

Empowering Children to Learn: An Exploratory Study Using a Philosophical Listening Tool (The Little Box of Big Questions 2)

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Abstract

A key function of educational psychologists is to promote empowering and cultivating learning environments that prepare children and young people for the twenty-first century. This study explores how children may be empowered to learn through the clarification of their daily lived experiences. Learning experiences are examined from the perspective of the children themselves, with a particular emphasis on metaphysical concepts. A listening tool was used to gather data: in-depth stories, experiences, motivations and beliefs about individual learning. Thematic analysis was applied to interviews, further promoting the 'voice of the child' and illuminating how children think about their own learning. Autonomy, experience and purpose are examined in the context of how children learn. This research aims to contribute towards the growing body of knowledge about how children learn. The findings may help to inform the work of educational psychologists and enhance the educational experiences of children and young people.

Keywords: voice of the child, listening to children and young people (CYP), empowerment of children and young people, spiritual listening, The Little Box of Big Questions 2 (LBBQ2)

Introduction

This paper will outline a brief review of the legislative context and specific literature linking the voice of the child to education. A listening tool designed for the use of educational psychologists (EPs) is examined and its findings discussed. Potential uses for some possible applications of the listening tool for children and young people (CYP) are indicated.

Legislative context

This research was conducted with CYP in an educational context and was guided by the legislation prevalent at the time. The Children Act (1989, 2004), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), SEN code of practice (2014) and the Children and Family Act (2014) all emphasise the moral and legal requirement to listen to children and acknowledge diversity. Articles 12 and 13 of the UNCRC (1989), in particular, stress that the protection and participation of CYP are mutually reinforcing rights. The emergence of legislation in 'the voice of the child' has inspired professionals such as EPs working in schools to find new ways to listen to children (Gersch & Lipscomb, 2012).

Listening to children

Listening to children is a vital aspect of high-quality teaching (Hattie, 2009) and promotes a more inclusive society. Normative Western models of child development have often seen adults underestimate children's capabilities (Freeman, 1998; Mayall, 2000; Smith, 2002). It therefore requires consideration that it may be challenging for some professionals working with children to set aside their assumptions and enter into non-biased dialogues with children (Kirby & Gibbs, 2006). Listening is a complex, two-way process, in which participation may be increased or decreased (Gersch & Lipscomb, 2014). Confronting any adult biases and ensuring adequate participation is therefore key to ensure meaningful, effective listening to children. This research aimed to listen, with high regard, to the 'voice of the child' and to empower CYP by taking their voices seriously.

Kelly's Personal Construct Theory further emphasises the importance of listening to CYP (Gersch & Lipscomb, 2014). A person's unique psychological approach determines the way they anticipate events, as well as what motivates, drives and influences them (Kelly, 1955). Helping children to validate their experiences may provide them with opportunities to express their ideas, develop life skills and interpersonal skills, make good decisions and essentially become agents in their own worlds. Recent psychological research incorporating the voices of children has demonstrated that the individual accounts of CYP's lived experiences can contribute meaningfully to knowledge in this field (Gersch, 2001; Gersch et al., 2008; Clark & Moss, 2011; Aubrey & Dahl, 2006).

Educational literature

Research has shown a decrease in the well-being of children, particularly in the UK (UNICEF 2007). There is a growing body of knowledge, discussed and scrutinised by EPs, on how education can be used to improve and enhance children's well-being and personal development, and to prepare them for life (Rotherham & Willingham, 2009). Approaches such as those described in The Learning Powered School (Claxton et al., 2011) have begun to be

used to design educational programmes based on psychological theory and listening to children. Such approaches focus on developing children's learning skills, resilience, resourcefulness, meta-learning, confidence and interpersonal skills. They shift the responsibility for learning to learn from the teacher to the learner, with a more personalised focus on the growth of the student's individual learning character. Such approaches are further supported by research that demonstrates that a focus on learning, rather than subject matter, has a positive impact on motivation, self-efficacy and achievement (Carpenter et al., 1989; Ames & Archer, 1988). These programmes oppose a traditional pedagogy that has been described as the 'banking model', due to its view of a student as an empty vessel to be filled with knowledge by the teacher (Friere, 1970). The current paper sought to explore more organic forms of pedagogy: educational alternatives that challenge reductionism and address human growth and learning uniquely.

In line with the humanistic psychological perspectives that children are experts in their own lives (Clark & Statham, 2005; Prout & James, 1997), this research gives precedence to the perspectives and voices of CYP. Previous research seeking to understand children has been influenced largely by research conducted 'on' rather than 'with' CYP (Darbyshire, 2000; Oakley, 1994). This study aims to contribute to the latter. We aspired to investigate how children engage with learning, through the evaluation of CYP's individual thoughts, motivations and views. We explored the notion that listening to the voices of children might help us to understand, and inform, both curricula and teaching methods that may improve how we educate our children.

The Little Box of Big Questions

This study utilises a listening tool conceptualised by Professor Irvine Gersch, which was further developed in collaboration with Anna Lipscomb, to explore children's individual beliefs and motivations to learn. Gersch conceptualised two listening tools: the Little Box of Big Questions 1 (LBBQ1) (Gersch and Lipscomb 2012) and the Little Box of Big Questions 2 (LBBQ2) (Gersch and Lipscomb 2014), for use by EPs and professionals working with children. The listening tools use metaphysical questions to stimulate meaningful, positive conversations with children that illuminate their beliefs, ideas and motivations. This paper used the LBBQ2, owing to its focus on learning. Gersch used the term 'philosophical listening' to describe how both tools listen to children's responses to metaphysical issues, and derive their essential drives, motivations, desires and the meanings they attach to their lives. Gersch has demonstrated these questions elicit useful, revealing responses and can reveal a clear connection between children's behaviour and their views about the world and learning (Gersch et al. 2014).

Research aim

The aim was to explore how the LBBQ2 may be used to listen to the learning experiences of children. This was with a view to shedding light on the inner resources of learning for children and how they may best be fostered to provide educational experiences that nurture confidence, self-belief, perseverance, conviction, integrity, self-questioning and resilience. Enhancing the well-being of CYP is central to this work.

Method

In this study, six children, aged between 10 and 14 years, were recruited from outer London primary and secondary schools. One girl and one boy were selected from each of Years 6, 8 and 9. The motivation for selecting this age range was that the children fell within the optimal age range for the LBBQ2. The sample was selected to be as heterogeneous as possible in terms of age, gender and cultural background.

Data was collected through a child-led discussion, using semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. The researcher introduced and explained the session. The LBBQ2 questions are printed on five separate learning cards. Each card has a 'big' question on one side and sub-questions or probes on the reverse, to assist the children in answering the 'big' question (see Appendix A). The discussion was conversational and open-ended. Children were invited to choose cards themselves; there was no particular order. The five 'big' questions are:

1. How do people learn things?
2. How do we find out new things?
3. Should you believe everything you hear or see?
4. What topics or lessons do you most love to learn about?
5. What sorts of things are special to you?

Following the discussion, children were encouraged to reflect and provide feedback on the session. Each session lasted approximately 45 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the interviewer. Data was read and re-read to identify themes in the way children spoke about their learning.

Thematic analysis (TA) was used to reduce, organise and interpret the data, without losing its context. TA is a systematic set of guidelines for analysing textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Theoretical freedom is a key feature of TA; it is independent of any particular epistemological standpoint. The following themes emerged as important in understanding how children learn, and the findings illustrated in the following section are a result of this procedure.

Findings

Overview

The following provides an overview of the children's responses to the learning questions from The LBBQ2. The names of the children have been anonymised for the purpose of this publication. The participant's beliefs and motivations to how they learn are summarized below:

- Autonomy: "I like to learn by myself."
- Experience: "I like to try new things and learn from my experiences."
- Purpose: "I like to learn things that are meaningful."

The following section explores the key themes and examines whether this information can improve our understanding of how children learn.

Autonomy

The data featured constructs of learner autonomy. Developing learner autonomy enhances the responsibility of the learner in evaluating their own learning, making it applicable to all aspects of life. Children showed an awareness of their responsibility and capabilities to learn:

Extract 1

The best way to learn new things is...well, if it's just something to discover by yourself then I would just learn it naturally. Eventually you'll just learn to do it, even if you don't know you will. (Camila)

Camila expresses an awareness of autonomy in learning, as well as self-belief in her ability to use it. Many children's statements showed a competence and motivation to learn autonomously.

Several children demonstrated an understanding of their personally initiated learning strategies and that applying them to a learning situation was a prerequisite for learning:

Extract 2

Like a lot of people are gonna tell me...you need to be learning this...but ultimately it's gonna be me that makes the decision to actually sit down and learn about something. (Kamal)

Kamal demonstrates a sense of agency or ownership in his learning. He is aware that, ultimately, it will be his decision to learn; that learning is his responsibility and that his personally initiated learning strategies will dictate his learning outcome. It therefore seems pragmatic to foster this ability.

Children referred to using their autonomy as a preferred learning method, rather than being dictated to or told information:

Extract 3

Well, sometimes you don't need to be taught new things, you just like do something or see someone do something and you'll just know, rather than just telling us what to write. (Sarah)

Sarah illuminates how children engage in the learning process. She suggests that learning does not have to be taught but rather assimilated by doing, observing or simply applying oneself. The children's statements demonstrated an inherent drive to construct their own knowledge from the information, a concept embodied by a student-centred approach to learning.

Many children reported that a positive, empathic and caring student–teacher relationship encouraged their autonomy and made them less fearful of criticism in the classroom.

Extract 4

My favourite teacher was the one that when I started school she pulled me out of my shell and made me more confident; she gave me more attention, and made me feel like I could ask for help, instead of feeling that I couldn't ask a teacher anything; she made me feel really appreciated. (Camila)

Camila implies that a positive student–teacher relationship can contribute to self-confidence, self-belief and ease the fear of failing. Implying that if teachers focus on boosting children's self-esteem and intrinsic worth, they will ultimately encourage children's efficacy and confidence in their abilities to learn. This may therefore be a key component in empowering children to learn.

In conclusion, whilst autonomy was the overarching theme, children clearly use their autonomy in unique and individual ways when learning. Children's natural tendency to learn provides an excellent resource for encouraging independent, autonomous learning traits. To help children assume greater control over their learning, they need to become aware of, and identify, any individual, existing or potential strategies they may employ. Supportive, facilitative pupil–teacher relationships appear equally critical in enhancing positive learning behaviour and children's belief in their own learning abilities.

Experience

There was evidence that children like to learn from their experiences: 'learning upon reflection of doing'. Many children expressed a preference to learn in relation to their own personal experiences:

Extract 5

I learn best when the teacher gives you models and then I can change the models to my own words or my own experiences, to understand it better. (Jordan)

Jordan implies that the best way to make sense of the learning material in the classroom is to interpret it in his own way, pointing to the role the learner plays in assimilating material presented to them and relating it to their own experiences.

Children highlighted how valuable their experiences are to their understanding.

Extract 6

I like to learn about new countries and stuff, and then when I go on holiday I can like make a checklist and go and experience all the things I have learned about. (Jordan)

Jordan refers to testing previously acquired knowledge through his experiences. Children may require their own experiences to be validated in order to become agents in their own worlds.

In conclusion, children perceive experience as an essential component of learning. They are aware that their experiences may influence how they interpret new material. The data supports the hypothesis that students approach new material in diverse ways. These findings suggest that children are aware of how their experiences influence how they learn and that they use their experiences to relate to new knowledge.

Purpose

Children emphasised the importance of meaningful learning and described this in terms of personal purpose (e.g., self-discovery), societal purpose (e.g., skills used for future career) and social purpose (e.g., relationships with others).

Personal purpose

Extract 7

I think it's really important for children to learn about themselves and things that will benefit them. I think kids can learn about things that will help them to be creative. For me, that has been especially important. It's my outlet: how I can express myself. (Kamal)

Kamal emphasises personal self-discovery, the importance of learning about the 'self': a concept congruent with Western culture. Kamal's statement suggests he believes it is important for children to understand themselves and how they can flourish individually.

Social purpose

Several children emphasised the importance of learning social aspects or self-transcendent goals, for example, learning to work with others:

Extract 8

I think the most important things for children to learn is to work together and get along with each other. (Marcus)

The children provided evidence that they have a desire to learn how to 'get along with each other'; many children described 'social skills' as something that they valued, and that would be obligatory in adult life. This reveals a bigger sense of purpose, one beyond one's self-interest and personal goals.

Societal purpose

Several children described a motivation to learn abilities that would contribute to their independence in adult life:

Extract 9

The most important things for children to learn is when they grow up, like how it is and stuff when they are alone in their house, how to pay bills and things like that. (Sarah)

The children described responsibilities when they grow up as 'important'; they aspired to learn skills that could help them with their future responsibilities. These statements imply that children seek an authentic learning experience, one that is relevant to the learner, and one that includes real-world problems, demonstrating not only that children are conscious of their future but also that they are motivated to learn life skills that will support them as adults.

Jordon notes that 'thinking' about his learning in relation to his future helps him to learn best.

Extract 10

I think I can learn best by thinking about how I could use what I am learning to do something in the future. (Jordon)

Children are motivated to learn material relevant to their future and applicable to their lives outside school, suggesting that teaching such material may empower students to succeed not only academically but also in life.

In conclusion, children expressed a motivation to learn meaningful material. They desire education for sustainable development, to learn ideas, skills and values relevant to the current economy, environment and society, as well as to their individual development.

Discussion

This research used philosophical and metaphysical questions to explore how children engage with their learning. In order to synthesise the findings, patterns were identified within the data. Autonomy, experiences and meaningful learning emerged as the three main themes in empowering children to learn.

Autonomy

Children were aware of, confident in, and showed a preference for, learning autonomously. This term, coined by Henri Holec (1981), refers to the ability to take charge of your own learning. It has been proposed that there is an important link between autonomy and educational theories of motivation (Dickenson, 1995; Dweck, 2010; Blackwell et al., 2007). This is consistent with Friere's (1970) notion that students should withdraw education, rather than teachers deposit it. The evidence suggests that allowing children more control over their learning enhances academic achievement (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987), self-regulated learning (Zimmerman, 2002), as well as their overall well-being (Burton et al., 2006). The self-determination theory hypothesis (Ryan & Deci, 2000) provides further support for these arguments, by suggesting that learning climates supporting intrinsic goals and autonomous learning improve both performance and persistence in learning. If our aim is to empower children to learn by promoting their natural abilities then rigid learning environments may not be the most appropriate way to encourage children's natural motivation to learn independently.

An educational environment that cultivates autonomy in learning is likely to be more facilitating than dictatorial (Whitmore, 2002). Evidence for the positive benefits of facilitated learning environments is accumulating in the literature (Mason 2004; Mitra & Rana, 2001; Mitra, 2003). A meta-analysis conducted by Hattie (2009) suggests that the student-teacher relationship is one of the biggest factors influencing facilitated learning. A recent survey, however, found the most common learning activities across England and Wales to be "copying from the board or book" and "listening to the teacher talking for a very long time" (MORI, 2008). This is despite legislations such as UNRC (1989) which stress the importance of children's participation. Systemic change to the National Curriculum may therefore be required in order to empower children to take charge of their learning. If our aim is to empower learning then the role of the child as the author of their own learning must be acknowledged and their autonomous learning capabilities encouraged.

Experience

Children expressed a desire to learn in relation to their experiences; this involved reflecting upon prior experiences as well as relating experiences to new knowledge. Kolb (1984) argues that we use our concepts to develop new theories about the world and actively test these, thus gathering new information. He proposes that knowledge is created through the transformation of experiences, and therefore the meaning-making process is unique to the individual. This awareness of grasping experience and transforming it is thought to be vital for lifelong learning (Kolb, 1984). It therefore seems fundamental that educational environments acknowledge children's prior experiences and preconceptions. These findings are also in line with the writings of Dewey, Kelley and Friere, who stress the need to make experience central to the education process. Dewey (1938) further argued that to convert the classroom from traditional to experiential, co-operation and collaboration would be required between peers, students and teachers. This would require teachers to respect children's individual interpretation of reality and allow them space to make

sense of things through their own unique experiences. Recent legislation, such as the SEN code of practice (2014), further supports this idea by emphasising the importance of listening to children in education, as it not only empowers children but also the teachers. Acknowledging individual differences can help children reflect on the significance of their experiences and to relate them creatively and healthily to themselves, to others, to society and to the environment.

Purpose

Children expressed a desire to learn things that were purposeful to their personal development. In contrast to extrinsic goals associated with materialism, children demonstrated an intrinsic motivation to learn life skills they could use in real-world situations. This is consistent with Maslow's (1968) humanistic learning theory, which suggests that the purpose of learning is to achieve self-actualisation; the motive is to realise one's full potential. In stark opposition to the behavioural, reductionist approach, Maslow argued the fundamental importance of the subjective world. The development of learning environments that facilitate creativity and self-actualisation have been proposed as an important goal for modern society (Burlinson, 2005) and further documented to contribute to positive psychological health (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Children demonstrated a concern for the future. Therefore, in order to prepare them for a rapidly changing society, it is vital we equip them with the skills they require to confront and cope with the challenges they will inevitably face. This might include curricula material on economic, social and ecological well-being. Policy and practice requires a global outlook and the teaching of skills applicable outside the classroom, to enhance children's independence and successful functioning in adult life.

Children expressed a desire to learn more about themselves. According to Rogers (1951), striving to understand oneself, or to reach one's 'ideal self', is important to all people. Self-actualised people are characterised as fully functional, open to experience, trusting of their own feelings, creative, fulfilled and existentially aware (Rogers 1951). Roger (1951) considers childhood experience to play a key role in self-actualisation as an adult and in nurturing children's ability to understand their feelings, experiences, beliefs and values and, ultimately, their 'self'.

Previous work shows that guiding academic efforts towards pro-social goals promotes motivation and better self-control in learning (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Pro-social interventions have shown to enhance academic achievement as well as civic, moral, social and emotional growth (Aber et al., 2011).

The data suggested that the LBBQ2 questions elicited meta-cognitive thinking, allowing exploration of children's philosophical and metaphysical beliefs about learning. The questions explored the individual ways in which children learn. It is thought essential that educational frameworks begin to incorporate such individualities. Integrating such individualities may assist in establishing personalised teaching and learning approaches: teaching methods that empower each child to learn in their own unique way and cultivate their ability to think creatively in accordance with their personal beliefs and values.

Implications

With regard to the development of listening to 'the voice of the child', these findings suggest that listening to children may be invaluable to their education. Further research in this area may provide otherwise unobtainable insights. In order to empower children to learn, it seems fundamental we acknowledge that learning is their own individual journey and encourage exploration, discovery, critical thinking, allow for struggles and support their own philosophy. In order to provide environments that nurture children holistically, respecting CYP's voices and recognising them as experts in their own world is necessary. It is likely that CYP themselves are the key to creating empowering environments that will equip them individually with the skills they need to learn.

In summary, this research contributes positively to the inclusion and participation of CYP in the work of EPs and other professionals working with children. There is still further to go in developing deeper methods of listening to and including CYP in education. These findings suggest that the LBBQ2 may be helpful in assisting EPs to understand children's learning strategies. The LBBQ2 might therefore help to inform education and health care plans, involve pupils in negotiating targets and assist with review and evaluation. The LBBQ2 may be an aid that can assist EPs to influence school policy, inform individual assessments and give light to children's attitude. Using listening tools such as the LBBQ2 may further assist professionals such as learning support assistants, teachers, social workers, therapists and other educationalists to provide individual learning environments and personalised plans. EPs have been clearly engaged with finding creative ways of eliciting children's views, and further research may assist in creating effective ways of translating this data into personalised action plans. Ensuring that these plans are evidence informed, monitored and administered by relevant professionals will help to safeguard that the implementation of these plans presents a positive outcome for the individual learning journeys of CYP.

It should be noted that this is a preliminary study, with a small sample in a specific area of London, and further studies of a wider sample will be helpful.

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Appendix A: The Little Box of Big Questions 2 Learning Questions

Set One LBBQ2 - Learning: How and why do you learn things

1

- How do people learn things?
 - How do you learn best?
 - Who has been your very best teacher? Why?
 - What would you like to learn about for the future?
 - What are the most important things for children to learn about?
- How do we find out new things?

2

- What is the best way of finding out things? For example: about different countries and people, things that happened in the past, things that are happening in the world now or how things work?
- Do you believe what your friends tell you?
- Do you believe what your teachers and parents tell you?
- Do you believe what the news on TV tells you?
- How do you know what to believe?

3

- Should you believe everything you hear or see?
- Can different people see things differently and still be right?
- What is the best magic trick you have seen? Did you find out how it worked?
- Do our eyes or ears ever trick us?
- How do you tell whether a fact is really true or not?
- Have you ever been tricked into thinking something was true and it wasn't? What happened?

4

- What topics or lessons do you most love to learn about?
- If you had to choose a specialist subject to answer questions on – what would it be?
- Why did you pick this topic?
- Where did you find out about it?
- What would you do to find out more?

5

- What sorts of things are special to you?
- Do you have favourite toys, music, colours, pets, places or possessions?
- Why are these so special to you?
- Where would you go to see beautiful things?
- If you had total freedom to do anything you wanted, what would you choose to do?

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Declaration of Interest

The second author is the co-author of the Little Box of Big Questions.