Meaningfully capturing the voice of children in research: Applying the Lundy Model of Participation in the Classroom

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Introduction

The importance of the voice of the child in research has become a significant educational issue in Europe and in the wider international context. While much of the research is focused on adults’ interpretations of what the child says, it raises the question: where and how is the voice of the child explored and represented in their own right?

Internationally, it is widely recognised that children not only have their own views (de Sousa, 2019; Harmon, 2018; Ring & O’Sullivan, 2018; Dillen, 2014) but that their voices must be heard and respected (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNCRC, 1989). Arguing that children should not be seen merely as objects of research but as active participants and as co-researchers, this article offers a rights-based approach to research with children, emanating from Article 12 of the UNCRC. It explores Lundy’s (2007) framework for research with children, ensuring all children’s views are valued and respected. The article includes some practical examples drawn from a research study in the Irish context, conducted by the author (Harmon, 2018), in which children became co-researchers in the exploration of religion, beliefs and values in their lives. The article highlights the importance of ensuring that the child’s voice is heard and not just an adult interpretation of that voice.

The Importance of the Child’s Voice

The importance of the child’s voice in education and prioritising their “participation” in decision making is core to developing a democratic education (Martin & Forde et al., 2015; Whitebread & O’Sullivan, 2012; Rinaldi, 2012). This is also true when engaging children in research. Participation enhances children’s self-esteem and confidence, promotes their overall development and enhances their sense of autonomy, independence, social
competence and resilience (Dewey, 1916). Professor Laura Lundy at the School of Education, Queen’s University, Belfast, offers a rights-based model of participation ensuring that the democratic environment is appreciated and nurtured in educational and research settings with children. Lundy’s model focuses on ensuring that all children’s views are valued and respected (Lundy, 2007).

**Figure 1: The Lundy Model of Participation**

![Figure 1: The Lundy Model of Participation](Source: Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2015, p. 21)

The Lundy Model of Participation (Figure 1), highlights four components that are necessary to ensure that Article 12 of the UNCRC is achieved. The components are space, voice, audience and influence.

**Space:** The Lundy Model of Participation begins with creating a safe and inclusive space for children to express their views. This space is a pre-requisite for children to express their authentic views, without fear of rebuke and reprisal (Lundy, 2007). This is not just a physical space, but a space for voice to be heard and appreciated and not just in a tokenistic way.
Voice: Developing opportunities for conversations with young people in education has increased as a result of the interest in the study of young people’s social practices, and the impact of their engagement with their culture on their relationships with themselves and the world (Lundy, 2007). Nobody expresses themselves in the same way as anyone else and so, once a safe space has been created (Lundy, 2007), the researcher must give due consideration to how each child’s voice can be heard. Voice can be articulated in a variety of ways and it is not just restricted to the spoken word. It is imperative that thought be given to multiple means of expression, as well as the silent voice in the setting, as demonstrated by the study by the author (Harmon, 2018). In that study, the methods of photovoice and scrapbooking, were used to access the voice of the child, and are presented here.

Photovoice

The taking of photographs by children as a data gathering exercise has been recommended by many (Rasmussen, 2014; Enright & O’Sullivan, 2010a; Clark & Moss, 2001). Photovoice has been described as “a powerful participatory action research method where individuals are given the opportunity to take photographs, discuss them collectively, and use them to create opportunities for personal and/or community change” (Enright & O’Sullivan, 2010b). “Voice”, in the context of photovoice, clearly has political connotations and refers to both “the expression of feeling or opinion” and “having the right or opportunity to express an opinion” (Young & Barratt, 2001; Wang & Burris, 1997). Wang and Burris (1997) outline three goals of photovoice: to enable people to record and reflect on their community; to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues; and to bring about change.

The author’s study involved engagement with thirty-five children between the ages of 11 and 13 years in an Irish Primary school exploring their views on religion and beliefs. The school was co-educational with a variety of religious and belief views, as well as a diverse ethnic population (Harmon, 2018). The study did not separate children according to their religious or belief views, as has been done in other studies (O’Farrell, 2016; Kitching & Shanneik, 2015; Lodge, 2004), but kept the children together in keeping the natural school environment. The taking of pictures was used as a data gathering exercise. The children were first invited to participate in a workshop which focused on the ethics of photographing other people.
Training on basic photography skills with digital or disposable cameras was also given. In class, having explored the UNCRC, the children were invited to take photographs in response to the following: *Embracing your right under Article 14 (respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion) of the UNCRC, take pictures that show your religious views or beliefs, as well as the religion and beliefs of others in your world.* The children had one week in which to take the photographs, allowing them the time to explore their communities outside of their school. The photographs were then printed, and the children kept one copy of their photographs, while the researcher retained a second. The photographs were used to support discussion in the subsequent semi-structured group interview, and in the creation of posters telling the story of religious views or beliefs among their group. The children had to decide in their group which pictures were to be used, and to ensure that all views were respected. This opened up a conversation about diversity within their classroom and wider community. The photos also were used during the semi-structured group interview to support conversation.

When reflecting on voice, the tendency is to focus on the spoken word, as highlighted by Alderson, Hawthorne and Killen (2005). However, this of course is not the only form of dialogue, as was evident from the following contribution of a Muslim child, Arya, who is selectively mute.

As a group of children from Christian traditions articulated their belief in Jesus as found in the Bible, Arya, slowly pushed a picture of the Qur’an into the middle of the table and bowed her head. The children all stopped talking and looked at the photograph. The children did not have the name of the book but knew it was the special book for the Muslim people. The girl did not articulate any information to the group. However, through the pictures, she shared her tradition with her fellow pupils and ignited in them a sense of curiosity about her belief tradition. In this one non-verbal articulation of her belief system, she had her voice heard.

The above situation emphasises the importance of voice within the Lundy Model of Participation (Lundy, 2007). It shows the importance of taking the time to select appropriate methodologies when accessing the voice of children and, as a researcher, to always look at
the needs of all the children in the group, which of course is a challenge when you have not worked with the children before.

**Scrapbooking**

The second participatory method used in the study was scrapbooking. Media educators and researchers have begun to use scrapbooks, sometimes called media diaries, as pedagogical and methodological tools to engage young people in generating and extending their knowledge of culture (Enright & O’Sullivan, 2010b). More recently, teachers of physical education and researchers have harnessed the potential of scrapbooking as a pedagogical and methodological tool to help researchers and teachers to better understand, extend and challenge students’ existing knowledge of, and critical engagement with, popular physical culture for example dance. This is evident in Enright and O’Sullivan (2010b), who explored with teenage girls how they were physically active. The girls were asked to scrapbook their physical activity and that of their peers. The girls used sporting images, hip-hop dance and one girl took a picture of her friend on a dance machine in a fast food restaurant.

According to Walling-Wefelmeyer (2020), scrapbooking offers more than simply using scrapbooks as a tool or method of data collection, but a process of saving, sharing, and making sense of the everyday. Scrapbooking thereby highlights the contingency and partiality of the scraps themselves and of its own activity in giving them form. This performance is both practical and conceptual. The author in his study used it as an approach to knowing, the children were asked to design a poster that they would use to teach a topic in religious education. The aim of this was to allow them to highlight what was important to them and to give the researcher an insight into their world and priorities with regards to religion and beliefs. Photographs taken by the children, school documentation, text from books, magazines and newspapers, screen prints from internet sites, drawings, stickers, and children’s writing were all included in their scrapbooks. The scrapbooks constituted a valuable data source for the study, as did audio recordings of the participants’ focus group discussions around their own and other children’s interpretations of the various scrapbook entries. This method again offered children multiple means of expressing their voice within the space
created, once again underlining the importance of having multiple means for children to express their views as outlined by Lundy (2007) in her model under Voice.

**Audience:** Returning to The Lundy Model of Participation, a principal reason for the development of the Lundy Model was to emphasise that voice is not enough and that children have a right to an audience and that those hearing their voice should have some ability to effect change (Lundy, 2007). This can happen in a variety of ways, sometimes those who hear the voice can directly make changes, other times they open channels of communication to ensure that the voice is heard in the appropriate forum. At the beginning of the process the children must know who that audience is and how their information will be used, for this clear and open communication is fundamental.

**Influence:** For Lundy, participation requires moving beyond just listening, to what the author calls ‘listening with purpose’ (Harmon, 2018). A major challenge to applying a child’s rights approach to voice is ensuring that the adults move to a place of purposeful listening. Purposeful listening allows the adult to be open to what is articulated and, where appropriate, to act for the benefit of the children. The challenge is to be open to be influenced by what children have to say and to ensure children feel they can influence the world around them. This notion of influence captures the phrase ‘due weight’ in Article 12 of the UNCRC. For Lundy (2007), influence is key: children must feel they have influence and so when inviting children to share their views, they must be informed about who the audience is and subsequently receive information on how that audience received their view. If the children feel that their voice has influence and is respected, it will promote a culture where their voice is appreciated, in accordance with their age and maturity (Harmon, 2018).

In the author’s study, the children knew who the audience would be from the beginning and that they would be offered an opportunity to share their views with that audience and offer suggestions for consideration for the betterment of their lives.

The involvement of children and young people in decisions which affect their lives is a developing field and the Lundy Model of Participation (2007) offers an excellent way to approach this. However, it is not without its challenges. The creation of a safe space, which is
a prerequisite for the engagement with the children to take place can be difficult, as in the case of many studies, this is a new physical space that they are entering (Lundy 2007). The author found that by using the children’s classroom, this was overcome, but struggled to get the children to move beyond classroom rules and structure when talking and engaging with their peers and him; so it was a challenge to create the emotional space for the children to speak freely in. This highlights that it is not just physical space but emotional space that must be created for authentic dialogue.

Giving due weight to the children’s views according to their maturity is key with the UNCRC and this needs to be communicated to the children in a very clear way. Thus to protect, and monitor, their expectations of at the end of the study, the author built in feedback time with the children between each session and relayed what he had heard (Harmon, 2018). This was of benefit when it came to the influence part of the Lundy Model of Participation (2007). The Lundy Model offers a framework but it needs to be adapted to each setting and the ability of the children. A key consideration must be the variety of ways employed to access the voice in the setting and that the children do not just become data gathers, but are seen as active participants in generating new knowledge.

Conclusion

This article has presented The Lundy Model of Participation (Lundy, 2007) and demonstrated how it was used in a study by the author (Harmon, 2018) to allow each child’s voice to be heard. It demonstrates, through using a rights-based approach ground in Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989) and appropriate participatory methodologies, that children can be active participants in the decision-making processes on topics that are relevant to their lives and so enrich the lives of all. Employing the Lundy Model of Participation is a process, comprising a series of steps that are developed overtime, as trust is built with the children. At its core is an invitation to the children to express their rights as outlined in the UNCRC.

References


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