

# Guest Editorial: Empowering Young People

Anne Greig, Charmian Hobbs & Sue Roffey

---

‘Nothing about me without me’ (Delbanco et al., 2001)

THE REQUIREMENT to elicit the views of children and young people on issues that concern them has been enshrined in law since the UK ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991 (with reservations on certain protocols). Putting this right into practice in education, however, may be fraught with difficulties where educational practices are focused on ‘telling’ and ‘controlling’ pupils rather than promoting their agency (Roffey, 2013). Adults, often with the best will in the world, want to do what is in the best interests of the child but may do so without appropriate, timely or effective consultation with the young person themselves. This makes the professional work of the educational psychologist (EP) critical in advocating for the empowerment of young people and encouraging practices that promote both the confidence to articulate opinion, as well as suggesting a variety of ways to communicate effectively. Pupil voice is relevant at both the individual and systems levels of education.

The empowerment of young people is based on the principle of democracy. In order to be authentic, however, student voice needs to go beyond tokenistic gestures and be accessible to all individuals, not just those considered to be ‘leaders’ in a school. This is particularly valid for the more vulnerable, who may not conform to behavioural expectations and whose views are consequently marginalised. This edition of *Educational & Child Psychology* is focused on the active engagement of pupils with a wide range of special educational needs, including the voices of those who are not always heard.

There are significant reasons beyond the moral imperative to ascertain student voice and facilitate their active participation in

decision-making, policy and practice. Young people have a unique perspective and there are now clear indications that where this is taken seriously it has a major impact on school reform (Ruddock, 2007). School engagement is critical to positive learning for individuals (Wilms, 2000). Although engagement itself is a two-way process – disaffection is likely to set in when a young person does not perceive themselves as achieving – a sense of belonging and participation enhances motivation in both the social and academic arenas of school. In order to have a sense of school connectedness, also a factor in mental health and resilience (Benard, 2004), young people need structured, on-going opportunities that genuinely seek to facilitate their confident empowerment in the construction of a supportive school climate, the processes of their own learning and their personal growth and development.

What we are therefore seeking to explore in this issue is how knowledgeable and skilled are we really at promoting this sense of connectedness and at hearing and empowering the young?

## The papers

The papers included in this special issue represent a historical departure from articles that are exclusively psychological in the traditional sense. We have included quality papers that are narrative, philosophical, grounded in sociological and educational theory, that take a detailed look at cases and demonstrate innovative, qualitative approaches seeking to empower young people. They offer EPs, as advocates of the young, new understanding, ideas and approaches and indicate a growing evidence

base. This focus is entirely congruent with the paradigm shift that has taken place over the last two decades in the wider field of psychology (for example, see Greig, 2001).

Attending to the actual 'voice' and 'empowerment' of the young has not been the stronghold of positivist developmental psychology. Yet engaging with, listening to, understanding and advocating for the young is the everyday bread and butter of our profession. Our training is rightly rooted in the psychology of real world ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) but we also need real world approaches and tools of engagement that are tailored, flexible and lead to the empowerment of the young. Indeed, since the emergence of legislation on the voice of the child and youth empowerment (e.g. UNICEF, 1989, 2002; DfES, 2001, 2004), we are beginning to see interesting and useful publications by colleagues on how to better participate with, consult with and empower young people (e.g. Gersch et al., 2008; Greig, 2013; Hobbs, Todd & Taylor, 2000; Woolfson et al., 2006, 2008).

The encouraging response to the call for papers for this special issue on empowering the young included a healthy number of submissions both from within our profession and from colleagues in philosophy, education and clinical practitioners. Youth empowerment appears to be a hot topic that is also of much interest to our colleagues in allied fields. It seems to be timely, therefore, to ask ourselves where we have been, where we are now and where we are going with it.

Philosophy and the sociology of education have a strong voice in the matter of empowerment, and they provide a good sounding board for where we now need to go and how to get there. The paper by Earnshaw poses such philosophical questions as: What is the voice of the child? What is a child? Who is constructing who? Who has power in the relationship? The idea that there are sound philosophical concepts that should be familiar territory to EPs in practice and shared in psychological theory is an intriguing one. This is especially the case

where we have a special issue that addresses the actual philosophical world of the young; what they think, feel, do, why it is thus and importantly, how we can better understand and facilitate it. The author uses imaginative examples from philosophy such as Augustine, Wittgenstein and MacIntyre to support his thesis, the central tenet of which is that child-adult relationships are essentially symmetrical and that the children need to 'learn' to be a child. As developmental psychologists we will be familiar with the work of Colwyn Trevarthen who has written on the synchronised relationship between the parent and child in terms of its constructive reciprocity or intersubjectivity (e.g. Trevarthen et al., 1998). It is interesting to note here the parallels. As a philosopher, Earnshaw asserts something here that we know in terms of the research evidence base as well as in our hearts that:

*'There must be a methodological humility when approaching childhood and this must be found in a greater attention to the child's attempts to speak to the adult.'*

Nevertheless, upholding this code of engagement remains compromised in our practices.

Another thought-provoking paper by Mercieca and Mercieca further deconstructs the concepts of 'voice' and 'empowerment' with a detailed analysis of the writings of Rancière. They consider the direction of power in child-adult relationships, the impact of this on the young, and examine the difference between listening and hearing. These authors reflect how, although we know we can do things better, somehow in this 'runaway' world, it never really happens. In order to help this happen, they go on to describe an empowering and established participatory tool, The Mosaic Approach, pioneered by Clarke and Moss (2001) and give helpful illustrative examples of it action.

The paper by Gersch et al. (2008) develops further the thesis of the need to listen to the young at the deepest level if we are to access, develop and empower their inner philosophical and spiritual worlds.

The authors describe their ongoing research and an original tool that uses a technique derived from Socratic dialogue and Personal Construct Theory, for hearing the child's most personal voice: the Little Box of Big Questions. They demonstrate how the method can be used in everyday application, as a research tool and for making larger scale systemic changes such as the promotion of inclusion and empowering leadership.

As developmental psychologists we will recognise how these first few papers that are addressing deep philosophical questions about the philosophical world of the young are reminiscent of the constructivist debate and the social mediation of the internal mind (Bandura, 1986; Donaldson, 1978; Piaget, 1937/1954; Vygotsky, 1978). Yet despite this erudite knowledge, which includes insight into the development of a theory of mind in normal, autistic and insecurely attached populations (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985; Flavell, 1988; Meins et al., 1998), how good are we really at taking it into account in our everyday engagement with these vulnerable youngsters? How good are we really at using it to truly hear their voice and at making a difference to the way things are done for the young person rather than the school, the teacher or the parent?

In her narrative account, Yardley brings to life the sense of working WITH the young, using evidence and illustration to support her professional experiences with empowerment. She shows how this endeavour is fraught with misunderstandings and obstacles in everyday practice and argues that there is now a need to encourage the growth of the young person's' inner scientist and philosopher. To this end, she documents a study on mentoring young participants as co-researchers, recognising them as the experts in what it is like to be them and invites us to consider how, as adults, we no longer automatically understand what it is like to be a child.

These first four papers, therefore, provide us with stances and tools to facilitate a reflective and empowering engagement

with young people. The remaining papers take up the special cause of a range of vulnerable client groups such as those with autism (McLaughlin & Rafferty; Hill), those in care (Mainwaring), those experiencing domestic violence (Thornton), those who require nurturing (Griffiths, Stenner & Hicks) and they describe various approaches and tools that are helpful in the process.

Given that autism is primarily a social communication disorder with an inherent barrier to the voice 'being heard', this client group are especially vulnerable to disempowerment. Two of the papers in this issue, explore this topic. McLaughlin and Rafferty's review and interviews of six young people examines the empowerment, or rather disempowerment, of adolescents with Asperger's Syndrome. In another article, Hill describes her action research of a small sample of young people at secondary school with a diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder. She focuses on participatory approaches and uses an autism friendly photo elicitation method to discern their experiences, to give them a voice and to empower change within the system.

Nevertheless, the young do not need to have a hardwired communication difficulty to find that they have no voice regarding arrangements and important decisions that are being made about them. Young people who have experienced early trauma and ended up in the care system have relatively closed communication because of restricted outer and inner lives. Being able to think reflectively and flexibly requires good enough levels of security, consistent nurturing experiences, and the care of attuned adults who know how to enter the child's zone of proximal development. Those without this positive developmental experience become insecure, unsure of who they are, anxious in learning new things and find it hard to trust adults (Crittenden, 1992; Meins & Russell, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978). The final three papers address the empowering needs of these young people and the methods used to facilitate them.

In her paper, Thornton reports on a study in which she used pictures and projective play to access the impact of domestic violence on eight children aged between 5 and 9. She obtained rich information which, she proposes, highlights implications for learning, behaviour and resilience in this group. She observes that whilst the immediate trauma is most likely to be picked up by colleagues in clinical psychology, EPs are in a strong position to hear the often silenced voice of this significant number of vulnerable youngsters who dwell predominately within the education system.

The paper by Mainwaring describes an EP-led, Australian program that supports the views, rights and empowerment of children and young people with traumatic histories who have been placed into care. The model uses innovative methods to engage the young people, including non-verbal and technological approaches.

Finally, we have included a promising summary of a *Brief Practitioner Pilot*, based on a doctoral thesis, on the impact of Nurture Groups (NGs). Griffiths et al.'s exploration of the views of eight children in one nurture group in Wales used a variety of methods to elicit their voices in a focus group environment. She argues that due to variations of classic nurture group model, the best way to access accurate reflections about this type of service provision, is to conduct smaller scale, more intensive focus group discussions within one model. It is an interesting overview of some of the methodological difficulties which can thwart our attempts at hearing and empowering the voice of the young people in practice. This study also acknowledges the importance of operating within the framework of the rights of the child and the benefits of putting the voice of the child at the centre of legislation.

In summary, the papers included in this special issue show that the profession is at last re-entering, with fresh insights, knowledge and tools, what is an established practice territory – listening to young people. However, before we can get on with the busi-

ness and empowering them, perhaps we need to empower ourselves by re-philosophising our own restricted, entrenched assumptions and practices. It has been well observed by L.P. Hartley in *The Go-Between* that 'the past is a foreign country, they do things differently there'. This is also true of us as EPs who trained a decade or two or three ago and also of us as human beings who once were, but are no longer young, and definitely not children.

### **Implications for professional practice**

Acknowledging there is general agreement, supported by international and national legislation, that participation of children and young people should be promoted, we, as EPs alongside other colleagues, have found so far that really enabling their participation is highly complex. This complexity stems from social, cultural and practical issues that have given rise to possible limitations on the participation of ALL young people. Many of us are familiar with wrestling with questions such as: When is a child or young person old enough? Do they know enough to contribute? Shouldn't we protect them from difficult decisions? Don't they just change their minds? Say what adults want to hear? Don't see anyone else's point of view? Thus, rather than focusing on how all young people can participate, some have been further marginalised because of lack of action. Those most at risk are also those with whom we are most likely to work. Despite our stated role of advocates for the young, we often find ourselves placed in situations, which squeeze out their voice. Adult power and agendas lead to a prioritisation of these views which can overwhelm both opportunity and determination to find out, to really hear, what the young people have to contribute on their own behalf. This is particularly the case for those who find communication more difficult, more distressing, or simply confusing. All young people need time to develop and share their ideas, some need more time and some have made attempts and been left feeling ignored

or overruled. It is simply not possible to ask what their views are when they have little or no experience of how to express what they may want, are not aware of what might happen and do not know what the context is. It is incumbent on adults to support and encourage the young to enquire into options in their lives, to ask questions about what is or might happen and give their opinion on this. This is not just about gaining views but also about developing their participatory skills within a democratic society. This means that as EPs we need to reflect on our expertise in enabling young people to feel confident and capable in giving their views whatever their difficulties and recognising that if we are less successful with some, then we need to find different and better ways of hearing their narratives. Perhaps we could reconstruct previous understandings of our responsibility for the welfare of our young clients to see our responsibility as ensuring that by enabling authentic and meaningful participation, their welfare will be ensured.

The definition of participation is in itself contentious. What is participation about? Individuals or groups? Being there or having influence? Sharing power? Having access to information? Developing skills or an entitlement? A consultation or a process? Deciding on what we mean should be a starting point for our practice as EPs. Davey (2010) suggests that:

*'Participation is a process where someone influences decisions about their lives and this leads to change.'*

Over the years a number of models have been developed to consider how we might evaluate the participation of our young clients in our work. Perhaps the most well known is the hierarchical approach of Hart (1992) which has been further developed by Shier (2001). However, this has been reconsidered by Lundy (2007) with an emphasis on a 'Rights' model and which considers key aspects of participation. The young must

have the space to participate, recognising the context of participation especially with regard to safety. They must be facilitated in expressing their view; both they and the adults around them need training and experience to develop their skills. The audience must listen in an authentic and meaningful manner. Their views must influence decision making, not necessarily that everything that is expressed is agreed but that their views are a part of and have an impact within the decision making process. Participation is a continual interaction between the young person, the context and the adult where negotiation is ever present to enable them to express how they want to be involved in decision making,

Research suggests that much progress has been made towards greater participation and this is evident from the papers in this journal. These papers reaffirm the commitment that EPs have to including the voice of children and young people in their professional practice. However, they also pose a significant challenge. There is a long way to go to address the variability in participation and especially for those with a complexity of need (Franklin & Sloper, 2009; Kirby et al., 2003). It is a long journey because it requires a cultural change in the way we work. It's about the active involvement of our young clients at all times. It is a process not an event. We need to weave them into the culture of our organisations and wider society. Perhaps we could start with thinking about the presence of the young person's voice within our working practices. Would he or she be part of the way our services are run or delivered? Would our young clients always be a part of the decision making process? If so, would we be doing anything differently? Many ideas for ways of exploring these ideas are considered in this journal.

**Anne Greig, Charmian Hobbs & Sue Roffey**

## References

- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Baron-Cohen, S, Leslie, A.M. & Frith, U. (1985). Does the autistic child have a 'theory of mind'? *Cognition*, 21(1), 37–46.
- Benard, B. (2004) *Resiliency: What have we learned?* San Francisco: WestEd.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1992). Ecological systems theory. In R. Vasta (Ed.), *Six theories of child development: Revised formulations and current issues* (pp.187–249). London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Clark, A. & Moss, P. (2001). *Listening to young children: The Mosaic approach*. London: National Children's Bureau.
- Crittenden, P.M. (1992). Quality of attachment in the preschool years. *Development and Psychopathology*, 4(2), 209–241.
- Davey, C (2010). *Children's participation in decision making: Summary report on progress made to 2010*. Available at: [www.participationworks.org.uk](http://www.participationworks.org.uk)
- Delbanco T, Berwick D.M, & Boufford J.L., Edgman-Levitan, S., Ollenschlager, G., Plamping, D. & Rockefeller, R.G. (2001). Health care in a land called PeoplePower: Nothing about me without me. *Health Expect*, 4(3) 144–150.
- DfES (2001). *Learning to listen: Core principles for the involvement of children and young people*. London: The Stationery Office.
- DfES (2004). *Every Child Matters*. London: The Stationery Office.
- Donaldson, M.C. (1978). *Children's minds*. New York: Norton.
- Flavell, J.H. (1988). The development of children's knowledge about the mind: From cognitive connections to mental representation. In J.W. Astington, P.L. Harris and D.R. Olson (Eds.), *Developing theories of mind*. New York: Cambridge University of Press.
- Franklin, A. & Sloper, P. (2009) Supporting the participation of disabled children and young people in decision-making. *Children and Society*, 23(1) 3–15
- Gersch, I., Dowling, F., Panagiotaki, G. & Potton, A. (2008). Listening to children's views of spiritual and metaphysical concepts: A new dimension to educational psychology practice? *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 24(3), 225–236.
- Greig, A. (2001). Practitioner research: Reality or dream? *Educational & Child Psychology*, 18(4), 75–88.
- Greig, A. (2013). Consultation and participation with children and young people in research. In A. Greig, J. Taylor & T. MacKay, *Doing research with children* (3rd ed., pp.203–244). London: Sage.
- Hart, R.A. (1992). *Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship*. Florence: UNICEF.
- Hobbs, C., Todd, L. & Taylor, J. (2000). Consulting with children and young people: Enabling educational psychologists to work collaboratively. *Educational & Child Psychology*, 17(4), 107–115.
- Kirby, P., Lanyon, C., Cronin, K. & Sinclair, R. (2003). *Building a culture of participation: involving children and young people in policy, service planning, delivery and evaluation*. London: DfES.
- Lundy, L. (2007). Voice is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6), 927–942.
- Meins, E., Fernyhough, C., Russell, J. & Clark Carter, D. (1998). Study of attachment as a predictor of symbolic mentalising abilities: A longitudinal study. *Social Development*, 7(1), 1–24.
- Meins, E. & Russell, J. (1997). Security and symbolic play: The relation between security of attachment and executive capacity. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 15(1), 63–76.
- Piaget, J. (1937/1954). *The construction of reality in the child*. New York: Basic Books.
- Roffey, S. (2013). *In control or in charge? 21st century learning*. Sydney: University of Western Sydney.
- Ruddock, J. (2007). Student voice, student engagement and school reform. In D. Theissen & A. Cook-Sather (Eds.), *International handbook of student experience in elementary and secondary school* (pp.587–610). New York: Springer.
- Shier, H. (2001). Pathways to participation: Openings, opportunities and obligations. A new model for enhancing children's participation in decision making, in line with Article 12.1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *Children and Society*, 15(2), 107–117.
- Trevarthen, C. (1998). The concept and foundations of infant intersubjectivity. In S. Braten (Ed.), *Intersubjective communication and emotion in early ontogeny*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- UNICEF (1989). *Convention on the rights of the child*. Available at: [www.unicef.org/crc/](http://www.unicef.org/crc/).
- UNICEF (2002). *Children participating in research, monitoring and evaluation (M & E) ethics and your responsibility as a manager*. Available at: [www.unicef.org/evaluation/files/TechNote1-Ethics.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/evaluation/files/TechNote1-Ethics.pdf).
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society: Development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wilms, J.D. (2000). *Student engagement at school: A sense of belonging and participation. Results from the Programme for International School Assessment (PISA) OECD*.

Woolfson, R.C., Harker, M., Lowe, D., Shields, M., Banks, M., Campbell, L. & Fergusson, E. (2006). Consulting about consulting: Young people's views of consultation. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 22(4), 337–353.

Woolfson, R.C., Bryce, D., Mooney, L., Harker, M., Lowe, D. & Fergusson, E. (2008). Improving methods of consulting with young people: Piloting a new model of consultation. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 24(1), 55–67.