voices: Implications for practitioners' pedagogical practice.

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Abstract

The paper seeks to extend the knowledge and understanding of how engaging with young children's voices in a meaningful way, can alter practitioners' pedagogical practice and thus create environments for learning that are more inclusive. It draws on the findings of a research study that explored practitioners' (teachers, nursery nurses and teaching assistants) views about engaging with young children's voices of perceived notions of inclusion in pedagogical activities in the early years classes of two schools in the North of England. It adopted a qualitative methodological approach that operates within constructivist and interpretivist paradigms. The study revealed that practitioners retain some resistance to responding to the voices of young children and that internal and external pressures influence their decision-making. Moreover, it signifies the necessity for greater emphasis on the importance of engaging with children's voices in the training of newly qualified teachers, and the ongoing professional development for all practitioners in early childhood education.

Keywords:

early childhood education, child voice, pedagogy, professional development, teacher education, inclusion

Introduction

An increased international awareness of the need to involve children in decision-making about important issues in their lives (United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) 1989; Holt and Holloway 2006) has emerged from a contemporary perspective of the child. In recognition of children's rights to both agency and voice (Morrow 2011), an exploration of ways in which to engage with them has arisen (Sinclair 2004). This marks a paradigm shift towards the acceptance that children have views and opinions separate from the adults in their lives (Matthews 2007). With these rights should come the power to command respect and to have their voices heard (Federle 1994). Whereas, historically, children have been excluded from decision-making concerning issues of identity and the quality of their lives, now they are recognised in international policy, as key informants and experts on their own lives (McNaughton 2002) and thus are the best source of advice for matters affecting them (Osborn and Bromfield 2007).

Within the English context, children's views are now recognised as having greater importance within policy-making (Children Act (DoH 1989); Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years (DfE 2015)); however,

educational decision-making processes do not always reflect these views. James, Jenks and Prout (1998) cite a lack of maturity and competence as reasons for the exclusion of children from these processes, whilst Devine (2003) contends that schools operate within a predominantly adult-centred framework, which has little regard for the status of children within the system. This is of particular relevance for children in the early years sector, since they may be considered the most far removed from such involvement.

Consequently, a research project was designed to engage the voices of children in the Reception classes (children aged four to five years in their first year of formal schooling) of an infant and a primary school in the North of England. Predicated on the notion that children are most knowledgeable about matters that affect them and that they are capable of communicating this to adults, the first element of the project sought to illuminate their perceptions of inclusion in pedagogical activities. Its key findings revealed children's notions of inclusion centred on themes of belonging and relationships; their interests; and having autonomy over the content, context or mode of delivery of a pedagogical activity.

The paper presents the findings of the second component of the project, which centred on ascertaining how practitioners (teachers, nursery nurses and teaching assistants) might respond to children's views concerning their pedagogical practice. This research is of particular importance at a time when the dominant discourse in the English statutory framework for children aged nought to five, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE 2017), appears to be moving away from responding to the child's voice. The EYFS calls for a move towards more adult-led activities in preparation for the formal learning of Year 1. The corollary is that practitioners will find it more difficult to make learning meaningful and powerful to the child's voice and thus restrict their opportunities to learn according to their own interests and preferences.

This shift in emphasis is evident in the latest report by the English regulatory and inspection body for the education of children (Ofsted 2017), in which eight of its fifteen recommendations stress the use of formal teaching methods, which do not consider the needs of the individual. The language and tone of the Ofsted report, which is not one of recommendations to consider, but rather ones upon which to act,

could present a challenge for practitioners' decision-making if they are to remain attuned to the child's voice.

Thus, the paper reports on practitioners' thoughts about responding to children's perceived notions of inclusion, and considers the impact of national policies and regulatory bodies on their pedagogical practice. Moreover, it calls on practitioners to engage with the voices of young children, and endorses "a moral perspective on the role and status of children which respects and promotes their entitlement to being considered as persons of value and persons with rights" (Greene and Hill 2005, 3).

Engaging with young children's voices to inform pedagogical practice

Historically, there has been a lack of understanding of how young children can express their views. This may limit their prospects for influence, despite the evidence that suggests their ability to make decisions increases in direct proportion to the opportunities offered (de Winter 1997). More recently, MacNaughton, Hughes and Smith (2007, 458) note that the scarcity of research with young children and the scepticism about their ability to participate meaningfully in policy-making has led to "little empirical evidence to support the contention that consulting young children is valuable".

Whilst the UNCRC (1989) provides a welcome acknowledgement of the importance of giving due weight to children's voices, Article 12 couches the ambiguous language of being in accordance with the age and maturity of a child who is capable of forming his or her own views. Thus, far from ensuring that all children are engaged in decision-making about their education, an assumption that they do not have the capacity to make informed decisions could lead to their marginalisation. Indeed, most consultation with children in research has been with those in their formal years of schooling or older (Children and Young People's Unit 2004).

Lundy (2007) notes this dichotomy and thus conceptualises Article 12 in a model that focuses on four elements: space; voice; audience; and influence. She argues for the space in which children operate to be inclusive. In so doing, possibilities arise for seeking the views of a diverse range of children and ensuring that participation is not just afforded to the articulate and the literate (Flutter and Rudduck 2004). This resonates particularly for children in the early years and

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reflects Kellett's (2011) notion that children see with different eyes and have different priorities and concerns. Consequently, it is imperative that adults, who make decisions about children's lives, find meaningful and accessible ways of engaging with their voices. However, if children's voices are to be listened to with sensitivity, it may be necessary to choose between the voices of different children, thus challenging assumptions that they possess one homogenous voice or culture (Woodhead 2009). Nutbrown and Clough (2009) acknowledge that whilst it may be difficult to respond to these diverse voices, changes in practice and settings can make the place more inclusive and enabling for all who attend.

Western traditions of education inspired by Rousseau (children have natural inclinations to explore); Dewey (learning should be experiential and concrete); and Piaget (children should be encouraged to discover knowledge), share a progressive system of education where the child is viewed as naturally developing and an active learner. Curricula and theoretical frameworks attempt to explain the concepts of children's active learning through interpretations of systems, activities, social capital and human motivation (New Zealand's Te Wha¯riki (Ministry of Education 1996); Australia's Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (Department of Education Employment and Workforce Relations 2009).

However, there seems to be an international mainstreaming of early childhood education (ECE) towards the adoption of developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) (Gestwicki 2006), despite the recommendations of researchers in early years. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2006) and Siraj-Blatchford and Silva (2004), for example, purport that there should be a balance between practitioner initiated group work and freely chosen yet potentially instructive play activities, and between curriculum differentiation and sustained shared thinking. Most disturbing is the consideration that an early childhood educator will be good at teaching in settings that adopt DAP, thus reinforcing notions of universal, age-related stage teaching. Moreover, MacNaughton (2005, 1) reports that this practice is now so embedded within early childhood studies that its familiarity makes it seem ""right", "best" and "ethical"".

Lenz Taguchi (2010), however, refers to an onto-epistemological perspective where there can be no non-contextualised and universal 'best ways of learning'. The

consequence, therefore, is that practitioners must make themselves aware of the complexities, differences and diversities, of the contexts inhabited by all those involved in the teaching and learning process; thus habits of thinking and doing in these processes need to be critically analysed. Such levels of reflexivity and analysis require practitioners to encompass a measure of pedagogical understanding, which they are often unable to articulate (Moyles, Adams and Musgrove 2002). Possible reasons for the lack of articulation may lie in the dual principles of care and support for physical, social and cognitive learning and development, traditionally present in ECE. Moreover, early years has sought to maintain an identity that is separate from that of school-based education, which may account for limited professional growth and discussion. Indeed, Stephen (2010) refers to the lack of explicit reference to pedagogy in the training of practitioners in ECE.

Nonetheless, work in the philosophy of early education (Moss, Dahlberg and Pence 2000; Dahlberg and Moss 2005), and in the attention to some aspects of successful practice, is moving towards the notion of a 'listening pedagogy' (Rinaldi 2005). This pedagogy recognises and celebrates young children as active and powerful agents in their own learning and development (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence 2006). Formosinho and Oliveira-Formosinho (2008) present a participatory pedagogy that creates a climate for cultivating democracy, identities, humanity and knowledge, through the immersion of children in pedagogical environments that co-construct their learning. Consequently, if practitioners listen to children and consider their opinions in the organisation and planning of the learning environment, children will feel respected, valued, included and answered, irrespective of their individual differences and even because of them.

Lenz Taguchi (2010) refers to a pedagogy that works with, and makes use of, differences, diversities and increased complexities of learning and knowing. She maintains that pedagogical practice based on a philosophy of belonging and learning, differs from one based on sociocultural models of learning, which dominate the field of education at large and especially in ECE (Roberts-Holmes 2012). Sociocultural theories in the EYFS (DfE 2017) are emphasised through the ways in which the social context can impact on individual learning and development, rather than a consideration of how the child's individuality and cultural beliefs influence the environment in which they develop (Rogoff 1998). Thus, learning is reduced to a

linear model of progression that simplifies and homogenises development (Evangelou et al. 2009) and fails to consider the child's sense of belonging within the learning process.

Despite the wealth of research to support democratic and participatory pedagogies within the early years, academics in the field (Dahlberg and Moss 2005; Farquhar and Fitzsimons 2008) maintain that the increased focus on ECE intensified government intervention, and the introduction of a mandatory standardised curriculum, has inadvertently influenced a greater formalisation of the early years curriculum in England (Ang 2014). Explicitly written and reinforced in the EYFS (DfE 2017) is the aim of promoting "teaching and learning to ensure children's 'school readiness'" (5) and "that the balance will gradually shift towards more activities led by adults, to help children prepare for more formal learning, ready for Year 1" (9). The current policy assumption that the early introduction of formal approaches to teaching is desirable for children to learn in preparation for compulsory schooling, is not confined to England alone. Indeed, the ECE curriculum document for New Zealand (Te Whāriki) has been influenced by the school readiness discourse, evidencing a strategic policy initiative to strengthen early childhood outcomes to ensure a continuity of learning across primary schooling (Ministry of Education 2015). Thus, a greater tension has emerged between current practice that reflects policy and the established underlying beliefs of early years pedagogy.

Ain England, a response by Ofsted's chief inspector (Spielman 2018) to criticism of the Bold Beginnings (Ofsted 2017) report, acknowledges that whilst children should not be sitting at desks for hours, there is still a requirement for the structured teaching of things that 'need to be taught' in the Reception class. Within a formalised and assessment-driven education system, the danger is that children's learning and education is relegated to a checklist of requisite skills that describe children's competence, or lack of competence, at school-age entry (Ang 2014). The notion of what 'needs to be taught' is open to critical debate as it is formulated on a specific governmental imperative. Genishi and Dyson (2009) emphasise the apparent disconnect between the realities of early years practice and government policies. Their research reveals the daily challenges faced by early years practitioners who contend with the pressures of academic assessments and who feel compelled to

make compromises in their pedagogical choices to account for the demands of a mandated curriculum.

The study discussed here, responds to the policy and governmental drive towards the formalisation of the early years in England. By exploring the implicit perspectives of practitioners on this matter, it considers how an engagement with children's voices might inform their future pedagogical practice.

Methodological overview

The philosophical underpinnings of the research project were both constructivist and interpretivist. A constructivist ontological approach enabled an impression of the research data to be formulated (Ratner 2008), whilst continually revising their meaning through interactions with the children and practitioners. Additionally, since the study was predominantly concerned with eliciting and analysing the participants' views, an interpretivist epistemological approach was also employed (Mason 2003).

The study adopted a qualitative inductive methodology, which generates theory out of the research (Bryman 2012). Such research is multiparadigmatic in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter (Denzin and Lincoln 1998). It can be viewed as a bricolage, which is pragmatic, strategic and self-reflexive (Nelson, Treichler and Grossberg 1992) and is dependent upon both the questions asked as well as their context. The intimate relationship that forms between the researcher and the study, and the situational constraints that occur, enables the alteration of methods according to the participants' responses. Thus, the prospect is raised that the researcher might view things differently from an outsider who has little contact or comprehension of the subject matter. A key principle of qualitative research, as expressed by Lofland and Lofland (1995, 16), addresses the need to "participate in the mind of another human being." By seeing the world through the participants' eyes, it becomes possible to demonstrate greater empathy and understanding than would otherwise prove possible (Burman, Batchelor and Brown 2001).

Prior to the commencement of the study, the researcher obtained ethical approval and written informed consent from all participants. The adoption of purposive sampling enabled a detailed exploration and understanding of the central themes

and questions of the study (Bryman 2012). The precision of the practitioners' salient characteristics, including experience of working with young children, and length of service, gave the study its rigour.

Data collection occurred over a three-month period and employed an ethnographic approach. The participants comprised two teachers and one nursery nurse in Riverside Infants; and one, teacher, nursery nurse and teaching assistant in Oak Ridge Primary. The anonymity of all participants is maintained by using pseudonyms. Data illustrating the key themes are discussed here; these have been selected from participants across both schools, and are representative of their thoughts on the idea of listening to children's views to inform their pedagogical practice.

Semi-structured interviews were employed as a flexible tool that responded to the direction taken by the participants, and as a means to collect rich, detailed answers. Practitioners were presented with a representative sample of children's quotes from all emerging themes that arose from the first stage of the research, in which children were asked about their perceptions of inclusion in pedagogical activities. It is important to note that the researcher may have influenced the children's perceptions of inclusion in pedagogical activities, since there are inevitable power differentials between adult and child and the filtering of adult accounts invariably occurs through adult constructions of the world (Moore and Sixsmith 2000). Nevertheless, themes emerged from the data analysis that resonated with notions of children knowing what to do, being able to play with their friends, and the teacher helping them to learn. The practitioners were then tasked to consider how the children's perceptions might inform their future pedagogical practice. Decisions relating to the time and place of the interviews were mutually agreed. This provided practitioners with a relaxed and comfortable environment, in which they might be able to reflect more deeply on the children's perceptions.

Finally, the adoption of an iterative process enabled the thematic coding of topics arising from the repeated reading of the practitioners' responses to open-ended questions. The merging and deleting of these codes ensued, which led to the emergence of themes (table 1).

Table 1 Initial codes leading to themes concerning practitioners' thoughts on the engagement with children's voices in informing their pedagogical practice.

Codes	Themes
• Recognising individuality and difference • Reflection • Altering current practice	**Valuing engagement with children's views**
• Curriculum • National policies and regulatory bodies • Training • Structure/organisation of schools • Lack of knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about learners and learning	**Factors influencing pedagogical practice**

The presentation of verbatim quotations from each practitioner illustrate these themes. A coding system is applied to identify the school and role of the practitioner. These are as follows: Riverside Infants (RI); Oak Ridge Primary (ORP); teacher (T); nursery nurse (NN); and teaching assistant (TA).

Findings and Discussion

A six-week observation period in each of the schools, led to the identification of specific pedagogical activities. These included whole-class activities; group work; physical development; use of the outdoor environment; and creative resources. Questions were asked of the children concerning how included they felt in each of their learning activities. Subsequently, children's quotes were utilised in the practitioners' interviews, to determine whether they considered an engagement with children's voices helpful in informing their pedagogical practice. Two themes identified as significant within the practitioners' responses, were **Valuing engagement with children's views** and **Factors influencing pedagogical practice.**

The children revealed an array of perceptions of inclusion in their pedagogical activities. A representative sample of quotes from children in each of the schools, were utilised in the practitioners' interviews, some of which are presented here.

Perceptions of being included

Because other children are doing it and I am too (RI).

*Cos it makes us all learn together (*RI).

She helps me do writing when I get stuck (ORP).

I like learning with other people … cos sometimes I get stuck on work … they help you and they tell you things (ORP).

Perceptions of not being included

I just don't like playing groups. Cos it takes so long. And it's so long to choose me (RI).

Cos it's boring. Cos you have to sit on the carpet for really long (RI I).

Because it's a bit boring… you just have to do writing on it (ORP).

… I didn't feel very included when we write it on the board…….. And I don't really like doing it. It feels a bit hard and tricky… (ORP).

Valuing engagement with children's views

Many of the practitioners' responses indicated that they valued engaging with children's voices. An example comes from Anastasia, a teacher at Riverside Infants.

We do put up … our weekly news website all the pictures of what they've been up to… So I think it's a brilliant idea to get…more children's voice coming through (T: RI).

Anastasia acknowledged that despite mechanisms being in place to enable children to comment on different aspects of their learning, they may not be fully capturing children's thoughts and feelings. This alludes to Lundy's (2007) notion that different approaches are necessary to ensure the seeking of views from a diverse range of children.

Another practitioner (Yvette) reflected on the impact her practice might have on children's notions of inclusion, which exemplifies the importance of responding to the individuality and difference of each child (Lenz Taguchi 2010).

We could probably look at … the quieter ones and … say to them would you like to go and do this on your own in a quiet area (TA: ORP).

This is noteworthy since the EYFS Characteristics of Effective Learning (DfE 2012) calls on practitioners to listen to children respectfully and kindly. Whilst this implies that engaging with children's voices should be one of the pivotal values of early years practice, comments from another teacher (Nina) indicate that meaningful opportunities are not always available for children to express themselves.

So when you're doing your planning you've got to try and make sure that you can get something from them. I mean two in particular would sit there and not say anything (T: RI).

Rather than observing how children respond to different pedagogical activities and seeking meaningful ways of engaging with their views, Nina focussed more on their verbal responses within a practitioner-led activity. Stating that the children need to respond verbally so that she knows they '*get something*' from the activity, reveals that she is possibly unaware of Malaguzzi's (1998) 'hundred languages of children', which include playing, thinking or speaking.

Whilst some practitioners recognised the importance of engaging with children's voices, many accepted that it was not always evident in the Reception class. In response to a question about whether she found the children's comments useful in regards to her pedagogical practice Selina, remarked

It hasn't, that sounds really awful. It hasn't changed my opinion. 'Cos it's pretty much what I would expect (NN: ORP)*.*

The practitioner is aware that she should reflect on the children's comments and possibly alter her practice, but considers that she is more knowledgeable about the selection of an appropriate pedagogical approach. By disregarding the significance of the children's comments, Selina denotes her lack of understanding of the importance of affording audience and influence to the child (Lundy 2007). This resonates with Hill et al.'s research (2004), who maintain that a number of policy-makers accept the importance of giving children a voice when decisions are being made, but indicate that their influence remains minimal. Furthermore, Kelley (2006) contends that many child participation processes, while attempting to hear the voices of children, often fail to respond to their views.

A possible explication for the differences in practitioners' engagement with children's voices, could be associated with the length of time since the practitioners qualified and the training they had received (table 2).

Table 2 Summary of practitioners' roles, experience and level of qualification

Name of practitioner (pseudonym)	Role of practitioner and school	Years of service	Level of qualification
Tiffany	Teacher (ORP)	Less than 1	Level 6 (PGCE 3-7 years)
Anastasia	Teacher (RI)	12	Level 6
Nina	Teacher (RI)	More than 20	Level 6
Selina	Nursery nurse (ORP)	More than 20	Level 3
Lydia	Nursery nurse (RI)	10	Level 3
Yvette	Teaching assistant (ORP)	4 in Reception class	Level 2 – not in early years

Nina and Selina, who had both trained more than 20 years ago, appeared to be more resistant to engaging with the children's voices, whilst Anastasia, who had trained more recently, reflected on how she could alter her practice to increase the children's perceptions of inclusion. Moreover, since Anastasia was the senior leader within the early years team, this might conceivably indicate that she was conversant with current changes in curriculum and pedagogical practice.

However, there was some conflicting evidence of the relationship between the length of time since qualification and the practitioners' comprehension of the impact of their pedagogical practice. A newly qualified teacher (Tiffany) stated that she had not received any information about engaging with children's voices during her training, despite the attention given to this in recent years.

I've never thought to have this sort of conversation with a child … because I would never have thought that some of the responses would be like that. I didn't know that's how they felt… I didn't know that's how they were seeing things (T: ORP).

Reid and O'Donaghue (2004), who identify that teacher training programmes focus on the transmission of pedagogical skills rather than a consideration of the child as an active agent in their learning, support Tiffany's lack of awareness of how young children are able to express themselves. This may be due to the increasing accountability in nurseries and pre-schools, and the expectation that they will ensure children are adequately prepared to contribute to the new knowledge society (Field 2010).

Another example of conflicting evidence comes from Lydia, a nursery nurse from Riverside Infants with more than 20 years' experience. She presents a differing

perspective to the nursery nurse (Selina) from Oak Ridge Primary with the same level of experience.

Maybe as the year progresses and they're maturing and they're learning more …, the length of time that they are sat on the carpet … does lengthen, .. maybe we ought to get it a bit more ….." (NN: RI).

These examples indicate that the significant factor is the practitioners' pedagogical understanding rather than their length of experience, which may come from on-going professional development, or be dependent upon whether the practitioners have a reflective disposition. This is of particular importance when mainstream teachers are facing major challenges in responding to a greater diversity of children's needs. International research by Messiou and Ainscow (2015), suggests that teacher development should engage practitioners in developing a common language of practice that assists them to reflect on the thinking behind their actions and how they might be improved. They maintain that all practitioners should approach the diversity among children with a positive attitude and an understanding of inclusive practice, much of which can be developed during their initial training and through short, customised, in-service training sessions (European Agency for Development in Inclusive and Special Education 2011). Addressing practitioners' current lack of understanding or indeed providing opportunities for continuous professional development through separate and discrete training sessions, offers invaluable support and guidance and counters the view that they are an 'add on'. Nevertheless, embedding this approach in initial training would be an effective strategy to prepare teachers for their first teaching positions.

Further examples of practitioners responding less positively to children's comments, came from Nina and Yvette. One child (Lucas) commented that he did not feel included when working in a whole-class activity, because it was '*boring*' and that he had to sit on the carpet '*for a really long time*'. Rather than considering how they might alter their pedagogical practice in respond to the child's remarks, Nina and Yvette both justified the need for children to become used to sitting on the carpet for periods, as it served as a preparation for their later schooling. Their views reflect a practitioner-led pedagogical approach that is at variance with the principles of ECE, which espouses sociocultural and interactionist models of learning (Roberts-Holmes 2012). This elucidation reveals a narrowly defined perception of learning as the acquisition of pre-determined knowledge, whilst resisting the requirement to listen

and respond to children's views. It reaffirms the position of children as powerless, and concurrently endorses the notion that practitioners know what is best for children in a general sense, rather than being expert in ways to collaborate with children (MacNaughton, Hughes and Smith 2007).

These findings expose practitioners' apparent unawareness of the impact of their practice and concur with Kangas, Venninen and Ojala's (2016) work, which is in stark contrast to the philosophy of early education that advocates children being engaged in a cooperative and collaborative activity (Dahlberg and Moss 2005). This philosophy both recognises and celebrates young children as active and powerful agents in their own learning and identifies how pedagogical approaches can lead to effective practice. The next section discusses possible reasons for the unawareness of the importance of, and missed opportunities for, engaging with children's voices.

Factors influencing pedagogical practice

Careful analysis of the practitioners' responses to the children's comments, revealed factors that directly influenced their choice of pedagogical practice. For example, in response to Lucas's comments about whole-class activities being boring, Lydia reflected

If it's something that they are finding boring or finding it hard to grasp …maybe I could take them aside afterwards …, just to recap .., but to do it as a fun activity (NN: RI).

Lydia does not suggest that these activities should be discarded, rather she attempts to mitigate the children's perceptions of being less included by focusing on their individual needs and engaging them in fun and less formal ways afterwards. However, for children to perceive their learning as inclusive, they should be working in a more creative and responsive mode from the outset (Nind 2005). Thus, practitioners need to consider the construction of the initial pedagogical activity and be mindful of each child's individual needs; otherwise, there is a risk of their marginalisation by removing them from their peers.

Authors, such as Nutbrown and Clough (2006), contend that the structure and organisation of schools, in addition to practitioners' pedagogical practice, are paramount to the success of inclusion. Differences in children's perceptions of inclusion in this study, relate to some organisational and structural differences

between the schools. For example, in Riverside Infants, the arrangement of children into groups according to perceived ability, often occurred, whereas in Oak Ridge Primary they were able to choose when they accessed different pedagogical activities and with whom they worked. The children at Riverside Infants often stated that they did not feel included because they could not work with their friends, whilst those at Oak Ridge Primary expressed feeling included when they could work on their own, with a friend, or with a teacher.

Ainscow, Booth and Dyson (2006) call for practitioners to reflect on the actions and thinking that inform their decisions, and stress the importance of providing space to review and unpack the social processes of learning that occur in specific school contexts. In this changed view, the practitioner's role becomes one of guiding and facilitating engagement and learning, rather than instructing. Thus, it becomes possible for a diverse group of children to be educated together, since the children need not be at the same point in their learning, or receive the same instruction from the practitioner. Rather, they can work at their own pace and in their own way, within a common framework of objectives and activities.

Another factor influencing practitioners' pedagogical practice relates to pressures from national policies. One comment (Anastasia) suggested that children must conform to certain practice in preparation for later schooling, or indeed, life.

… there reaches a point where they're going to have to do a little bit of conforming. 'Cos another learning thing for life is that there are going to be things you don't want to do all the time and they've got to learn that as well. So they can't keep going off and doing what they want (T: RI).

Whilst Anastasia appears to reflect the mandate that children are required to conform to certain diktats in life, she also acknowledges the need to engage children more in their learning. Genishi and Dyson (2009) highlight the apparent disconnect between the realities of early years practice and government policies. They reveal the challenges faced by early years practitioners who struggle to balance the pressures of impending academic assessments with their pedagogical choices, in order to respond to the demands of an authorised curriculum. Margetts (2007) illuminates the dangers of such approaches. She stresses that if there is an expectation for children to engage in formal practice before much of their neurological, psychological and behavioural development has taken place, the result

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can be detrimental to their progress academically, socially and emotionally. Consequently, far from providing children with opportunities to make decisions about where, when and how they learn inhibiting their ability to progress in education, it actually lays the foundations for success. "What children learn is important, but how children learn is even more important if they are to become learners in today's society" (Moylett 2011, foreword).

Further evidence of external pressures came from a teacher (Nina) who stated

*We don't want them to find it boring, but it's got to take that length of time cos that's what length of time it is (*T: RI).

One extrapolation connects with a growing concern among practitioners that they must keep teaching concepts until the children have acquired them. A Reception class teacher in Robert-Holmes and Bradbury's (2016, 610) study commented that he attempted to find the balance between the discourse of institutional performance and the needs of a three-year old, referring to "pushing the information in … rather than developing meaningful relationships." Whilst the majority of practitioners in the present study did not explicitly refer to the tension between school-based performativity and young children's learning needs, it is possible that decision-making around the planning of whole-class and small group activities were predicated on perceived ability, emerging from the requirement to demonstrate pupil progress.

Since this study occurred during the final term before the children moved into Year 1, it is conceivable that there were observations of more formalised pedagogical approaches within the activities, than at other times of the year. Indeed one practitioner (Lydia) commented

It may be that we're more conscious… at the start of the year, when we're trying to … get them interested in learning and they don't know that they're doing formal learning…, and maybe as the year progresses and they're maturing …, the length of time … does lengthen (NN: RI).

To counter the increased pressure on practitioners to 'push information in', it is suggested that they need to address the issue of inclusion in their knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about learners and learning, which ultimately determines their pedagogical approach to learning (Florian and Black-Hawkins 2010). Furthermore,

an inclusive pedagogical approach offers a subtle, but important, shift in how practitioners need to respond to individual differences, and "cannot merely be an implementer … of projects and programmes decided by and created by others, for some 'other' child and for undefined contexts" (Rinaldi 2005, 56).

Conclusion

The findings of this research project reveal that practitioners' willingness, or ability, to engage with young children's voices about inclusion are predicated on several considerations. Firstly, practitioners are required to recognise, and respond to, the difference and individuality of each child. Secondly, practitioner training and on-going professional development are fundamental to their understanding of how young children are able to express themselves about matters of importance to them. Harris (2015) reports on the necessity for ECE to make learning meaningful and powerful to the child's voice; giving children opportunities to learn according to their preferences and learning styles, has the potential to promote inclusion for all young children.

Finally, organisational and structural systems within schools, and external pressures are acknowledged as influencing decision-making about pedagogical practice. This is of particular significance in light of the latest Ofsted (2017) report, which asserts that all primary schools (and therefore Reception classes) should adopt more formalised teaching methods, rather than suggesting a consideration of whether adequate attention is being paid to learning and teaching approaches. As previously stated, this can be detrimental to children's academic, social and emotional development, and consequently, their perceived notion of inclusion.

In conclusion, the study calls on practitioners to place children at the forefront of their education and reflect on alternative ways of listening and responding to their voices, despite the ever increasing demands of a mandated curriculum and assessment strategy. Practitioners are the ones who know their children, and as such, they are obliged to listen to children's views, in an attempt to understand their priorities, interests and concerns (Pascal and Bertram 2009).

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