



Wee Voices

Learning Point:
Lessons from Action Research.



With kind support from



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Introduction

The idea behind Wee Voices was first conceived in 2008 and is collaboration between Fife Council, the Children's Parliament and the Scottish Pre-school Play Association (SPPA).

The proposed aim of the project is to develop a creative Children's Rights programme for the early years.

Before embarking on a full development phase we wanted to first test the relevance of introducing Children's Rights approaches into an early years setting. A period of Action Research to test relevance, methods of engagement and direction for future development took place in May/June 2010 in association with Aberdour Playgroup in Fife.

This initial investigatory phase was funded by the Scottish Commissioner for Children & Young People (SCCYP) and supported by The University of Edinburgh through research carried out by Naomi Maynard, as part the dissertation element to her Msc in Social Research. Throughout the process the Project team has been aided by Sue Gutteridge who was commissioned to act as a 'critical friend'.

This document is a **Learning Point** from this initial investigatory phase and will be used to further develop **Wee Voices** in the future.



Background

Wee Voices as a concept was formed in 2008 as an expression of the three partners' shared belief of young children as active agents in their own lives.

We see it as following on from the Wee Democracies project conducted in 2008 by the Children's Parliament.

Central to the vision of the "Wee Voices" project is a firm belief that children of all ages have a right to have their voices heard in matters that concern them, be it family life, the services they use or in the wider community. Within the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) a child is defined as '*every human being below of the age of 18*', however young children (ages 0-5) are often excluded from full participation in the language of children's rights. Wee Voices seeks to address this issue and examine what a children's rights approach would look like in practice.

By embedding an understanding of children's rights and participation within the early years and family settings, we hope that children will gain the confidence to voice their opinions and participate meaningfully in decisions in group settings and in family life. We hope that adults will gain both an understanding of the importance of children's rights and the UNCRC and how these apply to family life and within early years settings, as well as a recognition of children's expertise and capabilities.

Context

An interest in developing an early years children's rights programme is in fitting with both current academic and political climates. In what is called the 'new social studies of childhood', across several academic disciplines children are now being viewed as 'beings': competent, social agents often described as 'experts in their own lives'. This is in contrast to the previously dominant

discourse which portrayed childhood as a developmental stage predominately for preparation for adulthood (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998). This new understanding has led to a call to re-evaluate the relationship between children's rights and the early years. In the past young children were often excluded from the language of rights due to their levels of competency (Alderson, 2000). Some academics have put their energies into trying to prove young children are competent, whilst others have reflected that there is a need to redefine rights, emphasising the relational aspect of rights as opposed to seeing rights as solely concerning the autonomous individual (Archard, 1993). Through the activity-sessions it became clear that Wee Voices supports a relational understanding of children's rights.

Wee Voices is not unique in trying to develop an early years children's rights programme. Similar investigations and research has been conducted within kindergartens in Norway. This research evolved out of the very supportive Norwegian legislation which explicitly applies the UNCRC to the early years (See Bae, 2009 and Redding et al, 2008). The New Zealand government has also pro-actively embedded children's rights within their early year's curriculum whilst most notoriously a children's rights-based framework of practice has been cultivated within Reggio Emilia, situated in Northern Italy. Within the pre-schools of Reggio Emilia there is a strong rights-respecting ethos in which adults and children are co-learners who both value and respect each other's opinions and experiences (Moss, 2001).

Wee Voices seeks to build on the lessons learnt from these international projects whilst reflecting critically on their contextual nature, we are therefore aiming to contribute to knowledge within this field by developing a children's rights programme within a Scottish context. The development of this project fits within the ethos of the Early Years Framework (Scottish Government & Cosla,

2009). In addition Tam Baillie, Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People, is including children as young as four in his forthcoming 'Right Blether' consultation with a 'Wee Blether' focussing on the early years following in 2011. Within Fife, **Wee Voices** is located within a framework of participatory work with children and young people under the banner of the **Big Shout**. The **Big Shout** is a multi-agency partnership which seeks to provide and promote opportunities for children and young people to be involved in decision making processes (www.bigshout.com).



Wee Voices Action Research

Wee Voices has been guided in our thinking by the practice of the Children's Parliament and in the early years expertise of SPPA. The Children's Parliament has developed a thematic approach to working on children's rights with the under 14s, drawn from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). These are:

- Who we are
- Where we live
- Feeling safe and being cared for
- Freedom
- Health and Happiness
- Having our Say

During the period of action research **Wee Voices** tested three creative arts sessions around the themes 'who we are' and 'having our say' within Aberdour Playgroup developed and led by visual artist Rosie Gibson and theatre artist Rosie Fulton. Our researcher, Naomi spent four weeks within Aberdour evaluating the project and investigating the impacts of the artists' sessions on adult/child interactions.

The Playgroup

Forty-two children are registered at Aberdour playgroup, with a maximum of eighteen attending at once. The playgroup takes children from 2.5- 5 years. Over two-thirds of these children are able to access funding from Fife Council to cover five sessions at the playgroup. The majority of the families using the playgroup were locally based, coming from either the affluent area of Aberdour or neighbouring coastal towns. They were predominately Scottish; however there were a few European families who accessed the playgroup.

Naomi spent a week within the playgroup before the sessions began to familiarise herself with the atmosphere and ethos of the playgroup. She observed that Aberdour playgroup operated a very child-centred approach. The children had a lot of independence within the playgroup as the sessions were dominated by time for 'free-choice' play; the staff did not rush to intervene with the children's play but were naturally alert and attentive. The staff were eager to react to the children's interests.

There remained a clear structure built into the playgroup with session being bookended by 'Circle Time', a chance for introductions and children to share news, and 'Story time'. The staff appeared keen to foster a sense of belonging within the playgroup with routines and rules being organically developed within the playgroup.

This was particularly evident in the snack area where children seemed to understand the 'rules' and waited their turn without needing adult intervention.

The three **Wee Voices** creative arts sessions were intended to test what additionality could be brought to children's and adult's experiences within the setting by introducing a children's rights dimension.

A critical reflexive approach has been taken to allow for learning and development opportunities to occur.

Session 1: Photographic portrait session

This session was designed around the theme '*who we are*'.

The first of the three sessions, this was designed as a way to create a space for the artists, staff and children to get to know each other. A photographic studio was set up with rails of dressing up clothes, hats and accessories as well as a back drop, a large empty picture frame and a camera. The session began by children entering the 'studio' (set up in the playgroup's carpeted room often used as an entrance hall) and choosing their costumes and posing for photographs. As the morning progressed this session evolved as some children began to take ownership through dressing-up the staff and taking less formal photographs.



This session was very age-appropriate. An exciting atmosphere was created as collaboration developed between the staff and children and between the children themselves. The staff were able to see different aspects of the children they already felt they knew well. One staff member commented they '*felt like a little child*'; this activity created a space where role reversal's were possible as several children took on the responsibility of 'styling' the adults!



Learning Point: This session could be a valuable tool for adults and children to get to know one another at the beginning of a new session.

This activity was easily reproduced within the playgroup during which the children took further ownership of the project by getting behind the camera. This indicates the value of repeating activities. One of the staff also used this new free-choice activity as a space to spend quality time with one of the quieter girls and as a way to facilitate a different sort of interaction with this child.

Learning Point: This session could be revisited to enable children to explore themes of personal identity and individuality and the passing of time.

Session 2: The Magic Potion Factory

This session was designed around the theme '*having our say*'.

A Magic Potion Factory was set up on three tables covered with glittery paper within the main playroom. The factory was divided into three progressive stations. When the children entered the factory they were given a sparkly crown to wear: this was to show who was in the factory, which could only hold three to four children at a time.



At the first station the children could add dry ingredients such as glitter and coloured powders to their bottle. At the second station they added wet ingredients, including washing up liquid which made their potions bubbly. Lastly there was the chance to make and decorate labels for their potions.

The factory was set up alongside the playgroup's usual activities. This meant that children could dip in and out of the process. The majority of the children had a go at making a potion during the session. What was particularly interesting was the level of engagement the children had with the activity- some children spent up to 45 minutes making their potion, and were keen to make a second potion!

Learning Point: The *process* of the session was highly engaging for the children and offered many high quality learning experiences which children could encounter independently.

The organisation of the activity demonstrated the value of meaningful constraints within the possibilities of freedom, choice and autonomy. There were clear 'rules' surrounding the factory, with only three to four children being able to make potions at once. The size of utensils for mixing the materials and the small bottle size also helped to determine the quantities of materials used. However within the structure of the factory the children were able to make any potions they fancied: no two potions looked the same!



Learning Point: This demonstrates the value of this session to enabling children's exploration of free choice and individuality; Key concepts to build on within a rights framework.

The playgroup was easily able to adapt this session once the artists had left. A week after the original session three of the boys asked Naomi about their potions. The playgroup had saved these so the children were re-introduced to their potions. They were excited to

find they were still bubbly! This led onto the staff converting their usual craft area into a small-scale factory, using similar materials. When the bottles ran out the children were encouraged to work together to make a giant potion in the last 2 litre bottle. This activity was very messy and lots of fun. The children who were not at the original session were also happy to join in.



This session was originally conceptualised by adults as a device for enabling children to express their views on what they'd like to change: the idea was that the children would pretend their potions 'did' something. This concept was briefly introduced at the beginning of the session and more overtly whilst the children were writing their labels when the artists asked 'So what does your potion do?' The Wee Voices pre-conceived idea was that this would create an opportunity for children to 'have a say'. When asked some of the children replied that they didn't know what their potion did, whilst others responded that their potion made everyone blue, or turned people into flying rabbits. When the playgroup re-ran the session the staff allowed the children to describe what their potions did at 'Story Time'. One girl explained that her potion could make her a puppy as this is what she was hoping her parents would buy her for her fifth birthday.

Learning Point: Abstract concepts to provide a platform for 'children's voices' were not appropriate for this age group. For this age group, the important element of this session was the learning that they can express free choice, individuality and the effect that they can have on the external world; This sets the groundwork for later theoretical concepts to be introduced.

On a less literal level there were other ways that this session facilitated the children's voices. Their levels of engagement and enjoyment at seeing different colours and textures mix together 'say' a lot about what young children want to do and why. The process was also set-up in such a way that the children could take control of the activity and lead it in several different directions.

This finding should influence the way other activities were run within the playgroup. Firstly staff could respond to the children's enthusiasm around creating and mixing materials and set up other areas, such as the sand or water stations, to enable these sorts of activities. Secondly the session has provided an example of how activities should be set up in such a way to allow the children to take control of their playtime. For example the craft area could be rearranged so that children have more choices and control over what their creations look like by selecting their own paper and materials.

Learning Point: This session also offered an opportunity for adults – staff and parent helpers – to witness how skilful young children can be in directing their own play and learning. This understanding could lead to the playgroup being set up differently to enable children to be much more self-directed.

Session 3: The 'Little Man' Narrative

In this session, the artists again created a space where adults and children could interact and get to know one another and also express their voices through various mediums. In groups of six-eight the children and staff were introduced by the artists to a story about the Little Man who was in need to a home. This led to an adventure around the room to different 'places' such as the forest, the beach and a castle. At these places the children and staff were given the opportunity to draw on the Little Man's paper suitcase what presents they'd like to give him for his new home. The artists also used a digital recorder to capture the sounds at each of these places. These sounds were played back to the group. At each of the places the artists illustrated which person would give the Little Man a gift by using the framed photographs from the used the portrait session. This caused much delight! The session concluded with the group deciding where the Little Man should make his new home.



The staff did not re-run this session in this session in the following weeks. However when interviewed by Naomi about this session, one of the staff reflected that she had used this narrative technique before but as a way to calm down the children after lunch, she explained that now she would use this activity as a way to get the children's ideas!

Learning Point: The narrative session did not work so well with the younger children who found it hard to follow and engage with.

It was lovely to observe that the older children, who actively engaged in the fantasy, were eager to include the other children. Whilst the story was structured by the artists, within this structure there was a freedom for the group to take ownership of the activity and introduce new elements to the story: one girl introduced a dog to the fantasy which 'resurfaced' within the playgroup a week later!

Learning Point: This type of narrative session could be further developed to provide a greater opportunity for children to direct the session by incorporating Mosaic Approach (Clark & Moss, 2001) techniques such as cameras, map making and journals.



Children's Rights workshop

In addition to the creative sessions that took place within the playgroup, **Wee Voices** also ran a short interactive workshop for staff and parents on children's rights.

This workshop was used to introduce the topic of children's rights and to open a dialogue of how the participants saw this as applying to young children. This session provoked a lot of dialogue about some of the conflicts that arise within the discourse of rights – especially in relation to young children – that of freedom versus protection in particular.

The main theme that emerged from the workshop session for both staff and parents was the need to take time to really listen to what children are actually saying, rather than making assumptions and placing their adult understandings onto it.

A parent commented that the workshop had '***challenged her day to day actions [with her daughter]***'

Due to some difficulties with the scheduling for the research work, this workshop took place at a point where some of the creative sessions with children had already taken place. Ideally the session for adults would have been scheduled for a time prior to the creative programme beginning within the setting.

Learning Point: This session was really valuable for opening the dialogue around rights with the adults involved in the playgroup. This would have had a greater impact if it had taken place prior to any work with the children and to use it to encourage greater parent involvement. Ensuring greater partnership between home and playgroup in fostering a children's rights approach should be a focus for Wee Voices in the future.



Critical reflections

Following the practical research work within the playgroup setting, a meeting was held to allow open discussion to take place around some of the learning that had taken place for the adults involved. This was an important session as it created a space for us to think critically about what had been experienced by those most directly involved and the impact that it had had on their thinking. It also enabled us to reflect on how to improve and further develop the work.

Staff reflections:

The staff commented that the sessions were:

Absolutely brilliant! They were really, really good! It wasn't what I was expecting, they were much more simplified. It fitted in really well with the playgroup!

Really good actually! I thought the children all got involved... at first they were a bit wary but as the session progressed everyone felt confident!

'I think it has kind of opened my eyes and made me think, 'what can we do to make sure they're having as much input as possible?' because at the end of the day it's their playgroup! I think it's something that any job I go into for the future I will remember the activities and will think 'what can I do here to make these children's voices heard?'



All the staff explained that the Wee Voices project had reminded them they needed to *'take more time to sit and listen'* to the children. One reflected that learning about children's rights it had *'added a whole extra dimension'* to her way of working as well as becoming:

More aware of their individuality and who they are and that the children have rights and things to say.

Throughout this meeting it became clear that there was no clear shared understanding of what a 'children's rights approach' to working with young children means in practice. A question we kept coming back to was *what is the difference between a child-centred approach and a children's rights approach?* This is a question which is not easily answered.

A child centred approach is based on the role of practitioner as the provider of understandings, usually through the use of observations to 'scaffold' a child's learning. For example, when several children were observed making balls from playdoh, the playgroup arranged a trip to the nearby park to play with balls and other sports equipment. This demonstrates a desire by the practitioners to meet the needs and interests of the children but it is based solely on their interpretation of the children's behaviour. In arguing for greater participation of young children Lloyd-Smith and Tarr (2000) note that the *reality experienced by children and young people in educational settings cannot be fully comprehended by inference and assumption*. This, perhaps, offers an understanding of where the difference between the two approaches lies.

Learning Point: Further investigation is needed into the theoretical discourse regarding children's rights and child centred approaches. This in itself provides a legitimate purpose for the Wee Voices work.

Although no-one was able to clearly articulate what the difference is, there was agreement that there was a difference and that the process of the action research had changed their views of the children and the type of experiences and opportunities that could be provided to ensure children had their say within the playgroup setting.



Learning Point: The reflective element of the Wee Voices process has been useful to open dialogue about how to develop a children's rights approach for young children in practice. This discursive element should be woven into future developments for the project.

Conclusions

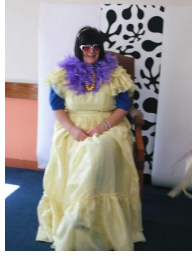
This Action Research project for **Wee Voices** offered several areas of learning and these will all be incorporated into the future direction of the work.

The creative sessions will be redesigned based on the practical lessons learnt, the most obvious being that there were different children at each session therefore it is important that either the sessions were free-standing, or run over a longer period of time so each child had a go.

Issues regarding the timing of the programme, the optimum use of the workshop for adults and ensuring a greater involvement of parents are also key learning points.

In the long term cultivating a rights-respecting framework of practice takes time; our research suggests that engaging staff and parents in children's rights is a vital component to the success of the project.





Thanks

Our heartfelt thanks go to the children, parents and staff at Aberdour Playgroup for committing and contributing to this piece of work – your enthusiasm was tremendous!

Thanks also to SCCYP for funding this element of the Wee Voices work; to Rosie Gibson and Heather Fulton for devising such stimulating sessions for the children and to Sue Gutteridge for her guiding thoughts and critical reflection.

The project team would also like to express their thanks to our student researcher, Naomi Maynard. Naomi spent four weeks within Aberdour evaluating the project and investigating the impacts of the artists' sessions on adult/child interactions. Naomi's contribution to the work has been invaluable. Her academic dissertation is available on request.



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