

Look Who's Talking: Using creative, playful arts-based methods in research with young children

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecr**Caralyn Blaisdell** , **Lorna Arnott**  and **Kate Wall**

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Abstract

Young children are often ignored or marginalised in the drive to address children's participation and their wider set of rights. This is the case generally in social research, as well as within the field of Arts-Based Education Research. This article contributes to the growing literature on young children's involvement in arts-based research, by providing a reflective account of our learning and playful engagement with children using creative methods. This small pilot project forms part of a larger international project titled Look Who's Talking: Eliciting the Voices of Children from Birth to Seven, led by Professor Kate Wall at the University of Strathclyde. Visiting one nursery in Scotland, we worked with approximately 30 children from 3 to 5 years old. Seeking to connect with their play-based nursery experiences, we invited children to participate in a range of arts-based activities including drawing, craft-making, sculpting, a themed 'play basket' with various props, puppetry and videography. In this article, we develop reflective, analytical stories of our successes and dilemmas in the project. We were keen to establish ways of working with children that centred their own creativity and play, shaped by the materials we provided but not directed by us. However, we struggled to balance our own agenda with the more open-ended methods we had used. We argue that an intergenerational approach to eliciting voice with young children – in which adults are not afraid to shape the agenda, but do so in responsive, gradual and sensitive ways – creates the potential for a more inclusive experience for children that also meets researcher needs.

Keywords

arts-based methods, creativity, early childhood, ethics in research, play, research with children, voice

Introduction

This article provides a reflective account of our learning through engagement with playful arts-based methods, in research with young children. The article is drawn from a methodological

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pilot project, which formed part of a larger international project on eliciting voice with young children. Our goal in the pilot project was to explore what voice and listening mean to young children themselves, using methods that supported multiple ways of expressing voice. Inspired by trends in early years pedagogy, which increasingly favour open-ended ‘free-flow play’ (e.g. Bruce, 2012), we invited children to participate in a range of arts-based activities including drawing, craft-making, sculpting, a themed ‘play basket’ with various props, puppetry and videography.

Although the methods seemed to engage children and foster creativity, we experienced dilemmas about how well our own research agenda had been met, and how directly and successfully we had managed to engage with children’s own perspectives about voice. Our methodological findings in this pilot project echo persistent tensions that need to be negotiated when employing arts-based research methods (Angell et al., 2015; Barton, 2015). Using open, creative methods may not lead to researchers collecting the data they hoped for, in terms of ascertaining children’s perspectives on specified topics. However, imposing structure on children’s participation raises questions about ‘authentic’ voice. In the article, we argue that an intergenerational approach to eliciting voice – in which adults are not afraid to shape the agenda, but do so in responsive, gradual and sensitive ways according to the preferences of the participating children – is an important way forward. Such an approach creates the potential for a more inclusive experience for children and also fulfils the objectives of the researcher. Through reflective, analytical storytelling about our pilot project, we develop new methodological understandings about conducting research with young children.

Background and literature review: the emerging potential of arts-based research in early childhood

Look who’s talking: voice work with young children

This article draws on data from the ongoing international project titled *Look Who’s Talking: Eliciting the Voices of Children from Birth to Seven*, led by Professor Kate Wall at the University of Strathclyde. The objectives of the project are to pay special attention to the voices of those under 7 years of age, and to share factors designed to support those working with the under-sevens in facilitating children’s voices. The decision to focus on young children was driven by our knowledge that this group is often ignored or marginalised in the wider drive to address children’s participation and children’s broader rights. Young children’s participation may be disregarded because they are viewed as ‘pre-social’ (Alderson et al., 2005: 33) and ‘too innocent and/or immature to participate meaningfully’ (MacNaughton et al., 2007: 164).

Thus far, the project has involved two phases:

Phase 1: Two international seminar series, including public lectures, visits to nursery settings, policy document analysis and the submission and discussion of reflective vignettes from leading academics in the field of voice.

Phase 2: Empirical data collection (self-submitted online vignettes and interviews with practitioners in nurseries) focused on understanding practitioners’ perspectives on what voice looks like in early childhood education.

- (a) Practitioners’ perspectives of voice in general
- (b) Practitioners’ perspectives of voice with children under three, specifically.

Outputs including talking point posters and visual minutes can be found on the project website at <http://www.voicebirthtoseven.co.uk/>. This article is located at the beginning of the third phase of the project: empirical data collection with children themselves, using arts-based methods to understand children's perspectives of 'voice'.

Arts-based early childhood educational research: emerging potential

Research design plays a key role in inclusion of young children. For example, if the larger design of a project rests solely on questionnaires, then young children are unlikely to be included as participants (Wall, 2017). The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2005: para. 14c) reminds us that it is the responsibility of adults to create opportunities for young children to express their views, rather than expecting children to prove their capabilities. This means adapting to the child's 'interests, levels of understanding and preferred ways of communicating'. Creative, arts-based methods offer great potential to adapt to children's own 'ways of being' (Alderson, 2008).

While Arts-Based Educational Research (ABER) in general is becoming more widely researched (e.g. Eisner, 2006; Pentassuglia, 2017; Rolling, 2010), the focus on Arts-Based Early Childhood Educational Research is still at a relatively embryonic stage. Certainly, a wealth of approaches draw on 'child-centred' methodologies which may include artistic representations and align with play-based pedagogy in early childhood education (e.g. Clark, 2017; Clark and Moss, 2011). In many cases, however, these are considered separate to ABER, as a particular methodology or 'genre' of methods (Leavy, 2015).

The lack of recognition for ABER in early childhood is noteworthy because the underlying premise for artistic approaches is that they offer an inclusive mechanism for eliciting perspectives, due to their expansive range of techniques—drawing, painting, collage, experimental writing forms, poems, dance, drama, musical composition, sculpture, photography, filmmaking and others. The synthesis of visual, tactile and performative characteristics (Angell et al., 2015) in ABER appears advantageous for a broad age range and abilities, but particularly for young children – for whom more verbally focused methods may not be suitable. Wall (2017), for example, argues that visual methods such as storyboarding enabled young children to be included as research participants alongside older peers. This was the case even when young children did not complete the written elements of storyboarding – the drawings they created gave voice to children in the project, who otherwise may have been 'missed or unheard' (Wall, 2017: 327). ABER therefore offers inclusivity to participants who may be challenged by literacy-based approaches (Thomson, 2008).

A qualitative, inclusive and child-centred approach to ABER aligns well with early childhood play-based and child-led pedagogies (Einarsdottir et al., 2009), which are commonplace across many European, Scandinavian and Australian countries (e.g. Penn, 2011). It represents a multi-modal mechanism for expression, tying in with Gallas' (1994) description of childhood and contemporary discussions of children's multimodal literacies (Wolfe and Flewitt, 2010) and meaning-making (Rinaldi, 2011). Wall and Higgins (2006) suggest that ABER can alter the power dynamics between adult and child, offering the potential for a relational approach to understanding voice. However, while ABER facilitates 'playing' with the power relationship between researcher and child research participant, this 'play' must be underpinned by a belief in children as competent and capable research participants – and in some cases, co-researchers (Lundy et al., 2011).

Barton (2015) suggests that

art is not always a concrete representation of the artist's ideas and feelings. The process that an artist goes through in order to produce an artwork is a vehicle by which to express a personal story or journey. (p. 64)

ABER, therefore, can offer useful insights into a child's world or ways of seeing – but it is the underpinning relationship that develops between researcher and child which generates knowledge for research purposes. Given the similarities between ABER and early childhood pedagogy, the arts are not just a way to communicate, but potentially put the child at ease in the researcher–child relationship, by utilising established ways of working. ABER can therefore be understood as a route to empowerment and participation, rather than a tool for positivist 'data extraction'. Open-ended, creative, artistic methods support children's agency in the research process (Barton, 2015). However, despite the promise we see in ABER, no method should be uncritically applied. It is necessary to be 'critical of the nature of the tool' and 'the way it is read (by different individuals and age groups)' (Wall, 2017: 327).

Methodology

Arts-based methodology

Our arts-based methodology with young children sought to engage with a multimodal definition of voice through artistic expression. To do this, we provided open-ended, process-focused activities with a variety of materials involved, including:

- Fine arts (drawing; craft-making with glue, glitter, pipe cleaners, popsicle sticks, foam shapes; sculpting with soft 'air dough' style clay)
- A themed 'play basket' containing provocations affiliated with 'voice' (microphones, megaphones, walkie talkies, toy ears attached to headbands)
- Videography
- Puppetry and role-play in relation to 'voice'
- Informal conversations with children.

Our approach was inspired by trends in early years pedagogy internationally, which increasingly focus on creating space for 'free-flow play' (e.g. Bruce, 2012) alongside responsive – but not directive – adults (see The Scottish Government, 2014). These methods were intended to help us enter into the children's 'cultures of communication' (Christensen, 2004) and spark creative work about voice and listening. Children were able to join in and leave the activities fluidly, in a way that resonated with their play experiences in the nursery (e.g. Moyles, 2014). Similarly, they were able to tell the researchers about their work in a relaxed manner if they wished, unburdening them from formal interviews (Angell et al., 2015).

In order to pilot our methodological approach, we visited Brightstone Family Learning Centre¹ (participants in Phase Two of the Look Who's Talking project), a newly built early years centre in Central Scotland. Our pilot study took place across three visits to the 3- to 5-year-old playroom. The research was conducted in the playroom's open plan space rather than asking children to come to a separate space. Children's participation in the project was fluid; some children joined us in all three visits, while others participated for a short time and then moved on. We estimate that around 30 children took part, with varying depths of involvement. Practitioners were not directly involved but were nearby to support the experience if needed.

Because the arts-based activities were process-focused, rather than product-focused, we used video, still digital images and researcher field notes to create a record of the children's work and of our own reflections on the experience. Over the course of the three visits, we also created a 'Big Book' to document the project visually for children and practitioners after each session. Children were invited to contribute to the scrapbook. The book was left at the nursery at the end of the pilot project.

Ethical issues: towards informed consent with children

The EECERA (European Early Childhood Education Research Association) Ethical Code of Practice (2015) was followed and approval was granted by the University of Strathclyde Ethics Committee, as well as the relevant Scottish Local Authority. An in-depth discussion of ‘ethics in practice’ (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004) is beyond the scope of this article, but informed consent with children required consideration. Given the low risk of this project to the participants, with the agreement of Brightstone’s Head of Centre, we offer parents the option to ‘opt out’, rather than seek opt-in parental proxy consent. Opting out meant that we would still include their child in the activities if they wanted to join in, but we would not include them in our data. One parent did opt out for reasons around child protection – it was not safe for the child to appear in photographs.

We negotiated consent directly with children, demonstrating our belief in young children as ‘reliable, voluntary’ participants in research (Farrell, 2016: 226). To stimulate discussion about consent, children were invited to watch an animated video (found at <https://biteable.com/watch/look-whos-talking-1631959>) to explain the research. We then facilitated a discussion about ethics to agree ways of working. For example, joint decisions were made about elements of data the researchers would like to publish, in what form, and the fact that we would use pseudonyms and mask identities in all publications. One child requested that the camera was not used initially, which was respected by the researchers. Later, she turned the camera back on herself, indicating her agreement to be recorded.

While the ethical discussion with children was promising, it can be hard to ensure that any participants in social research (whether adults or children) are sufficiently informed (Gallagher et al., 2010). Gallagher et al. (2010) also challenge the ‘gold standard’ of researchers’ understanding of the project, arguing that researchers themselves may not fully appreciate the implications for participants. In our pilot, it quickly became clear that because of the free-flowing nature of the research, children who had not joined in with the ethics discussion were later joining the research. Although we attempted to explain the project to these children as they arrived, children’s ‘partially informed’ status meant that issues such as confidentiality and anonymity were of particular importance, inextricably linked to consent, rather than separate concerns (e.g. Farrell, 2016).

Regarding confidentiality and anonymity, we debated considerably the use of children’s images in publications. While children offered consent to have the photographs taken, and parents by opt-out approach similarly consented for the images being used in publication, three critical moments arose during the course of this study that led to our decision to convert images into sketches for publication.

1. In collaboration with children, we developed a joint ethical agreement for the project, during which we agreed to mask children’s identities in publications.
2. The fluid and at times problematic nature of informing children about the project, as described above, resulted in partial information provided to some children. Thus, while parents agreed to the use of photographs, some of the children themselves did not by way of omission from the discussion.
3. Around the time of our pilot project, there was public (e.g. Watson, 2018) and academic (Mascheroni, 2017) debate regarding the control of data online and datafication of childhood, particularly in social media and smart devices. This creates a moral obligation on the part of researchers, to avoid exploitation of children for data.

Thus, while we agree with Nutbrown (2011) and Allen (2015) that by anonymising photographs in the name of ethics, researchers are perhaps perpetuating the ‘Other-ness’ of children and distorting

the meanings created in visual research, the agreement made with children in this project – in a world where we have an obligation to protect children’s personal data – took precedence. Sketches offered a middle ground, where we could maintain the integrity of the data in a safe, ethical way. A longer project would have allowed for more dialogue between children, parents and researchers around the use and protection of children’s images (e.g. Rutanen et al., in press).

Knowledge creation: analytical frame

A challenge of ABER is that the analytical frame is implied rather than explicit (Angell et al., 2015). In order to address this, we explicitly present our analytical frame and approach to knowledge creation. Our interpretations were guided by provisional principles created during the early stages of the Look Who’s Talking project. The principles are framed as action points: provisional, open to change and phrased in the form of reflective questions that arose from data collection. For full information on the emerging principles and underpinning questions, see Wall et al. (2017).

- Define: What is voice? What is not voice? How does voice link to rights? When is voice not appropriate?
- Include: Does everyone have an equal voice? How do I know when someone is excluded? Do I value some voices more than others? Is opting out a key part of inclusion?
- Empower: Who owns what is said? Are some voices more important than others? Who is asking the questions?
- Listen: How do I listen to conflicting voices? Who listens to me? How do I listen non-judgmentally? How do I hear silent voices?
- Process: How comfortable am I taking risks? How do I build trust with different groups? When is voice risky? How do I use voice to move things forward?
- Structure: How does space shape voice? Which tools and techniques are supportive of voice?
- Approach: What skills do I need to support voice? How do I allow for the unexpected? How do I reflect on the process? How do I record voices?
- Purposeful: What am I doing this for? What have I got to lose? How does voice lead to change? What are the children getting from this?

The principles served as ‘sensitising concepts’ for our analysis (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007), while still leaving space for new ideas and concepts to arise in the field. We took a reflexive approach to interpreting the data – not as neutral products of ‘data extraction’ but as partial material traces of the experiences, created and shaped by our research methodology itself (e.g. Barad, 2007). In doing so, we set aside the role of the ‘precise’ or ‘omniscient’ researcher who sees and interprets all through the view from nowhere and everywhere (Fine, 1993; Haraway, 1988). Instead, through an inductive approach, we have analysed our findings to produce key areas of methodological learning about arts-based research. These are presented in the following findings sections.

In presenting the findings, we also take a reflexive approach, in which our own subjectivity is made visible (Gullion, 2016). In the context of social research, the researcher is in the privileged position of interpreting and representing the lives of others (Brown and Gilligan, 1992). In this article we have used that privileged position to make our interpretations and provisional thinking transparent to the reader. We disrupt (artificial) borders between ‘academic’ and ‘poetic’ writing (Gullion, 2016), weaving our own voices and reflections into the text in order to tell our stories about using playful, creative and inclusive methods with young children.

Findings and discussion: stories of arts-based research in the early years

The findings below are presented in the form of researchers' reflexive stories of the process of engaging with Arts-Based Early Childhood Educational Research Methods. We organise these stories according to three emergent themes:

1. The role of arts-based methods in facilitating creativity, playfulness and inclusion.
2. The tendency for researchers to default to 'authentic verbal voice' as a means of extracting data to address our research questions.
3. The potential for responsiveness and an intergenerational approach to data collection using arts-based methods which is grounded in a relational approach.

Subsequently, in the conclusions, we map these themes to the data from the earlier phases of the Look Who's Talking project to reflect on principles of 'voice'.

Reflections on creativity, playfulness and inclusion

ABER is driven by process, with directive outcomes playing a much lesser role. In this view, artistic methodologies are considered a 'personal journey with ruptures, interventions and intersections of the art, the personal and the writing' (Blumenfeld -Jones, 2016: 323). This was the case in our pilot, with children enthusiastically interpreting the materials in a variety of ways. This process, characterised by 'spacious uncertainty' (Solnit, 2016) for the researchers, resulted in unpredictable, joyful and sometimes difficult expressions of playfulness and creativity. Below, we present a reflexive story of these encounters.

In the opening moments of the research, practitioners invited children to 'Come play with the ladies' and this ethos seemed to pervade throughout the experience. A small group of children joined initially, and practitioners withdrew to nearby areas of the playroom. More children noticed the play and joined us. This led to a hub of creative activity in our area of the playroom. Three main overlapping areas of creative play emerged:

1. 'Fine art' activities (drawing, crafting, sculpting with clay);
2. Dramatic play with props such as microphones, walkie talkies and toy ears;
3. Videography led by the children.

These are visualised in Figure 1 to exemplify the sense of energy, diversity and collaboration during the play.

The second visit provoked a similarly enthusiastic response from many of the children at the nursery. Some children from the first visit joined us again, while others we were meeting for the first time. Lorna facilitated a puppet show activity, which was hugely popular and flowed well with the nursery's play-based approach. Children seemed comfortable joining in and staying as long as they wished, leaving freely to go to other areas of the nursery, coming back and joining in again.

At times, we struggled to keep up with the children's enthusiasm in terms of unpacking and making things available. The positive side of this unruly process of 'making-with' children and materials (Haraway, 2016: 58) was that we were able to demonstrate our own listening practice with the children. For example, Lorna was willing to turn the video cameras over to the children themselves, supporting children to experiment with the tools rather than clinging to researcher ownership. Echoing Christensen (2004: 171), these small acts of listening to children seemed to



Figure 1. Collage of joyful and creative arts-based methods (sketch).

help us ‘rehearse the character of our relationships’ and establish a sense of commonality and fluid relationships of power. However, our methods also created challenges around inclusion.

For example, one child was opted out of the research by her parent for child protection reasons around photographs. It was not safe for the child’s image to be ‘out in the world’ beyond the nursery. We were informed of this, but did not realise that during the first session, practitioners had been keeping her away from our area of the nursery. In the second session, we identified her to ensure no pictures were taken but she could still join in with the play. However, our open approach to children themselves taking photos and videos meant that we did not have control over the images being created. Perhaps for this reason, perhaps for confidentiality reasons, the child was once again kept away from our project. Our willingness to cede control to children, therefore – the ethical underpinnings of the project – created a situation where this particular child was excluded.

As this story illustrates, being creative and playful in the research was not a Pollyanna-ish, inclusive experience for all involved. Our approach did create opportunities for fun, fluidity and commonality, while also creating annoyances, conflicts and even exclusions for some children. Here, we can see an empirical example of what Haraway (2016: 71) calls ‘risky, committed, ‘becoming involved’ in each others’ lives’. Arts-based methods are just as problematic and ethically ambiguous as any other research method (e.g. Gallacher and Gallacher, 2008).

Defaulting to ‘authentic verbal voice’ in order to meet the research agenda

As we entered into the ‘unruly methods’ with young children, it became clear that our research was not, in the first instance, creating concrete, easily categorised data about children’s views on voice. We became concerned about the lack of children’s own ‘voices about voice’ – we were not sure how the data being created would fit into the wider Look Who’s Talking project. Below, we present a second story of our arts-based research experience, one that demonstrates the tendency to privilege verbal voice and the dilemma between facilitating free and open artistic methods against structured elicitation of explicit data.

Feeling a bit insecure about meeting our research agenda, both Lorna and Cara defaulted to voice as verbal utterances – directly asking the children what they thought about voice and listening. Cara, who was working with the drawing and crafting activities, had the most success with this:

I asked Maisie and Isla if it was ok to ask them some questions while they were drawing – they nodded and said yes. I wrote their answers in my notebook. As we talked, they kept going with the art they were making. I asked, ‘what does it mean to listen?’ They answered:

Maisie: You listen with your ears. [pauses] Listen to the teachers.

Cara: What does it mean to listen to the teachers?

Maisie: Sit still.

Isla: Don’t wiggle about when you’re reading stories.

Lorna, in contrast, was facilitating the drama/videography (Visit One) and puppetry (Visit Two) and found that children had less interest in talking about our research topic – as illustrated in the following vignette and photograph (Figure 2):

A girl (approximately 4 years old) was excitedly explored the treasure box of props, holding the mouth props up to her mouth and laughing. She found a pair of fake ears and puts these on. She commented on them being very large and I asked if larger ears made hearing and listening easier, to which she replied in a matter of fact tone: ‘no, I’m just like Rumpelstiltskin’.

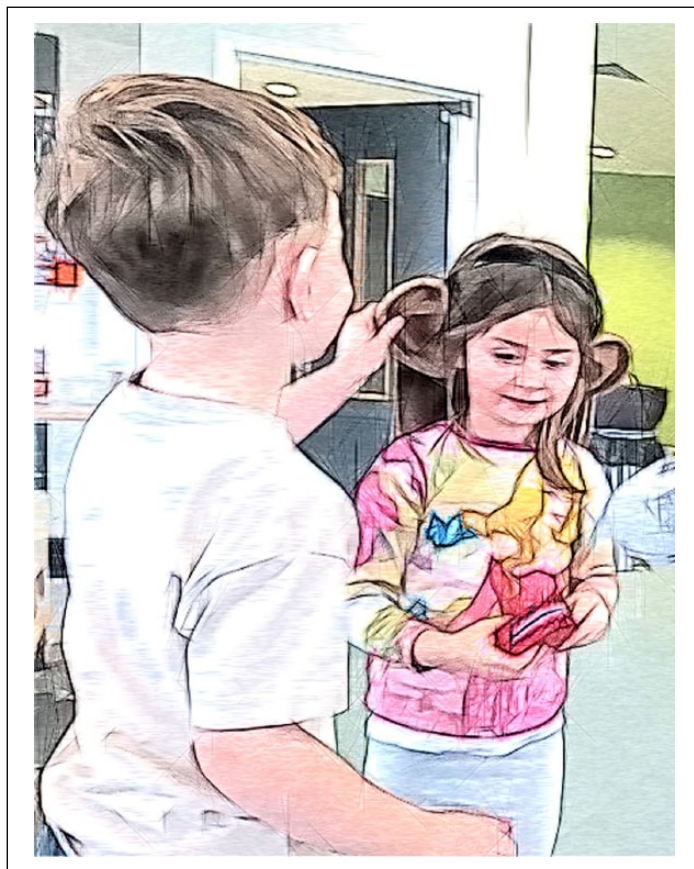


Figure 2. Big ears are not for good listening, they're like Rumpelstiltskin (sketch).

In other attempts to talk about voice, Lorna was met with similar reactions. The children seemed otherwise occupied. For example, children were drawn to the camera technology and wanted emphatically to control the camera and take on the role of videographer. They were less concerned with creating stories of voice, but rather wanted physical ownership of the camera and were enthralled by its ability to move in different directions when on the tripod. On our second visit, we brought a different video camera, which was more robust so that children could use it independently. As children took ownership of using the camera, the puppets became central to the activity. Zack, for example, simultaneously controlled the camera while holding a puppet in front of the screen, acting out a story (Figure 3).

Zack's story of the mouse, however, consisted of a made-up language and was hard to hear. We again found ourselves wishing to retreat to the security of verbal articulations of voice. In our final visit, therefore, we focused strongly on the verbal elements of our research, by inviting the children to read through the 'Big Book' with us. The aim was to facilitate direct conversations about voice and listening. Ironically, reading the book and asking directly about voice and listening had a silencing effect on the children, who seemed uncomfortable and did not answer – though several of them had talked to Cara about listening in previous sessions (Figure 4).

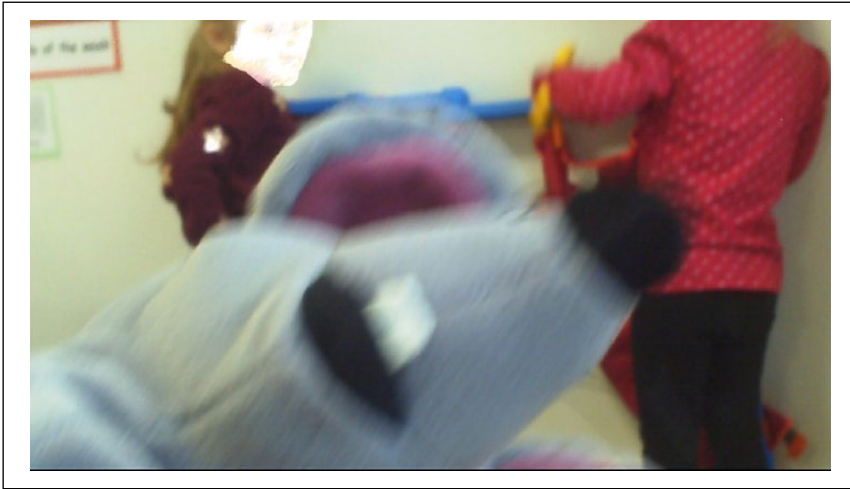


Figure 3. Screenshot from Zack's self-directed puppet film.



Figure 4. Reading the Big Book: the 'silenced' children (sketch).

Episodes like this raised questions about why we chose to involve children in this data collection, and for what purpose. Although we had purposefully made space for open-ended processes, we then defaulted to a view of children's verbal utterances as their 'authentic voice'. The 'voice' that fit most easily into our agenda involved children's 'message-like thoughts that can be exchanged, and intentions that match the situations defined by adults' (Komulainen, 2007: 25).

While this worked for some children, when they were interested, willing and able to engage in verbal conversation, defaulting to articulate verbal utterances sat directly in contrast with our underpinning research ethos. However, avoiding steering the research process at all towards our own agenda would make it difficult to include children's perspectives in the wider project alongside the voices of academics and practitioners.

Potential of a responsive, explicitly intergenerational approach to arts-based research

In this section, we draw out the potential for a more explicitly intergenerational, responsive frame that includes verbal voice, but does not depend entirely upon it. Here, we present a final story to articulate our meaning, which suggests how two emergent activities – puppetry and storytelling – demonstrate future possibilities.

As Zack's story with the mouse illustrates, puppetry was popular with many of the children. When Lorna introduced the puppet theatre on Day 2, all of the children who were with us ran over to her, leaving the drawing and crafting behind. They seemed very excited to first build the puppet theatre and then to create a performance. After much negotiation, some children placed themselves behind the theatre, puppets in hand. They insisted that the curtains be closed for the beginning of the show and then opened with dramatic effect. However, the puppeteers seemed to freeze up when faced with their audience of other children, whispering to each other and miming conversations with the puppets. They seemed to feel a bit 'on the spot' and unsure of what to do.

At the same time, at the drawing and crafting table, at Cara's suggestion, two children began to create an oral/visual/embodied story while drawing in the scrapbook (Figure 5).

- Cara: Hmmm, I wonder if anyone wants to write a little story in the book?
 Felicia: I'm going to write a wee story.
 Cara: What is your story about?
 Felicia: A mouse.
 Cara: What happened to the mouse?
 Felicia: It fell down a hole and bumped himself [draws a line down to the bottom of the paper]. He crawled away.
 Cara: Oh dear, what next?
 Felicia: An elephant came!
 [Lily arrives and Felicia watches her draw for a few moments. She then returns to the story, now with a glue stick in hand]
 Felicia: [smearing glue across the page with broad strokes] The mouse is in lava!!! Slippery lava!!
 Lily: [joins in, drags her marker across the glue onto the next page] It crawled out the other side!
 Felicia: [laughs as if she thinks this is absurd but funny] A bear came!!

Both girls dissolve in laughter as the story disappears between the glued pages.

The puppet show was popular, but perhaps missed out some important steps that Barton and Baguley (2014) suggest underpin artistic performance: becoming familiar with a script and belonging to a storytelling group. However, at the drawing table, Lily and Felicia had – in their own way – begun these steps, working together to spin their tale. Over time, these storytelling and puppetry

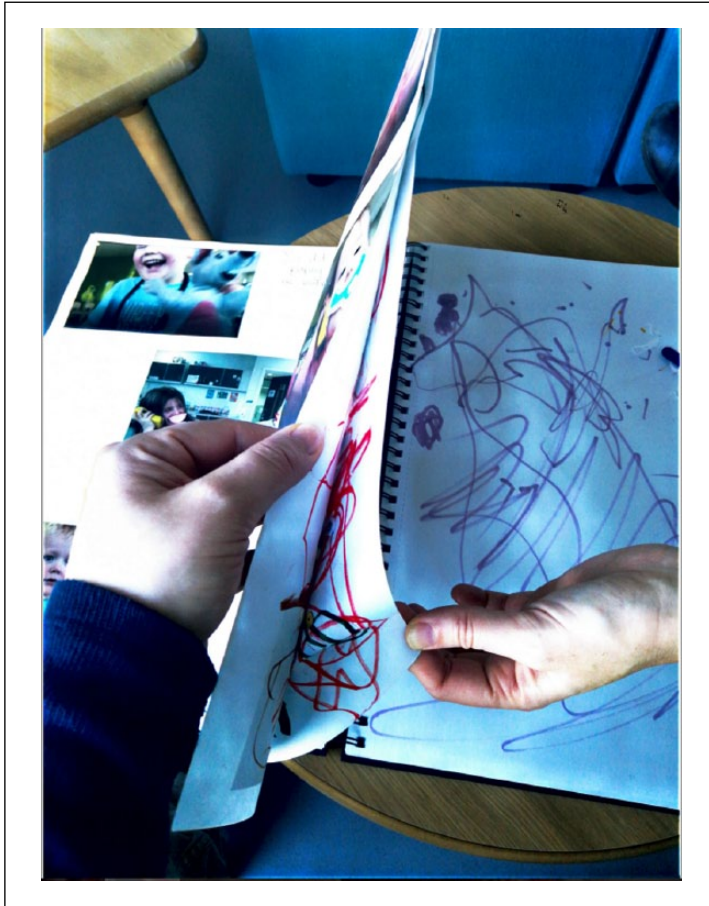


Figure 5. The story of the mouse, vanished into the glued pages.

interests – developed by the children in relationship with the researchers – could be brought together. As Paley (1987) argues, the dramatisation of children’s own stories can be a powerful way to find out what they think.

Providing a variety of materials and coming to understand children’s interests from the ‘bottom-up’ allowed us to see possibilities for future activities that could bring a better understanding of children’s perspectives of voice. A gradual, sensitive approach to co-shaping the activities seems promising and exciting. Findings from a previous phase of the Look Who’s Talking project suggest that a relational approach to voice is essential. Practitioners working with children below 3 years old told researchers that they had to be attuned to children’s way of being, to truly interpret and understand their non-verbal voices (Arnott, 2017). Our experiences with arts-based methods echoed this message about relational ways of being between adults and children.

Conclusion: arts-based early childhood educational research as an approach to engage children with principles of voice

The arguments for including children’s own perspectives in social research are well rehearsed, and children’s inclusion is becoming more commonplace in many disciplines (Blaisdell et al., 2014;

Table 1. Mapping experiences of arts-based methods to Look Who's Talking principles.

Look Who's Talking principles	Reflection on arts-based methods
Define	With the drama and performance activities, we didn't get a sense of children's perspectives about how to <i>define</i> voice.
Include	The process was relatively <i>inclusive</i> both in terms of research participation (and negotiating not to take part as discussed by Horstman et al. (2008)) and children's ability to drive and shape the agenda for the project.
Empower	Children appeared <i>empowered</i> by the variety in resources provided to engage in the project, and the ability to determine their own involvement. Simultaneously, the open methods produced exclusions for some children.
Listen	In terms of the larger research project, there was potential that the methods created disadvantage in the lack of opportunity for adults and children to <i>listen</i> to each other about the specific topic of voice. Nevertheless, within the arts-based methods themselves there were many opportunities for listening and potential for future development.
Process	A relational approach over extended time is required to develop <i>processes</i> of trust. Some children returned to us on each visit and we began to understand their voices better. Other children's engagements were fleeting and harder for us to interpret.
Structure	The spaces of the nursery and materials of the research worked well together, creating flexible <i>structure</i> – but more time was needed to develop relationships between researchers and children in order to sensitively shape the research agenda.
Approach	Arts-based methods provided a variety of <i>approaches</i> for eliciting voice, allowing for the unexpected and provoking reflection by the researchers. To some extent, drawing and crafting seemed to create a particular space for talk about the research topic, perhaps because children were familiar with these activities already.
Purposeful	What children get from this process varied. Many seemed to enjoy the creative activities. However, in terms of meeting the <i>purpose</i> of the project – to include children's perspectives in the larger project – more time and development are needed.

Christensen and James, 2008). Young children, however, occupy an ambiguous position in this movement towards more participatory approaches to social research (Tisdall, 2016). Children 'speaking' through photography or drawing, for example, does offer the potential to expand the representation of voice beyond the common practice of incorporating direct quotations from children (Tisdall, 2009) – children are often asked to talk about their photos (for example, see Clark and Moss, 2011 or Burke, 2005). The 'individualizing character' of this notion of voice reproduces an understanding of the ideal subject as rational, articulate – an understanding which 'marginalizes children' (Tisdall, 2009: 214), particularly young children (Arneil, 2002).

These ambiguities are encapsulated in the stories we have told in the findings section of this article. We synthesise this thinking in accordance with the Look Who's Talking project principles in Table 1.

In our piloting, we were keen to establish ways of working with children that centred their own creativity and play, shaped by the materials we provided but not directed by us. However, as we have discussed, we struggled to balance our own agenda with the more open-ended methods we had used. Although we found limited interest from children in developing voice-related 'products'

of their art, we see great potential for future work. Arts-based methodologies seemed to resonate with the children, perhaps because of links to playful early years pedagogy. Yet, we quickly retreated to the security of verbal voice, which required complicated and often counterproductive attempt to impose structure. Here, we see links with debates in early childhood pedagogy – for example, when is structured play appropriate instead of ‘pure’ free play (Fisher, 2016)?

This article raises more questions than it answers, but ABER is not aimed towards the quest for certainty; instead, it can highlight ruptures, difficulties and surprise in researching the world (Barone and Eisner, 2006, 2012). We conclude by reiterating our argument that an intergenerational approach to eliciting voices – in which adults are not afraid to shape the agenda, but do so in responsive, gradual and sensitive ways – creates the potential for a more inclusive experience for children that hopefully also meets researcher needs. Children’s right to articulate meaning, opinions and perspectives in all matters that affect them is enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and has rapidly made its way into research practice in many disciplines (e.g. Beazley et al., 2009). However, the ‘how’ of children’s participation rights remains a space of contention and debate (Desmet et al., 2015; Liebel, 2012). Creative, playful and open-ended arts-based research in early years can provide opportunities for children to embody and enact complex concepts and ideas. For ourselves, our pilot provoked a ‘(re)awakening and (re)examination of attitudes and beliefs’ (Bagley and Castro-Salazar, 2017: 1) about children’s involvement in social research and the ways our methods and assumptions shape what ‘voices’ are produced and included.

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Note

1. The name of the nursery, and all participant names, are pseudonyms.

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