STARCATCHERS

Scotland's Arts and Early Years Organisation

Where is the Voice of Scotland's Babies?
Towards an arts-based methodology for participation with pre- and non-verbal children (birth-3)

Norton Park, Edinburgh
1st September 2022

Cattanach
Better starts | Better futures

Interface
The knowledge connection for business

Scottish Funding Council
Comhairle Maoineachaidh na h-Alba

Royal Conservatoire
of Scotland

What have we been trying to do?

AGENDA

01 **Aims and Objectives**

What did we want to get out of the last six months?

02 **Reviewing the Literature**

What knowledge is out there and how can we find it?

03 **Collecting the Data**

What is happening in Scotland's arts sector right now?

04 **What have we found out?**

What have we learned from our initial findings?

05 **Where to next?**

How can we turn this knowledge into an actionable plan?

Royal Conservatoire
of Scotland

01

Aims and objectives

Literature Review

- Identify conceptual issues and theoretical frameworks surrounding early-years children's participation

- Gain an understanding of existing practice used in facilitating participation for children in the early years

- Map the contexts in which participation in early-years has been studied

- Gain an understanding of the current knowledge of, and practice in, the role of the arts in early-years children's participation

- Map the methodologies/methods of research into early-years children's participation

Data Collection

- Explore perceptions of 'voice' in relation to pre-/non-verbal children (aged 0-3)

- Explore current and emerging practices across Starcatchers staff and associated artists in relation to seeking and understanding the voice of the pre- and non-verbal child

- Provide an initial scoping of early years arts practice with Scottish-based arts organisations and practitioners in relation to 'participatory arts' for children aged 0-3 years

Royal Conservatoire
of Scotland

"*A person's a person, no matter how small*"

Dr. Seuss (1954)

02 Reviewing the literature

Finding the literature

- This review used a two-concept search strategy: **young children** and **participation,** and searched for peer reviewed studies published in English and after the adoption of the UNCRC in 1989.

- Six databases were searched, and 506 articles were initially flagged as being of potential interest.

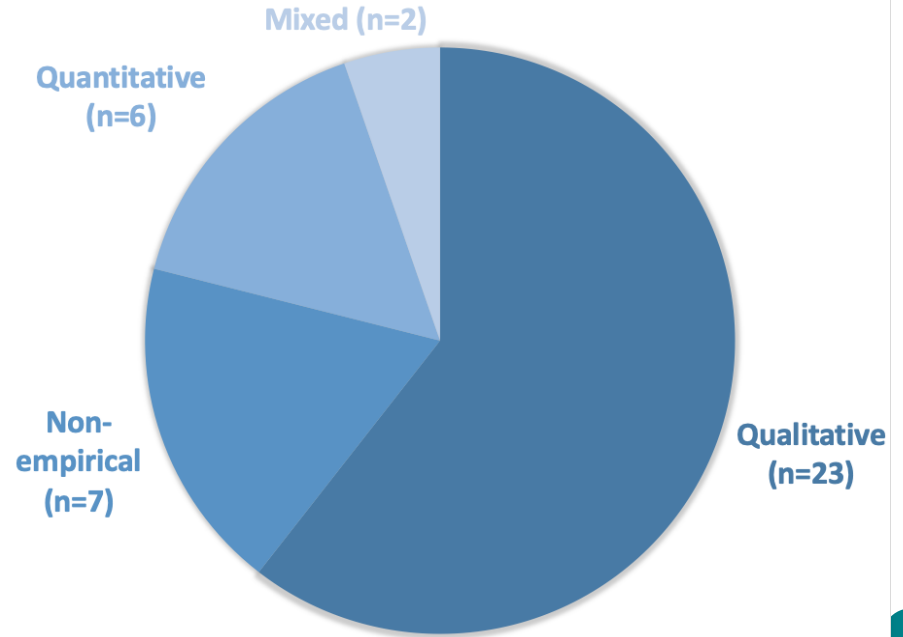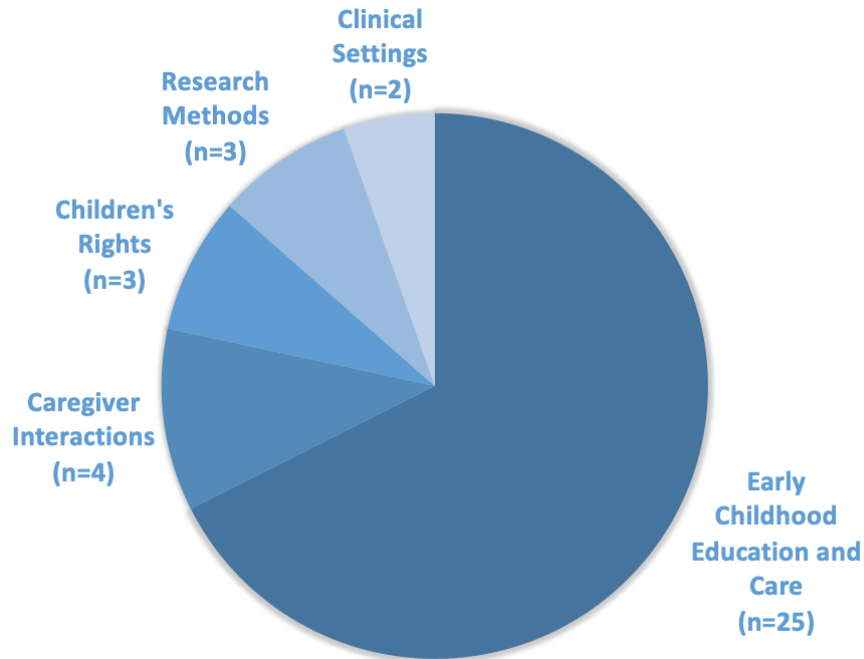- Following further scrutiny and the removal of duplicates, 37 papers were left.

Royal Conservatoire
of Scotland

Relevant research since 1989
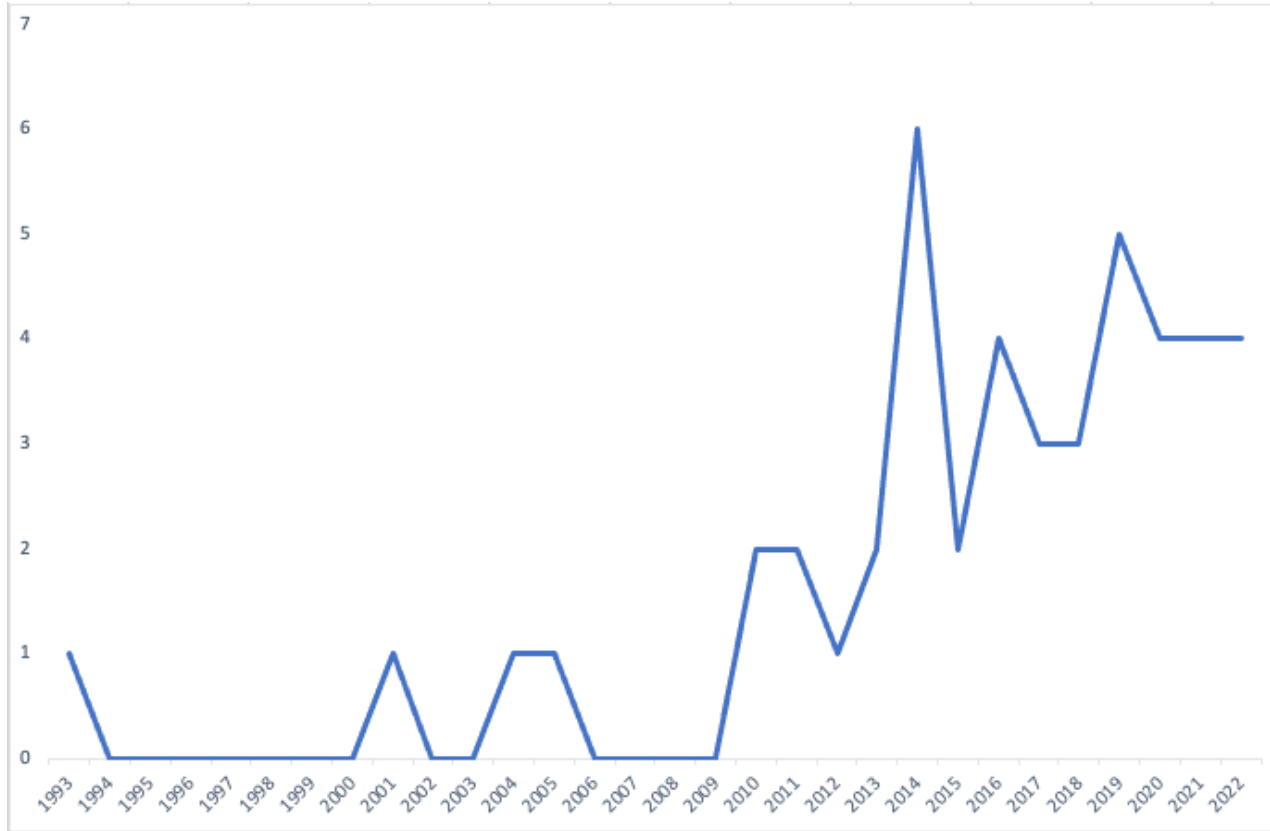
Where is this research happening?
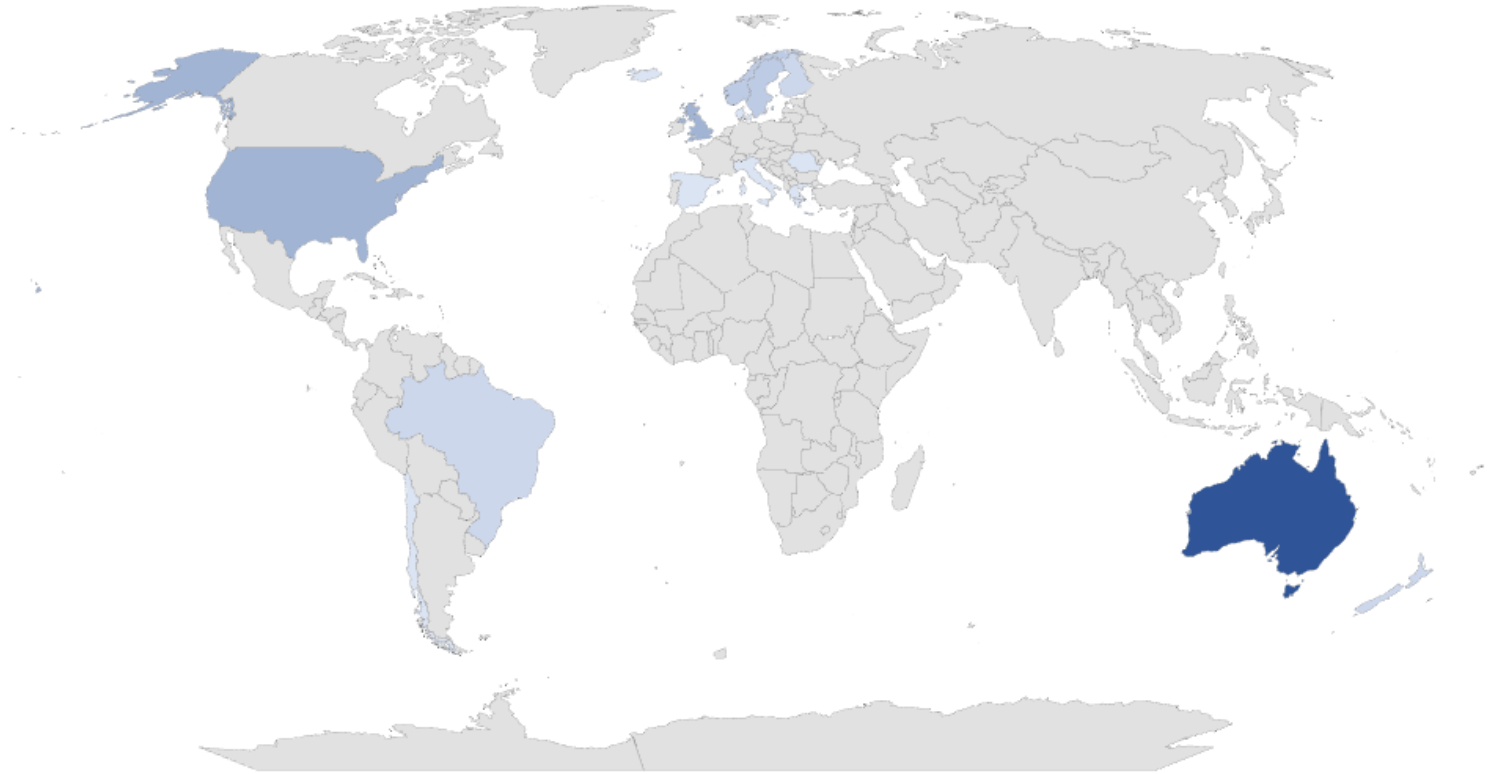
Research contexts and methods

Theoretical frameworks

Sociology of childhood

Attachment theory

Human rights theory

Social ecological model

Developmental theory

World culture theory

Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

Developing themes

Global policies and perspectives

Power and generational hierarchies

Infants' social life

Infant citizenship and democratic experiences

Resources and access

Attainment agenda

Biological realities

When is adult mediation appropriate?

Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

03

Collecting the data

Data was collected:

From

- Artists
- Arts managers / coordinators
- Starcatchers staff

Through

- Survey – mapping the arts sector
- Focus groups and vignettes – exploring current and emerging practice of rights-based approaches

Who

- Either work for Scottish-based arts organisations or are a Scottish-based freelance arts practitioner
- Have been involved in the creation, facilitation, or delivery of arts-based experiences for children aged 0-3 years of age in Scotland during the last 12 months

Survey

- Total responses = 37
- Total complete responses from those who met the inclusion criteria = 31

15

Arts managers / coordinators

16

Artists

Royal Conservatoire
of Scotland
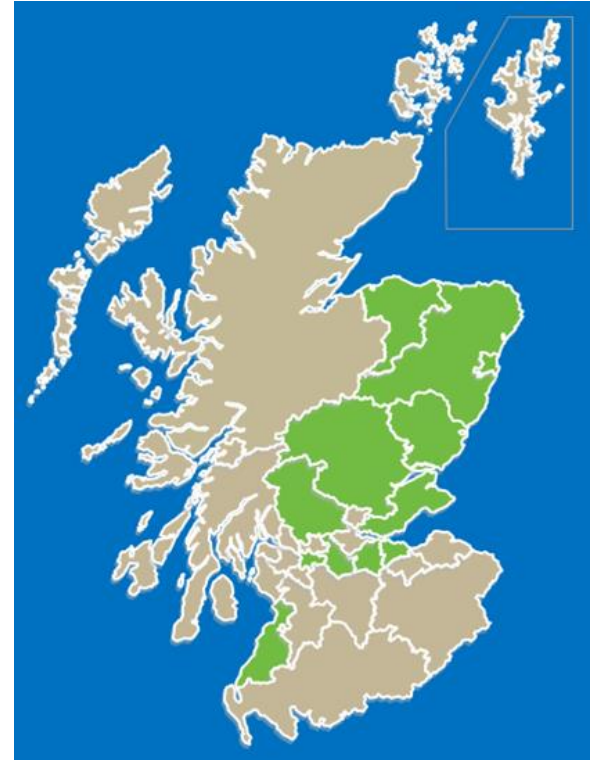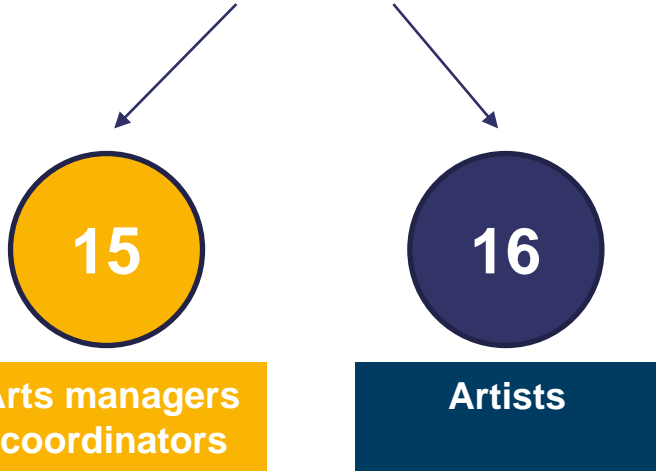
Overview of survey results
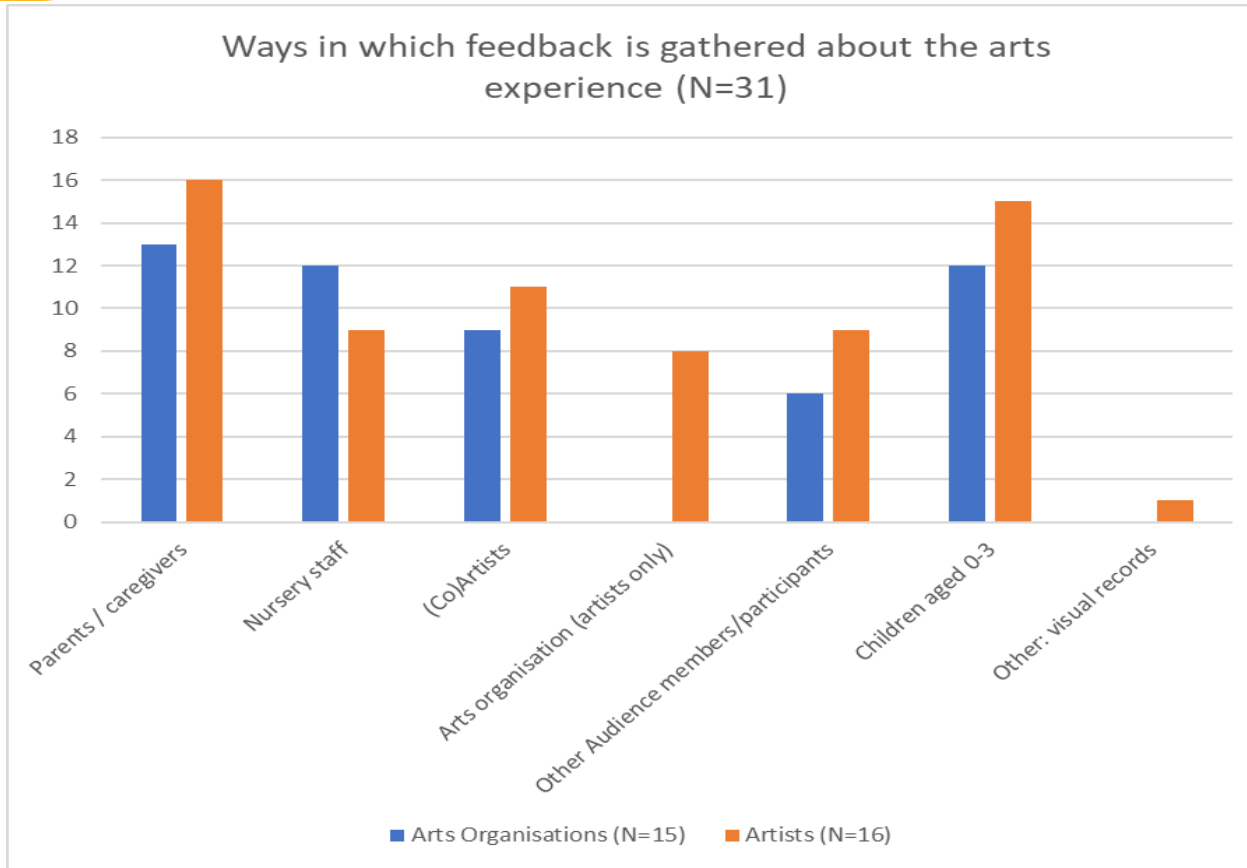
- Around 2 thirds of all arts organisations offered multidisciplinary arts experiences to 0-3s; the remainder offered one art form: this was also mirrored in the artists' responses
- 'Arts experiences and play' along with 'family and intergenerational work' was the most cited description of work for this age group by artists
- 'Workshop series' was the most frequent format for providing arts experiences by arts organisations; 'standalone workshops / events ', 'productions' and 'physical resources' were the second most frequent format and 'digital resources' was third

Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

Feedback on artistic experience

Ways in which feedback is gathered about the arts experience (N=31)

Ways to gather feedback from children aged 0-3 on artistic experience

Type of feedback	Arts manager / coordinator	Artist	Total	
Verbal: spoken	6	5	11	
Observations: behaviour	4	7	11	⭐
Observations: engagement	2	6	8	⭐
Through parents / caregivers	4	3	7	
Observations: expressions	1	5	6	⭐

*1 respondent (artist) out of 31 reported using a pre-defined model for gathering feedback from pre- and non-verbal infants

Royal Conservatoire
of Scotland

Artists: meaning of 'voice'

Defining the term 'voice' in relation to pre- / non-verbal children (N=15)
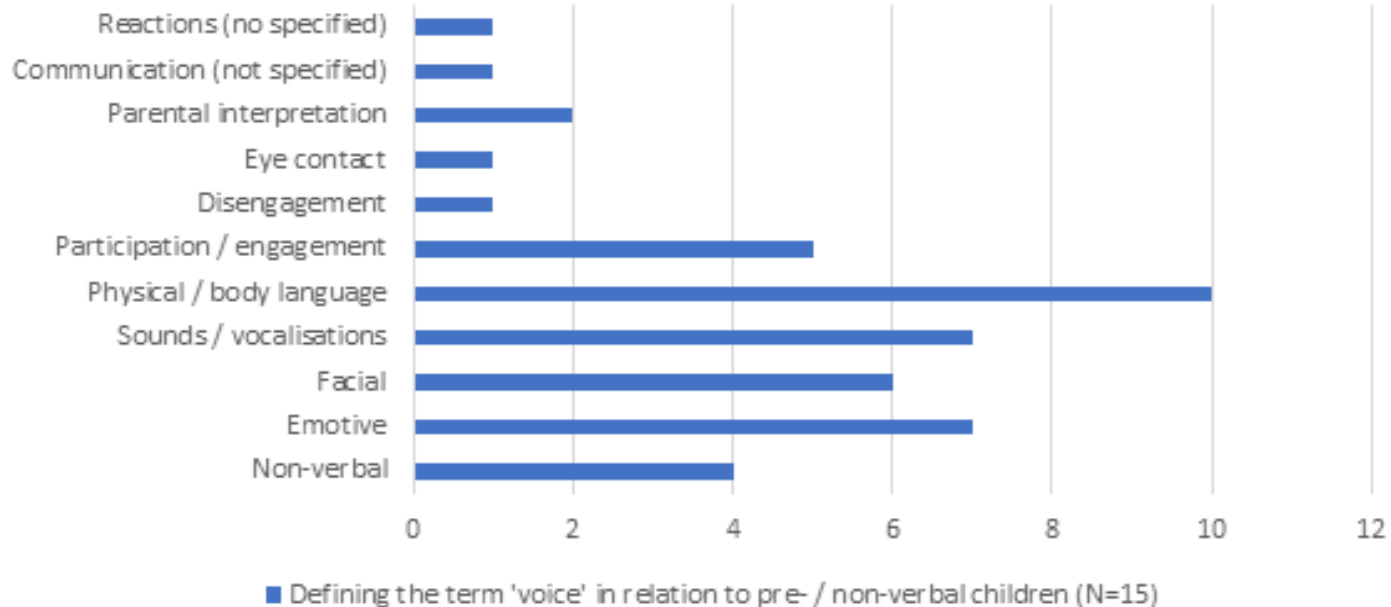
04 What have we found out?

At this stage of the research we have found four key areas in which the thematic analysis of both the literature and our own data have generated similar findings:

- Shared power – generational and hierarchy
- Sharing and intruding on children's spaces
- Intentions vs biological limitations
- Co-construction of artistic experiences

Shared power – generation and hierarchy

Pre- or non-verbal child

Caregiver

Artist
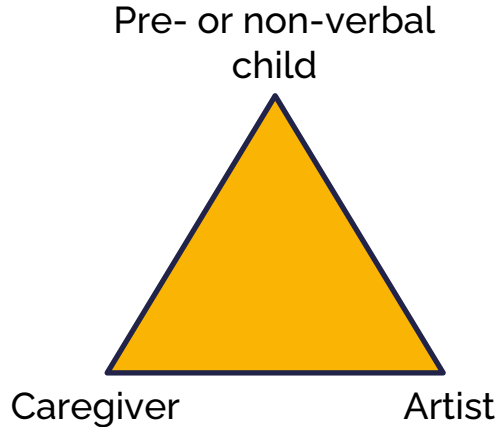
- Adults as gatekeepers
- Importance of hierarchy is context-specific
- Applying adult-oriented social conventions to an infant
- participatory arts contexts can allow for equality of experience

"[...] it's really trying to persuade, on that rainy, grey day, that we need to be the drive to pull the parents out of the house" [Hannah]

Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

Shared power – generation and hierarchy

It was frequently found in the literature that adults have varying degrees of comfort with ceding control to very young children, and the disruption of age-based hierarchies. This was often discussed in relation to the agency of the very young.

"Ghirotto and Mazzoni (2013, p. 307) state that 'Asymmetry is a condition that creates a mutual and interdependent relationship when it works from a positive perspective'. This premise brings support to a distinct definition of agency for infants and toddlers reflected in Eastern philosophy; one which recognises the constructive nature of power relations and celebrates interdependence." (Burr and Degotardi, 2021).

Royal Conservatoire
of Scotland

Sharing and intruding on children's spaces

- Space to explore
- Normalising different ways of communication
- Permission for adults to play
- Respect for the child and their space (reversing the hierarchy)

"[As an artist], I'm sharing this with you, this is your world, we are coming into this space and if you don't want to play, that's okay"
[Maggie]

Sharing and intruding on children's spaces

The richness and importance of children's own spaces and peer groups was frequently remarked upon in the literature, with much discussion focusing on how we can enable participation without intruding on their spaces.

"As we observed, the interrupting of their playing and conversations to ask the 'questions of interest' was considered by the children an intrusion into their play spaces, and they showed obvious signs of discomfort." (Ceballos and Susinos, 2022)

Royal Conservatoire
of Scotland

Intentions vs biological limitations

- Importance of hierarchy is context-specific
- Infants' cognitive awareness of how and when their voice is having / has had influence
- Explicit vs implicit representation
- Immediate representation vs representation over time
- Artistic approach has to cater for 2 different beings at very different developmental stages in their lives

"… babies are born, like, really able to communicate … [they] tell you when they are happy and tell you when they are not"
[Oliver]

Royal Conservatoire
of Scotland

Intentions vs biological limitations

While much of the literature had an aim to support the development of agency in the very young, it's often remarked upon that there are biological realities which can necessitate adults taking charge.

"However, despite the efforts to blur the adult/child binary, age and life experience did remain a troublesome area for practitioners and children. Care practices, such as nappy changing and sleep routines, seemed to particularly create barriers and tensions to the project of 'undoing' generational hierarchy." (Blaisdell, 2019)

Co-construction of artistic experiences

- Positionality and identity – shared and individual
- Participation on equal terms
- Validation of contributions (value and worth)
- Child-led and child-centred
- Consideration of different stakeholders
- Importance of process vs product

"I think the automatic assumption is that because we're Starcatchers and we work with kids from birth up to five, that that's our target audience. But it's not, that's one half of it, the other half is their grown-ups"
[James]

Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

Co-construction of artistic experiences

This finding from our data collection aligned closely with a theme of the role of adult mediation in children's experiences.

"In part, the discursive arrangement also influenced the educators' doing of supporting the baby in the block building, by virtue of his right to be involved even though he did not seem capable of initiating his involvement independently" (Salamon and Harrison, 2015)

"Findings of this study validate earlier evidence... which shows that even very young children have an active role in starting, extending, or redirecting play with their caregivers. Adults' adaptive capacity and their responsiveness to these invitations are considered crucial for sustaining and extending communication." (Katsiada et al., 2018)

Where to next? Implications for Phase II

Key findings so far

- Adults are an integral part of the early years' context: triangular model of participation in early years arts practice
- Participative arts experiences can reverse the hierarchy
- Need for shared understanding of, and terminology for, rights-based approaches with pre- and non-verbal children
- Important to redefine the notion of 'voice'
- Need for more research that looks specifically at rights-based arts practices with pre- and non-verbal children

Royal Conservatoire
of Scotland

Next Steps

Creating the framework for participation in the arts

- Harnessing best practice within the arts to advocate for rights-based approaches to working with pre- and non-verbal infants
- Further analysis of study findings in relation to existing models of participation
- Defining the notion of 'voice' in relation to pre- and non-verbal children
- Using the blueprint that has emerged from our findings to develop and pilot strategies for participation for pre- and non-verbal children

Royal Conservatoire
of Scotland

References

Blaisdell, C. (2019) 'Participatory work with young children: the trouble and transformation of age-based hierarchies', *Children's Geographies*, 17(3). doi: 10.1080/14733285.2018.1492703.

Burr, T. and Degotardi, S. (2021) 'From Birth to Three: Exploring Educators' Understandings of Agency', *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 46(4). doi: 10.1177/18369391211041775.

Ceballos, N. and Susinos, T. (2022) 'Do my words convey what children are saying? Researching school life with very young children: dilemmas for "authentic listening"', *https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2022.2026435*. Routledge, 30(1), pp. 81–95. doi: 10.1080/1350293X.2022.2026435.

Convention on the rights of the child (1989) Treaty no. 27531. *United Nations Treaty Series*, 1577, pp. 3-178.

Katsiada, E. *et al.* (2018) 'Young children's agency: exploring children's interactions with practitioners and ancillary staff members in Greek early childhood education and care settings', *Early Child Development and Care*, 188(7). doi: 10.1080/03004430.2018.1446429.

Salamon, A. and Harrison, L. (2015) 'Early childhood educators' conceptions of infants' capabilities: the nexus between beliefs and practice', *Early Years*, 35(3). doi: 10.1080/09575146.2015.1042961.

Seuss, Dr. (1954) Horton Hears and Who! New York: Random House

Royal Conservatoire
of Scotland

Thank you

Dr Rachel Drury
r.drury@rcs.ac.uk
@racheldrury3

Claire Ruckert
c.ruckert@rcs.ac.uk
@claireruckert

STARCATCHERS
Royal Conservatoire *of Scotland*

Cattanach
Better starts | Better futures

Interface
The knowledge connection for business