4 *Practitioner's Response to Manifesto 2*

Promoting Children's Voices

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4.1 Introduction

The promotion of children's voices has a long history; from the days of John Dewey's democratic education (Dewey, 2000) through the work of Julia Flutter and Jean Rudduck (Rudduck and Flutter, 2000; Flutter and Rudduck, 2004) to present-day efforts to help children articulate their visions for the future of their world. In response to the manifesto about empowering children to release their voices and celebrate the art of the possible, honest reflections are shared about classroom practices in both the UK and India. These are just two examples, and we call on the reader to reflect on their own situations and articulate what it is that allows children to have agency in other contexts too.

Here are some questions provoked by Julia Flutters' manifesto (Chapter 3):

- How do we convey the main points raised in the manifesto to others?
- How do we champion children's voices in adult-dominated domains where age is seen as the defining sign of adequacy?
- How do we ensure that in the process of championing the voices of young people, we do not silence others?
- How can we create classrooms that facilitate collaborations between teachers' and pupils' voices, and how can we ensure that this is replicated in wider society?

4.2 Practitioner Wisdom from Cambridge, UK

You would be hard pushed to find a teacher who does not want to promote the voices of the children with whom they work. Those who

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work with children, and take the time to listen to them, soon realise their little voices are in fact not so little. These little voices are fundamental if one wants to consider an education system that attends to the whole child, exploring learning in a multifaceted and multidimensional way, with an appreciation for the different skills children bring and acquire, beyond or alongside their academic development. We all have teaching moments that can only be described as magic; I know for me, these have always been centred on the promotion of children voices, whether intentionally promoted or the result of children's sheer determination to be heard! I remember a singing assembly led by our headteacher, Dr James Biddulph. A child came up to him and said, 'Mr Biddulph, I'm not allowed to sing because it's against my culture. . . . My dad told me not to sing because we do not sing at home, it is haram.' As a result of this small interaction, the school made a commitment to ensuring children's voices – their ideas, feelings, thoughts, worries, joys and so on – were central to our thinking, planning and educational practices.

Box 4.1 Personal Reflections of a Teacher

After reading the manifesto, I was reflecting on how I incorporated children's voices into my own practices, and the challenges and difficulties I faced in doing so. I am proud of the classroom community I have fostered – one where all children are free to express their ideas, opinions and wants in an environment where they will be heard and respected. However, I have started questioning the authenticity of this process, and asking whose agency is really in play. For despite my influence, it is really the children who are the driving force within this environment. Their ideas on inclusion are often more developed or concrete than my own – offering suggestions for how to include children who are reluctant to speak, or exploring alternatives to verbal engagement, or showing an appreciation for the different facets of participation. It has become apparent to me that the promotion of children's voices is the promotion of all voices, and a vital step towards inclusion inside and beyond the classroom. The specific messages conveyed by young people such as Greta Thunberg are invaluable, but so is what they represent;

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children's voices being expressed and listened to. If harnessed and showcased, representation of this sort will inspire the next generation of voices. In many cases, these voices are already present in our classrooms; they are now just waiting for their 'stage'. This stage does not have to be global, like Greta Thunberg's; in many cases, the promotion of voices on the school stage is a good starting point. Our classrooms are the perfect place to foster these voices – who knows where they will end up?

The chapter provokes interesting questions for educators. Firstly, it raises concerns about the presence of children's voices in otherwise adult domains. Some issues are undoubtably age sensitive. And yet, in most cases, they also touch on ideas or themes that are accessible and suitable for children. How do we, as educators and adults, make these conversations appropriate and accessible for children. Relatedly, how do we then ensure these voices, once expressed, are not only championed but used to make change? Children's voices should not be used in tokenistic ways, and their insights should be combined with, or engaged by, other adult voices. We need to further explore ways of including children in key discussions and ensure their voices are used as catalysts for change.

In order to help answer these questions, a case study from the University of Cambridge Primary School (UCPS) is explored; key pedagogical approaches and their impact on children's voice are outlined, with suggestions for future implementation. Then, a case study from Dhun, India, is explored, presenting an exciting opportunity to rethink school design.

Let's start by exploring a case study illustrating the promotion of children's voices in school decisions through a 'Class Congress'.

Class Congress

Title

Class Congress: An Embedded Curriculum to Release Voices

Context

The curriculum at the UCPS has been specifically designed to incorporate numerous pedagogical approaches that aim to promote pupil voice, creating autonomous learners. The school aims to help learners

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develop strong academic foundations and a love of learning. It also strives to cultivate compassionate citizens who are able to respectfully share and discuss their ideas and opinions.

Curriculum Design

At the UCPS, learning is anchored to, and focuses on, five key values – empathy, courage, trust, respect and gratitude – while still ensuring that all curricular demands and government expectations were adhered to. Beyond imparting knowledge, the school aims to harness the natural curiosity and creativity of children to create lifelong learners with the confidence to ask questions and solve problems. The school designed its curriculum around key pedagogical approaches, one of which is 'oracy and dialogue'. Our focus on oracy and dialogue is embedded throughout the school, starting in lesson planning and teaching approaches, and every stage of a child's development. We also include children in debates around what they would like their education to include. The school believes that children must be taught how to actively engage in discussion and debate.

This begins with the integration of 'talk agreements' that are discussed and built on by students, and continues with the introduction of 'talk roles'. A talk agreement is a set of expectations about ways of engaging in a pair or in a group. For example a basic starting point would be that children look at each other when they are talking together, or take turns and don't talk over one another. This ensures that children have an appreciation for the different ways to engage in talk and that they understand its multifaceted nature.

Classroom practices and learning also promote discussion, with children exposed to different conversational formats, such as triads, talk partners, larger-group discussions and whole-class discussions. Children are encouraged to be brave in their ideas. Classrooms and learning spaces are created to facilitate discussion, ensuring children are free to express their ideas in safe spaces, knowing their ideas will be met with respect. In line with this, the teaching staff are also encouraged to talk and debate, knowing their perspectives will be listened to and respected. Even the physical layout of the school creates spaces for children and adults to engage in dialogue; the learning street (the name for the corridor) acts as an extension of each classroom, connecting different form and age groups, and thereby creating spaces where children who ordinarily would not interact can come together, learn

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and interact. The use of these spaces changes day by day, offering flexibility to our educators and learners, a factor which in itself promotes the importance of pupil voice.

What We Did

In all schools, development is an ongoing process. In 2022, following discussions with children, and after our headteacher, Dr James Biddulph, visited schools in Europe as part of the Erasmus project, the school decided to trial 'Class Congress'. Class Congress is in part a re-envisioned school council, but one that ensures *all* children can have a say. School councils have been commonplace in UK primary schools for decades, but their utility is being questioned, and tweaks are being made to the format. In the typical school council, two people from each class are voted to represent the group, ensuring that the same children, and thus the same voices, are represented. Others are therefore not given the opportunity to develop these skills.

Class Congress was devised as a way to overcome this exclusion and ensure all children are given the space to air their ideas. Class Congress involves weekly sessions between all children and the senior leadership team. As the UCPS is a large school, Class Congresses have been arranged so that each Congress contains one class from each year group. This ensures continuity between each Congress and allows for a range of ideas to be explored. Prior to the Congress, the children in each class decide on two issues or ideas that they want to discuss as a school. Two children are then selected to present the ideas to the Congress. Class teachers are given autonomy over this process, ensuring that all children are given the opportunity over the year. In the Class Congress, all children sit in a circle to promote open discussion and the idea of unity. The representatives from each class then stand up and share their ideas. All ideas are written up on the board, and when all classes have shared their ideas, the children vote for the ideas they want to discuss. All children are then free to stand up and speak, provided certain ground rules are met: only one speaker at a time, speakers must stand when talking and speakers must aim to build on the ideas of previous speakers. It is important that the children are also able to see the impact of their suggestions and discussions, so school leaders ensure that decisions are followed through on, or, when they cannot be taken forward, reasons are given to the children. So far, I am yet to come across an instance when children have failed

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to comprehend the constraints of the school, showing the value of open communication.

Implications

Overall, the establishment of a Class Congress has been a success, with all children in my class, and the wider school, engaged and excited about getting their say on the running of the school. Although the Class Congress structure is still new, and I am sure it will be reinvented over the years to suit the needs of different cohorts, there are several factors behind its success. Firstly, teachers authentically believe in the idea. The UCPS fosters a community where staff are willing to give things a go, which is essential for getting new ideas off the ground. Teacher autonomy was an essential factor in the success of the project, for empowering teachers means empowering children too. The second factor aiding the smooth implementation of the Class Congress was the fact that the school already had a well-established oracy and dialogue curriculum. Children had already been taught the skills necessary to engage in discussions, and the routines and expectations around talk were embedded into everyday school life. This meant that instead of having to teach these skills, children only needed to be taught to apply them in a new setting, with a few minor tweaks. If Class Congress, or a similar project, was being rolled out in a school without a structured and embedded oracy curriculum, additional modelling of expectations would be required.

The UCPS shows how children's voices can be made central to the development of the curriculum and wider school practices. The case study highlights the importance of explicitly teaching children the skills they need to engage in debates as well as showing the impact that children can have when they know their voices are truly valued. As long as it is revised and developed in line with changing school needs, Class Congress will continue to be a success.

Although thousands of miles away, the aims of the Dhun School for Now in India are similar to those of the UCPS, albeit using different approaches to cultivating and promoting pupil voices.

Dhun School for Now

Title

Project Dhun: An Education That Connects

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Context

Project Dhun aims to create a 500-acre neighbourhood in suburban Jaipur, India, combining working, learning and recreation spaces. The Dhun School for Now is a K–12 school (ages five to eighteen) that draws inspiration from nature, and aims to solve future problems through experimental project-based learning. When complete, the school will cater for 420 learners from numerous local communities, fostering intercultural collaborations and knowledge exchanges.

The geographical location of the school has given rise to a new view of learning. The school is surrounded by four separate villages and embraces the knowledge systems and perspectives found in each. It is located near Dhun's regenerated land bank and is thus the perfect place to learn from the natural environment. Although in its infancy, the school has already worked with forty learners; two of whom have been recognised in junior entrepreneur competitions, and five learners have written a book based on their distinct cultural community experiences. The school is clearly developing pupils and promoting their voices. So, how can these practices be embedded into schools worldwide?

Curriculum Design

The school is being developed with pupil voice as central to the curriculum. The school is anchored around three core pillars: Self, Community and Planet. These pillars aim to foster a regenerative and interconnected outlook on education (detailed later), empowering educators and children to find their voice and focus on community engagement. They work in conjunction:

- The pillar of Self focuses on nurturing individual students' agency, autonomy and mastery. It empowers students to become self-directed learners, cultivating a sense of purpose and competence. Children's learning focuses on empowerment, ensuring that pupils understand their skill sets and motivations.
- The pillar of Community emphasises the importance of collaboration, empathy and social responsibility. Students form deep relationships with their peers, teachers and the broader community. They learn to value diversity, to leverage the community's collective wisdom, and contribute positively to the well-being of others. This is achieved through positive staff role modelling, and by ensuring that learning is centred on collaborative projects.

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- The pillar of Planet instils in students an appreciation for the environment and a sense of stewardship. It promotes sustainable practices, ecological awareness and a commitment to preserving and regenerating the natural world. Students develop an understanding of the interconnectedness between human actions and the health of the planet. This is achieved by ensuring that all learning is situated and relevant.

Educational Spaces Re-Envisioned?

To pilot these aims, the school set up creative, inclusive spaces for learning, offering opportunities for young minds to learn and develop alongside their peers and educators. The role of the teacher was evolved into the idea of a 'facilitator'. Facilitators act as mentors, encouraging and promoting freedom and experimentation, understanding and nurturing the interest and pathways of learners. The pilot scheme was developed from looking at more than forty schools globally and following some key themes and pedagogical approaches, including the following:

- *Foundational learning*: a focus on the development of fundamental knowledge and skills
- *Nature lab*: learning scientific concepts through immersive experiences in nature, including farming, nature walks and field trips
- *Free play and gymnastics*: fostering bodily intelligence and creativity through unstructured place and gymnastics
- *Space making*: engaging and participating in design processes to shape and optimise learning environments
- *Nook*: enhancing learning through projects and hands-on exploration, as well as critical thinking
- *Studio*: integrating arts into the learning journey and stimulating creativity and expression

Implications

Developing a school from the ground up – like the Dhun School – is a luxury that many of us do not have. However, aspects of the founding principles can be embedded into existing school systems. While not everyone has a 'Nature lab', we do all have access to the natural environment, whatever this might look like. While we do not all have

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access to a 'Studio', we all have classrooms that we can use in new or creative ways. The emphasis needs to be placed on how we can adapt our spaces and resources to work for us. This requires creativity, and may mean adapting our preconceived views of education, but the impacts could be invaluable.

Other curricular approaches, such as ensuring that learning is place based and relevant (starting with local knowledge and then extending outward), can be incorporated into any curriculum design. Building flexible learning journeys around individuals is key to building student confidence, voice and agency.

One of the really interesting things about the Dhun School is its focus on individualised learning. This learner-led approach, often referred to a child-led learning, is not a new concept, but it is typically found early in the education system and then pushed out as curricular demands increase. However, as the Dhun School demonstrates, a curriculum centred on children's interests is an important step in fostering pupil voice. Where governmental constraints are in place, it is our role to find ways to ensure child-led learning still has a place in our classrooms. The Dhun School and its pedagogical approaches, offer a possible approach for this.

From these two case studies, we can see that education is increasingly focused on promoting children's voices; children are no longer passive participants in their learning journeys. And, at the same time, both studies show that education practices cannot be 'one size fits all' – there are numerous ways to promote children's voices.

4.3 Reflections on a Manifesto

As educators, it can feel like we have an endless list of tasks to help children for their next adventure. It starts with teaching letters and numbers and moves on to reading and complicated equations. These skills are invaluable. But developing them in isolation is not enough. As educators, we are here to do much more. We are here to help children develop and form their own ideas. We need to ensure they are equipped with the skills and knowledge to make their voices heard – something that starts within education systems.

The importance of children's voices is becoming more apparent. In schools, teachers, teaching assistants and school leaders have the unique opportunity to spend every day with groups of children. Through this,

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we get to know the characteristics of individuals, their interests, worries and joys; the ways they learn, how they struggle and the things that matter to them. It is this unique social relationship, different from any other, in any other context in which children live their lives, that affords educators with something which we have referred to as practitioner wisdom. And wisdom is strengthened through dialogue and learning with and from one another. The examples are there; it is now our job to learn from each other, combining and adapting practices with our own expertise. Classrooms across the world are bursting with young voices wanting to be heard. No one has better ideas about education than those who are experiencing it, and, having read the preceding manifesto, I believe that education systems should not be designed without consulting those who engage in them. It is our role and responsibility to champion these voices; we know their importance, and it is time to make sure that everyone else does too.

As teachers, we aim to empower the children and young people we work with. We are already hearing their voices in our classrooms and making sure they are given the space to express their ideas. But we need to take this further. We need to ensure their voices are having influence outside of school. This starts by truly valuing their voices and ideas, and ensuring pupils can see the influence their ideas have had. This will look different in different settings, from leading open discussions on current topics to including children in key school decisions; the possibilities are endless.

Over to You

Whether focusing on issues that are directly relevant to them – classroom expectations or their own learning journey – or on large-scale issues, such as climate change, children's views are often insightful. They might present a more innocent view of the world, free from the prejudices we bring as adults. And yet, their voices are also full of new insights that we, as adults, sometimes miss. This makes children the ideal voices for change.

In her manifesto, Julia Flutter describes a vision in which schools include children meaningfully, not tokenistically, in discussions about education, their lives, communities and the world. It is a clarion call to counter myopic views about childhood, children and their education. Children already have a voice; we just need to create systems in which

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they can be heard and, importantly, acted upon. As we end this practitioner's response, we invite the reader to reflect on the following questions, drawing from their own wisdom and practices, in their own classrooms, schools and social, cultural and educational contexts:

- Where are children heard in your school? Where are they not?
- How can you develop ways in which children can challenge the status quo without classrooms and schools deteriorating into chaos?
- How can we draw on children's nuanced understanding of the world and learn from and with them?

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