

Chapter 14

Commentary on Chapter 13



Finding Voice in Practices

Deborah James

How can I become a mother in history if I have no cultural frame in which to history my transition?

(E. Fletcher Robbins, personal communication, June 7, 2019)

Abstract I begin with an obscure starting point to discuss Chap. 13 (Recchia, Fellner and Fincham), which explores rights-based practice in a toddler room. Bear with me. My colleague Ellie Fletcher Robbins and I were preparing a grant application to explore transitions into motherhood in the context of serious mental illness. Our grant was rooted in Jonathan Lear’s anthropological exegesis of hope, which is based in the history of the North American Indigenous people, the Crow (Lear, 2006). Their survival depended on the elders’ capacity to learn from enigmatic stories in their own culture and their ability to listen to a younger member of their community. The youth successfully translated his catastrophic vision of the tribe’s future because it was infused with references to their traditional ways of knowing how *to be*. It turns out the survival of the Crow depended just as much on the community’s dialogic repertoire as it did on the individual’s vision or the collective response of the elders.

Keywords Dialogue · Narrative · Voice

I begin with an obscure starting point to discuss Chap. 13 (Recchia, Fellner and Fincham), which explores rights-based practice in a toddler room. Bear with me. My colleague Ellie Fletcher Robbins and I were preparing a grant application to explore transitions into motherhood in the context of serious mental illness. Our

D. James (✉)
Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK
e-mail: Deborah.James@mmu.ac.uk

© Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd. 2022
F. Press, S. Cheeseman (eds.), *(Re)conceptualising Children’s Rights in Infant-Toddler Care and Education*, Policy and Pedagogy with Under-three Year Olds: Cross-disciplinary Insights and Innovations 4,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-05218-7_14

153

grant was rooted in Jonathan Lear's anthropological exegesis of hope, which is based in the history of the North American Indigenous people, the Crow (Lear, 2006). Their survival depended on the elders' capacity to learn from enigmatic stories in their own culture and their ability to listen to a younger member of their community. The youth successfully translated his catastrophic vision of the tribe's future because it was infused with references to their traditional ways of knowing how *to be*. It turns out the survival of the Crow depended just as much on the community's dialogic repertoire as it did on the individual's vision or the collective response of the elders.

My purpose in storying theory in the context of my own practice is to engage you with an idea that voice is understood best when it is set within a dialogic frame that goes well beyond communicative interactions between people (Shotter, 2011). Ellie showed us the restrictions that cultures place on determining our being and our doing; a culture's history of practice lays down neural pathways in a collective psyche that set patterns for individual and collective responses in the here and now. Taking a dialogic perspective on children's rights permits different ways of seeing some of the apparent tensions in practice that were so engagingly depicted by Recchia, Fellner and Fincham in Chap. 13 relaying their own stories from the toddler room.

To expand on this idea, let's take a closer look at two central concepts in the chapter: agency and inclusion. Teachers are described in their struggle to reconcile the idealised vision of what rights-honouring practice should be like and the realities of their daily work life, with all the constraints placed on them by external and unnamed forces. Children are described as having their *true agency* restricted or even prohibited by the requirement to conform to the adult's structure. Practising agency through a right's perspective creates conflict and causes splits and separation. This is in sharp contrast to the concept of inclusion, which is framed by a string of words evoking positive pictures of togetherness. Both agency and inclusion are initially framed through other researchers' work and the authors then reflect on their practices and exemplify a mediation of the inclusion/agency binary that they set up (Egan, 1997). I wondered why the authors did not name their position in the research, which I assume was from practice—at least for Fincham and Fellner. I was wondering about the authority they attributed to the new knowledge they were creating by making their practices visible.

As they moved into an emic position, giving narrative evidence for the philosophy of their community of practice, the agency/inclusion binary became a shape by the inclusion of a third—the community. The separable roles assigned to community, teachers and children were used to define agency, and they were depicted in a facilitative space, purposed by a common goal, where identities were constructed and they learned how to be. This 3D space, with all its internal coherence and harmony, was then rather surprisingly defined in terms of *other*, "There is something shared within the community that is not shared with others...". Their position in relation to the *outside* created in my mind something like an impermeable boundary around the Centre.

My attention was drawn to the influence that the medical model had on structuring their observations. Before he entered the community, while on a home visit, the little boy at the centre of the story was described as having repetitive behaviours and *visual stimming* (author's emphasis), and their positional expertise was marked by contrast to the parents' lack of expertise, who were "not yet aware of the potential need for additional services". Lovely examples of child-centred, inclusive practices inside the community's space precede the reporting of more settled behaviour, but the teachers were still worried and anxious about the child's autistic traits. They described seeing his interest in other children as just another object of his play. These ways of seeing the boy and structuring the theory of his mind were not questioned. Their philosophy was "very different" to the behavioural therapists whose intensive reward/sanction intervention was definitely of an *other* variety. The outside intervention specialists were attributed with enabling the boy's progress in ways that led to them being able to recognise his development. His success and potential for development seemed to be the turning point in their ability to re-see his future and therefore persist with creative practices to include, and even be enchanted by, his different way of being. That is my view of it. The teachers saw it differently. For them, the turning point came in the moment when he asked for food, and it is easy to understand why given the context. Here is a boy, expressing his needs and making a choice—the space which became permeable created the conditions for him to find his voice.

And so, I return to Fellner's questions of how we negotiate working with a variety of perspectives and whose ideas of *rightness* or *justness* are prioritised. In my perspective, the clash of ideas, and the dilemmas they create, are the very reason border crossings are necessary for quality in research and practice. Not because they provide a source of expertise not otherwise available, but because they make us theorise much more deeply about our own perspective. Chap. 13 shows how generative that conflict can be and it paves the way for others to prioritise the production of relational-responsive knowledge over representational-referential knowledge (see Shotter, 2011).

More dialogic evidence on the relational work that permitted the permeability, so central to development here, would have been a boon, allowing us to witness the forays across the border, creating deeper insight into the movement that made this learning possible. What were the chinks that created connection for engagement? Knowing more about this community's dialogic repertoire is just as important as understanding the navigation of rights-based practices in the toddler room, and its effects on the boy or on the teacher-educators.

The framing of voice with choice and individual agency (evident here and in many other places) might restrict the reach of rights-talk in early childhood education. This talk, like all other talk, has its real power in setting anticipation for possible ways of being and doing. It is through *dialogue* with the concepts contained in the other (culture through artefacts in the material world, or people who embody the history and habits of a people group) that we expand our own understanding and create more space for others.

References

- Egan, K. (1997). *The educated mind: How cognitive tools shape our understanding*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lear, J. (2006). *Radical hope: Ethics in the face of cultural devastation*. Harvard University Press.
- Shotter, J. (2011). *Getting it: Witness-thinking and the dialogical...in practice*. Hampton Press.