Empowering the disempowered through voice-inclusive practice: Children's views on adult-centric educational provision

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Abstract

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child provides a significant platform to include children's views on issues that affect their lives, yet, in many contexts, particularly in educational practice, children's perspectives continue to be irregularly sought and are rarely acted upon. By providing children's perspectives on what they would like adults to know, this article explores a unique view of childhood and the interactions with family, community, educational experiences and well-being. The children's insights about their worlds that they feel adults are missing potentiate the development and incorporation of voice-inclusive practice. While the sense that each child makes of their *Lebenswelt* – the 'ingredients' – is idiosyncratic and will be influenced by many factors, including peers, teachers, parents, other adults and the media, it is the nature of this personal understanding that is poorly understood, and consequently ignored by adults. By exploring the commentary of more than 1000 children across five countries – Australia, England, New Zealand, Italy and Sweden – this research reveals an overwhelming collection of what the authors describe as 'comments that rhyme' in terms of the identification of expressed sentiment and thematic representations of their perspectives.

Keywords

Children's rights, education, voice, child perspectives

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Introduction

Across educational settings, there is a divergence of opinion between teachers on the matter of student voice. In some settings, there is an active willingness to include children's perspectives on educational matters affecting them. However, in others, there remains a sense that teachers have little trust in children's capacity to hold or express a valid opinion. Despite a growing awareness of children's capacities enshrined within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; United Nations, 1989), the prevailing view remains that the child's voice is worthy of only selective attention. Where children are not trusted to think for themselves on matters of importance, they are considered more susceptible to the need to connect with their peers than with educational concerns (Harris, 2000). Consequently, when consideration turns to the child's viewpoint, teachers continue to control 'at all costs' the decision-making processes within their classrooms.

The UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) provides an impetus for children's capacity to be explored. The value of the child's perspectives is affirmed by the participatory rights to access education (Articles 24, 28 and 29), have their perspectives included on matters that affect them (Article 12), and express themselves in ways of their choosing (Article 13). Article 29 has particular salience, stating that children's education should seek to develop, respect and prepare the child to 'their fullest potential' (United Nations, 1989). However, the effectiveness of the UNCRC in practice must be questioned if children's views and perspectives are not included within the educational process. Why this continues to occur is a modern dilemma for teachers and students seeking to reform an archaic method of teaching and learning. A plethora of research and empirical evidence indicates that non-aversive, inclusive methods that incorporate the views of all stakeholders, including children, are the most effective in supporting student well-being and educational success (Doyle, 1986; Emmer and Stough, 2001; Gillett-Swan, 2013, 2014; Gillett-Swan and Sargeant, 2014; Sargeant, 2014a).

Many beginning teachers enter the profession with an openness, idealism and desire for change, and seek to explore the opportunities that working with children presents (Gillett-Swan and Sargeant, 2015). However, despite an outward commitment to a child's freedom of expression, beginning teachers often adopt methodologies that are in direct conflict with that notion. Perhaps in response to institutional pressure, their views of children and children's capacities shift. The result is a move away from practices that are democratic towards those of power and control, stifling their willingness to seek children's perspectives. The idealism that underpins beginning teacher experiences can be quickly stifled due to a number of factors, including behaviour management, mentor teacher influence, job-related pressure and stress, standardized testing pressures and accountability, along with pressure from parents, the school administration, the community and government.

As one of the first points of contact for beginning teachers, the influence of a mentor teacher's classroom practice on an emergent teacher's developing perception of teaching should not be underestimated (Thorpe, 2005). The early experiences of beginning teachers during the 'survival mode' of the first year can confirm or challenge the knowledge gained in pre-service teacher education programs (Stuart and Thurlow, 2000).

Upon entry into a pre-service program, student teachers, regardless of their age, bring with them their own personal biases, values and viewpoints (Liston et al., 2006). They also bring with them a particular ideology of teaching and what they think teaching should be. Their personal conception of teaching is based on their own experiences as school students and their associated life experiences (Porter, 2007). A conceptual error that is made by as many early career teachers as experienced ones is that their teaching practice is their sole responsibility, and is informed only by theory and content application (Kane and Chimwayange, 2014). A student's voice bears

little relevance to this sense of responsibility. Even amongst experienced teachers, a willingness to consider more student-directed practices is identified but scarcely implemented. Consequently, if a lesson is not successful and the students are not engaged, the cause is traditionally attributed to something being wrong within the children, not the teacher. Such a simplistic notion misrepresents the constituent influence of the complex social system that is a classroom (Doyle, 1986).

Conventional pedagogy and teaching practice has undergone significant evolution in recent decades. Constructivist techniques such as small group work, collaborative consultation and discovery learning methods are now commonplace in many contemporary educational settings, and are regarded as pedagogically effective (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2007). Constructivist theories seek to explain how individuals make sense of their world by emphasizing 'the learner's contribution to meaning and learning through both individual and social activity' (Bruning et al., 2011: 193). Such an approach has clear links to the participation rights of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989), as it seeks the individual's active participation and contribution for successful implementation. Despite widespread discussion and evidence of success with child consultative methods, there remains a reticence by teachers to utilize such pro-social strategies in a systematic way. This educational paradox, which is apparent in many schools, not only impacts on classroom cohesion, but also has a flow-on effect to beginning teachers and pre-service teaching students, who enter the profession with a contemporary willingness to enact children's UNCRC participation rights.

Away from the classroom, teachers often agree that active strategies are appropriate and show a cognitive willingness to embrace innovation which can include children's voices. However, in practice, unless a number of preconditions relating to student behaviour are in place, evidence of this shift is limited (Sargeant, 2014b). In these cases, the use of 'modern' teaching techniques that offer children a more active role in their education by seeking and incorporating their perspectives is often seen by teachers as permissive and lacking in sufficient boundaries and educational relevance (Coates and Vickerman, 2013). The presence of behavioural preconditions leads some to question whether children are, indeed, capable of making meaningful and worthwhile contributions to the educational process (Kane and Chimwayange, 2014).

This article communicates the contemporary perspectives of tween children based on a collection of sustained research projects conducted by the authors in Australia, Sweden, New Zealand, Italy and England, and presents their perspectives on their lifeworlds and their community. The children's commentary offered herein provides a credible foundation of evidence for teachers which supports an activation of voice-inclusive practice in their daily work. By presenting such evidence, this study provides an impetus for a broadening of teaching practice that embraces, rather than rejects, the range of a child's knowledge and perspectives.

Children's capacity

Evidence of children's capacity to engage actively with complex notions is well established (Einarsdottir, 2005; Gillett-Swan, 2013, 2014; Harcourt, 2008, 2012; Harcourt and Conroy, 2005; Harcourt and Hagglund, 2011, 2012; Messiou, 2008; Phillips, 2010; Robinson and Taylor, 2013). Further to this, the United Nations (2009) has provided a General Comment which elaborates on what children's capacity means in practice. It asserts that children's capacity should be assumed to be present rather than as a precondition, as is often the case, particularly with young children and those with special needs (Coates and Vickerman, 2013). Despite Sanders and Mace (2006) noting that children's own perception of competence consistently rates higher than is attributed to them by most adults, they remain in a subordinate role defined by adults, which, ironically, further limits their participation, as they are positioned by adults as having limited capacity (Smith, 2007). If

children are not provided with opportunities to develop and increase their participation in matters of importance to their lives, they will remain passive in their participation. Sanders and Mace further argue that:

> children and young people judge themselves ready to deal with responsibilities and feel prepared to deal with the consequences of making decisions at an earlier age than would social workers and other adults … through being involved in the process of participation, children and young people gain skills and confidence and become competent. (Sanders and Mace, 2006: 94)

Recent developments in services for children have acknowledged the benefits and importance of listening to children's perspectives (Cook-Sather, 2009; Fattore et al., 2007; Kane and Chimwayange, 2014). However, this acknowledgment is yet to take a firm hold at the implementation level, where organizations invest heavily in the development and provision of services for children (Lundy, 2007). There remains a large void in the 'helping professions', where practitioners, teachers, social workers and the like are expected to engage children, but remain insufficiently equipped to effectively address the views of these children, except in crises. Children's direct input and involvement in education remains limited (Gillett-Swan, 2013; Halsey et al., 2006; Harland, 2007; Kane and Chimwayange, 2014; Mortimer, 2004; Robinson and Taylor, 2013; Wyn, 2009). Despite advocacy by groups such as UNICEF about consulting with children, the message is yet to resonate with educators. The mounting evidence of the capacity for modern children to personally deal with and process confronting information in their everyday lives remains an underappreciated point in education and in wider society (Sargeant, 2007, 2010, 2014a).

As signatories to the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989), many nations have been less than diligent in upholding their obligations, with Article 12.1 of the UNCRC (giving children a voice) proving particularly problematic. With the ever increasing conception of the global village, it is important to identify what unique perspectives children hold when considering media influences, globalization, consumerism, education, family values, climate change and terrorism.

There remains a relative dearth of research investigating the views of pre-adolescent children, aged between 8 and 12, on matters that directly affect them, such as schooling, the transition to secondary school and community involvement. Very few studies allow children to directly nominate for themselves the issues of importance. This scarcity of research that actually explores children's perspectives on issues nominated by children reveals an underlying tenet that children are unreliable reporters of their own experience. While such a notion is rarely voiced in the literature, it appears to permeate wider community perceptions of tween children.

Ignoring the voices of pre-adolescent children has implications for society's capacity to cater to their needs, in the education sector in particular, and has long-term implications for the prosperity of a nation in terms of social development, resilience and well-being (Gillett-Swan, 2013, 2014; Sargeant, 2014a). Unfortunately, many service providers, organizations and practitioners do not have the capacity or expectation that working with children is enhanced by considering their perspectives. Such a view may be simply because it is not a traditional practice, nor is there enough significant empirical evidence of children's perspectives on key societal issues available (Danby and Farrell, 2004; Lundy, 2007). Without evidence of authentic interaction between adults and children, negative media stereotypes of young people dominate and disaffect these community relationships (Gilliam and Bales, 2001).

While many studies exist relating to the issues affecting children, there are limited studies that directly present the child's view (Cook-Sather, 2002; Gillett-Swan, 2013, 2014; Harcourt, 2012; Kellett et al., 2004; Kinash and Hoffman, 2008; Kinash and Kinash, 2008; Sargeant, 2014a). Studies about children are often engaged from the adult perspective and, with that, can include

adult biases and assumptions about what children think. Such assumptions are compounded by the fact that a common definition of childhood has been historically difficult to engage (UNICEF, 2004). While research on issues affecting adolescents often incorporates their view, the same confidence is not afforded to younger, pre-adolescent children beyond a developmental frame (Gillett-Swan, 2013; Grant and Stephen, 2005; Kellett and Ding, 2004; Sargeant, 2005, 2007; Schor, 2004). A community that is receptive to the child's view can develop a greater understanding of children as they attend to the 'traditional' tasks of childhood, such as family participation, school achievement and the establishment of peer relations (Lundy, 2007; Simpson, 2004), while being increasingly exposed to issues and events of 'the adult world'. Some research with children – for example, by Tucci et al. (2007) – relates to 'adult'-nominated issues, such as global unrest, consumerism, climate change or family breakdown. But rarely does the research ask the children themselves to propose the key issues of importance to childhood.

Tucci et al. (2007) report on (predominantly adolescent) children's views on topics nominated by the researchers. However, Cook-Sather (2002) urges educators to reconfigure power dynamics and discourse practices within existing realms of conversation about education, and to embrace the political potential of children in speaking out on their own behalf both in the critique and in the reform of education. The acknowledgement and active incorporation of children's rights in educational practice remains scant, despite a noticeable imbalance of societal power between adults and children being increasingly recognized (Gillett-Swan, 2013; Robinson and Taylor, 2013; Singer, 2005).

Children's participation rights as relevant to education underpin what the authors define as *voice-inclusive practice*. Voice-inclusive practice involves activities and practices that incorporate and actively engage with children and their perspectives on matters that affect them (Articles 12 and 13 of the UNCRC), particularly as relevant to their education (Articles 24 and 29 of the UNCRC).

Globally, the consideration of children's rights within education has been variably incorporated. Within the European context, this variation of practice is particularly pronounced. As Haldorsson (2011: 8) notes, the challenge is that the 'EU [European Union] is not a signatory to the UNCRC'. Across the EU, the obligations to children's rights vary substantially, reflecting different levels of knowledge and attitudes (Francis and Lorenzo, 2002). The incorporation and consideration of the UNCRC within practice – particularly in educational contexts – in European and other nations, however, is yet to readily embrace the UNCRC.

Haldorsson's (2011: 10) report on the implementation of the UNCRC by EU states notes that: 'the EU has not acceded to the UNCRC, however a number of precedents confirm the obligation of the EU to respect and promote children's rights in all of the policy areas in which it has competence to act'. The importance of the UNCRC to Europe is further exemplified through its acknowledgment in the Charter of Fundamental Rights and the Lisbon Treaty (Karlsson, 2013). Furthermore, the European Commission's 'Europe 2020' strategy

> sets out a vision for the 21st century of a Europe where the children of today will have a better education, access to the services and to the resources they need to grow up and, one day, lead Europe into the 22nd century … advocat[ing] 'an EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child'. (European Commission, 2011: 3)

The focus on 'reaffirming the strong commitment of all EU institutions and of all Member States to promoting, protecting and fulfilling the rights of the child in all relevant EU policies and to turn it into concrete results' (European Commission, 2011: 3) affirms the importance of the UNCRC to Europe.

With a particular focus on children's participation rights within educational contexts, the authors have, over the past decade, conducted classroom observations and consulted with children and teachers in a range of educational settings. These settings have included primary/elementary, secondary, early childhood, special, public and private schools in Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, Italy and England. The wide geographical scope of these discussions presents a clear picture that the need for voice-inclusive practice is not unique to a particular country or culture, but relevant to all. The observations and discussions have informed the delivery of pre-service teacher education courses in voice-inclusive practice by providing direct links to the evidence of effective educational practice as expressed by children between the ages of 8 and 12. As the authors reflect on these experiences and interactions with children, it has become apparent that, whilst the range of issues – both social and pedagogical – confronting practising teachers continues to grow, it is not the students but teachers who must be better prepared and educated towards voice-inclusive practice.

Method

Participants were drawn from a range of primary and secondary schools in Australia, Sweden, New Zealand, Italy and England (mean age 11). Participation was voluntary and all personal identifying information has been removed from the data. These countries were chosen as sites for data collection because each is considered to be a liberal democracy, has representative democratic forms of government, shares many elements of culture and education, and has ratified the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989). The participants responded to a range of open-ended questions, the responses to which have been reported elsewhere (Gillett-Swan, 2013, 2014; Sargeant, 2007, 2010, 2014a). This article focuses on the analysis of the responses to two of the questions which lend significant weight to the benefits of voice-inclusive practice: 'What is a question you have for adults?' ($n = $ 415) and 'What is one thing you would like adults to know?' ($n = 873$).

The open-ended questions used in the data collection allowed the participants to write a free account in their own words to explain and/or qualify their responses, and allowed the researchers to 'catch the authenticity, richness, depth of response, honesty and candour' which are the hallmarks of qualitative research (Cohen et al., 2007: 330). Too often, the individual perspective is treated as idiosyncratic – an oft-held critique of qualitative research. Further to this, issues such as the dynamics of power are infrequently considered by researchers seeking to elicit the perspectives of children, yet represent an important element in the process. Children's responses and reactions to assertions of power by adults during different interactions such as daily classroom practice, research activities and home life have implications for how children engage with and actively participate in these and other related activities. The effects of pre-existing socialized power relationships between children and adults, and their impact on engaging from children an authentic level of participation, were also examined. Through the pursuit of engaging children's perspectives authentically, this research reveals a level of connection between the children's responses that builds a compelling picture of children's overall experiences.

Using a thematic content analysis, the responses were coded by an inductive method into emergent general themes (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). The data were then grouped according to related themes in order to find the most effective way to examine each child's perspective within the larger collection of responses so that the individual response of each participant remains at the forefront of the researchers' interest. Despite the individuality of each response, this research reveals an overwhelming collection of what the authors describe as 'comments that rhyme'. Notwithstanding the specific contextualization of the individual responses, a clear set of recurring themes emerges when considering the expressed sentiments present in each

child's response. A selection of individual comments is included in this article in order to maintain a focus on the individual.

Results

When considering the dominant themes emerging from the responses to these questions from children across five discrete countries in Europe and Australasia, a clear expression of dissatisfaction with adult acknowledgement of capacity is apparent, regardless of the national context. The following comments encapsulate the sentiments of many:

> The one thing that I'd like adults to know is that us children can have our own opinions and we can do things on our own but we also need a lot of help so they should support us and not make us feel small.

> To know that kids do know some things. To listen to me! To stop thinking that they know everything in the WORLD!

The children's obvious dissatisfaction with their current situation highlights the importance of voice-inclusive practice in education. The children express a willingness to work *with* adults to aid in their own development, while also seeking the opportunities to contribute to matters that affect them. Within the children's responses, an additional four emergent themes were identified under the overarching context of 'seeking recognition': (1) capacity advice; (2) empowered commentary – life as a tween; (3) dissatisfaction; and (4) seeking acknowledgement.

Capacity advice

Many of the children's responses reflect an openness to provide advice and insight about their own capacity, and their preferences for how adults could engage with them and find out their ideas and perspectives on matters of importance. Many of the comments express a view that implores adults to consider what children have to offer in terms of their unique points of view and creative outlook:

> Often adults are asked for their opinions about things but children can have a completely different point of view to the adults. Children can offer a lot if they are asked. Children are honest and they are creative. They have amazing ideas about how to make places and activities child friendly and places that children will want to go and take care off [*sic*].

And, more simply: 'Kids are very capable so don't underestimate us'. Other commentary reflects a consideration from the child's perspective that consultation is so rare that they may appear disinterested due to a lack of experience with genuinely motivated adults. Time, experience with consultation and a familiarity with language will break down this perception:

> Sometimes when children are asked for their ideas they are shy and scared to say what they think because they are not always asked. But if you ask them in a way that children will understand and tell them that you really want to hear their ideas they will share their thoughts with you especially if you make the questions easy to understand.

Advice is frequently offered which reflects a view held by the children that adults are not considerate of the children's overall capacity to either act or hold a viewpoint about local contexts:

> Kids can do more things for themselves.

> Kids are not stupid and naïve to what's going on around them.

They also refer to the 'reciprocal' investment required in future decision making:

> If you want children to take care of the places they visit in the community then you need to involve them in the decision making because then they will be child friendly and places that children will want to go.

These children's commentary reflects a willingness to communicate, contribute and assist adults in planning for children's futures and making their current experiences better. This is particularly relevant for education as local, national and international planning seeks ways to enhance children's educational experiences and improve educational outcomes.

Empowered commentary – life as a tween

The children's commentary calls for consideration by adults of the conditions of the pre-adolescent in a contemporary global community. The children report – often in a matter-of-fact manner – on their current life experiences, and call for an understanding that their personal circumstances and perspective can assist when considering how better to cater for their needs in a range of contexts.

Much of the commentary refers to the stresses of the tween: 'We can be just as stressed as they can be working as we go to school'. This comment seeks acknowledgement that the developmental, social and academic expectations of the school experience can be stressful for the pre-adolescent. In addition, there is a direct recognition within the comment that children are aware that teachers also experience stressful working conditions as they perform their educational duties. Such commentary reflects a view that the educational processes are an experience that is shared by students and teachers.

In other commentary, a sense of futility is expressed: 'For me personally as a teenager I'd like my Mum to know I don't want to be a grumpy, messy teenager but somehow she always annoys me so I guess I will end up being grumpy'. Such commentary reflects an awareness of the expectations held by communities that adolescence is a time of conflict and experimentation. Such a view is often exacerbated by those who view the teenager as a deliberate antagonist, when, in fact, such conflict is not welcomed by the developing tween. It is not uncommon that communities define the adolescent years as confrontational, and such messages create an expectation of such inevitability. The children acknowledge such expectations of conflict as they express an awareness of the impressions they make: 'We all appreciate what they do for us and we may not show it but we appreciate it'.

However, while acknowledging the personal interpretations of their appearance, the children also express an understanding that such individual identify formation is a necessary function of development. The importance of self-awareness and discovery is expressed: 'Let people [tweens] be who they want to be, if they are not the same as you, don't judge them'. Within such commentary, the children also express the importance of adult support and offer some acknowledgment:

> I struggle with some things but when I am helped personally then I understand what I need to do.

> Sometimes children have ideas and they need the adults to help make them happen so if adults and children can work together then everyone will be happy.

Again, the above comments reflect an appreciation of the need for shared roles in adolescent development between adults and children. Many of the children express a futures perspective

and demonstrate an understanding that the tween years represent not only a period of change, developing independence and identity, but also represent a transition towards the tasks of adulthood. The importance of education, in particular, is acknowledged:

> Getting a good education so I can reach my full potential in life so that means I will live a happy life.

> When children are involved in decision making they will learn while they are growing up that their ideas and thoughts are important to other people and that sometimes they can happen and that sometimes they can't.

> Learning and having fun at the same time you need to get the balance right to get the most out of school.

The children identify their potential as active community members and further evidence their potential role in community development as citizens:

> Children make up a big part of the community. They are members of the groups and activities that are run within the community just like adults. When children are involved in making decisions about these activities they are more likely to take care of them, they are more likely to get involved and they are more likely to get other children involved.

> Sometimes children and adults can have similar ideas but when children are involved it helps to make the children responsible citizens because they feel included and they feel like they are part of the community too.

Finally, within the context of life as a tween, the children ask adults to consider their roles as problem solvers. The following comment reflects a call for the inclusion of the child's perspective when problem solving:

> Kids can handle themselves sometimes and help people … and adults have their own form of wellbeing and they might think different to us so … what we think will make it better can be different to what they think will make it better.

They also express the importance of consequences beyond the present: 'There are things that they [adults] don't think about, coz if we do something that they tell us to do, it might affect us later in ways that they don't know and they can't help'. The children's responses reflect a desire to be included and to collaborate with adults, so that mutually beneficial outcomes can be achieved. Children's desire to be involved in decision making that affects their lives is reflected and openness to providing opportunities to work *with* adults is potentiated.

Dissatisfaction

The children's dissatisfaction with their current position in relation to adults is evident through their commentary. Their position is explained with realism, highlighting their ability to reflect on their current situation and offer insights into how the lack of recognition affects their experience and lifeworlds:

> You complain about something and they say 'at least >>insert worst-case scenario<<'.

> Feeling trapped with no control over my life.

The children express an awareness of the contemporary issues that are of equal concern to adults and children, such as the competing pressures of the modern world and the social impacts of schooling:

> Homework is annoying because we have our own LIFE out of school and we shouldn't have to worry about school when we are at home spending time with our family.

> How much bullying goes unnoticed in schools. People don't tell because they are scared that they will be bullied for it.

The positive impacts of consultation with children are expressed in terms of community membership and connection, despite the limits of age. The children express a level of frustration that they may have a worthwhile contribution, which is ignored:

> If children are consulted they feel a part of the community instead of feeling left out or like adults are making all the decisions without asking them.

> Just because we're younger doesn't mean we can't have our say.

> They [adults] tell you to do stuff because they feel that's the right way but they never actually ask you what you think is the right way.

Despite the clear dissatisfaction expressed through each of the children's responses, a solution and a willingness to work with adults are presented. This reflects a maturity and depth in reflective processes not typically attributed to children of this age. Rather than their dissatisfaction with their current position being viewed by them as a wholly negative experience, they provide insight into ways that their situation can be improved and can work towards mutual benefits, whereby shared outcomes can be achieved.

Seeking acknowledgement

Children also seek acknowledgement when it comes to determining how to approach issues and topics that affect their lives. They do not consider their perspectives to be the only perspectives that are important, but they do ascribe importance to the contribution that their perspectives can provide. The empowering effect of personal recognition is reflected in the following commentary:

> Children have great ideas so why don't we always ask them their opinions or involve them in making decisions? That is a question that adults need to ask themselves. If children are consulted then they will share their ideas, their opinions and their thoughts. Children have a lot to offer, they are creative, they have their own ideas and they know about the areas that they visit in the community.

The children clearly express a view that, should adults seek their opinion, their contributions would also have validity. Their call is for inclusion rather than autonomy:

> Kids should have a say in some things and adults aren't always right.

> We are not all babies, we are capable to do a lot more than they think.

In seeking a level of acknowledgement, the children also identify their unrecognized contributions within the context of the limits of childhood:

> Kids work just as hard as they do and that we do it for free. :)

> Children think outside the square, they think about all the possibilities and they think about how to make places fun for everyone. Children are funny and thoughtful and can have great ideas that will help not only children but everyone in the community.

Their awareness of these limits of children, particularly in terms of decision-making powers, is clearly expressed. Their seeking of acknowledgement is considered and contextualized by awareness that their contributions may not result in concrete action, but that this should not diminish their right to express a view:

> Children understand that everyone has different opinions and that even if you are asked about your opinion it doesn't always mean that your idea is going to happen. It is still nice to ask them for their ideas and ask them for their thoughts and maybe some ideas can happen.

As evidenced by the above commentary, many of the identified themes bear similarities in intent, perspective and sentiment. These comments 'that rhyme' from a range of educational contexts across the globe reflect a willingness on behalf of children to be involved in a more authentic and collaborative educational experience with their leaders, the adults. However, the contrasting views of children perpetuated by adult inaction over many decades are possibly summarized by the following two perspectives, one that reinforces a perception of disrespect – 'I dunno, they [adults] probably wouldn't listen' – and one that highlights the infrequency of consultation: 'When children are consulted they are asked to share their opinions on a topic. When they are asked for their ideas they feel included and proud that their ideas are getting heard'.

Discussion

Through the exploration and explanation of children's views using the children's own words on subjects of their choosing, this research represents an appreciation of the power in involving children themselves in developing an understanding of childhood. By presenting such evidence, this study provides an impetus for a broadening of teaching practice that embraces rather than assumes the range of a child's knowledge and perspectives. While Kane and Chimwayange (2014: 54) assert that 'for teachers to develop new ways of supporting student learning, they must gain access to student perspectives', the reticence by teachers to adopt such a method may be founded on a perceived lack of evidence. By considering the commentary provided in this article, educators might seek to confirm our assertions with their own students. By suspending their pre-existing assessments of student capacity and engaging with their perspectives, teachers may reveal a positive resource that will enhance the learning and teaching process: the student voice.

The ideas evident in the above commentaries can be thematically categorized further if investigating other issues relating to the school experience. However, in the context of this article, the commentaries represent clear examples of children's perspectives of how adults perceive their capacity (Francis and Lorenzo, 2002; Gilliam and Bales, 2001). These responses plainly have broader implications beyond the scope of this article, which seeks to present children's perspectives in the context of voice-inclusive practice. This research demonstrates that children, when asked, have the capacity to express their often hidden views of their world, in turn supporting

voice-inclusive practice. However, it is not enough simply to promote voice-inclusive practice for experienced teachers to change their approach. They must first experience and appreciate the power of children's perspectives in action.

The key professional error being made by many teachers is to oversimplify the capacity of their students (Kane and Chimwayange, 2014; Sanders and Mace, 2006). The commentary provided in this article demonstrates the extent of this error, providing examples from children in their own words. Whilst the challenges facing teachers in contemporary classrooms are well documented, there is often an underappreciation of what is required of students in school contexts and how they view it. Students must attend to many curricular, behavioural and social expectations, continually, throughout each school day. The curriculum is strategically segmented to include breaks and a range of communicative events, where students either lead or are being led. Alongside these constant pedagogical changes are the varying expectations of different teachers across the curriculum. The expectations of teachers can change from one class to the next, and can fluctuate depending on the teacher's perception of the student. Through the incorporation of voice-inclusive practice in education, shared outcomes can be better achieved, as well as demonstration and greater acknowledgement of children's rights within education as applied to practice.

The propensity for teachers to adopt the approaches used by others in order to 'fit in', whether they are effective or not (Edwards and Watts, 2004), remains a pedagogical concern in many settings. Voice-inclusive practice is underpinned by an environment where the children feel free to participate at a level of their choosing. Voice-inclusive practice incorporates a range of communication modes that are accessible and understandable, and ensure that the children can participate at their own chosen level, but first an acceptance of a philosophy of inclusion is required. Many teachers continue to select strategies that are reliant on the hierarchical maintenance of control and power. Traditional strategies remain the method of choice for many practitioners for reasons that are also discounted by the literature, but are seemingly justifiable in the field. None will ever support a voice-inclusive practice approach. As a starting point, an acknowledgement of the information presented throughout this article will provide an opportunity for the already highly skilled members of the teaching profession to move beyond the traditional approaches towards a pedagogy that better seeks and acts on children's expressed needs, bringing forth voice-inclusive practice.

Declaration of conflicting interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Funding

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