# Voice of the Baby

Exploring rights-based approaches for participation using the arts with babies and young children from birth - 3 years

Photo credit: Brian Hartley

STARCATCHERS

Royal Conservatoire *of* Scotland

Cattanach
Better starts | Better futures

Interface

# Contents

## Acknowledgements

## Introduction and context

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is currently being incorporated into domestic Law in Scotland. In the lead up to incorporation, and as implementation is rolled out, cross-sector organisations, statutory services and government bodies are acknowledging that we must listen to children and young people when it comes to matters that affect their lives; this also includes pre- and non-verbal children.

This Summary Research Report represents Phase 1 of a larger research project. The purpose of Phase 1 was to explore current and emerging rights-based approaches in the arts for children aged birth to 3 in Scotland, with a particular focus on pre- and/or non-verbal children in this age category. The findings from Phase 1 will contribute towards the development of a framework for participation specific to pre- and non-verbal children (Phase 2).

This research represents a partnership project between Starcatchers and the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, with funding from Cattanach and Interface.

## Researchers

### Dr Rachel Drury - Lead Researcher

Dr Rachel Drury is a researcher and creative artist working in the field of music psychology. She is currently Co-programme Leader for the MA Psychology in the Arts (Music) at the RCS (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland) and is the music specialist for Rachel House Childrens' Hospice in Kinross (CHAS). Rachel's current creative and research interests focus on rights-based approaches in the arts in relation to music in therapeutic settings (in particular, paediatric palliative care); arts in social justice; and mental health in the arts.

### Claire Ruckart - Research Assistant

Claire is an interdisciplinary doctoral researcher based at the RCS and the University of St Andrews. She attended RCS for her Bachelor of Music in Vocal Studies, during which time she developed an interest in the psychology behind music and performance, which led to her gaining an MSc in Performance Science from the Royal College of Music, as well as an MSc in Psychology (Conversion) from the University of St Andrews. She is co-founder of the Flourish network, an initiative to make performance science accessible to musicians.

## Definition of terms

For clarity, the following definitions are being used for this initial phase of the research:

- Voice: refers to a wide range of communications including, but not limited to, movement, expression, action, sound, gesture
- Pre-verbal child: refers to a child who has not yet developed verbal speech (due to developmental stage)
- Non-verbal child: refers to a child who does not, or cannot, use verbal speech to communicate, irrespective of developmental stage
- Rights-based approach: refers to an approach that has the rights of the child at its core and where children are provided meaningful opportunities to participate in, and influence, decision making that impact their lives and experiences.
- Participation / participatory arts: Participatory arts refers to artistic experiences that are reciprocal in nature and rely on collaboration between artist and participant(s) to inform both the creative process and outcome. Participation, therefore, refers to an engagement and interaction with artist / artistic experience.

## Aims of the research

- To explore existing knowledge of, and practice in, rights-based approaches for children's participation in early years practice
- To provide an initial scoping of early years arts practice with Scottish-based arts organisations and practitioners in relation to 'participatory arts' for children from birth to 3 years
- To 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

## Key Research Questions

- What examples exist of rights-based approaches being used with children from birth to 3 years?
- What does the current landscape of rights-based arts-practice for early years look like in Scotland?
- How is the voice of the pre- and non-verbal child sought through participative artistic experiences and what impact does it have on the artistic practice?

# Overview of methods

The research design for this phase of work consisted of a systematic scoping review, a survey targeting arts practitioners and arts organisations, and group interviews with Starcatchers staff and associate artists.

## Systematic Scoping review

Using a standard search of relevant databases, 23 articles were selected for inclusion in the systematic scoping review of the research literature which focused on the participatory rights of children prior to the development of speech. They included 13 qualitative, 6 quantitative and 3 mixed methods studies.

## Survey and Group interviews

The survey and group interviews explored elements of existing models of participation (predominantly the Lundy Model of Participation (2014) comprising 'Space', 'Voice', 'Audience' and 'Influence') in relation to the arts for pre- and non-verbal children.

## Participants

The participants invited to take part in the research included:

- Arts managers/coordinators within an organisation whose output included work for birth to 3 years of age
- Artists currently working with children aged birth to 3, or those who have worked with them in the last twelve months
- Starcatchers artists who have worked with/for children aged birth to 3, or in the case of Creative Skills, are training participants who work directly with children aged birth to 3.

## Data Gathering and analysis

Data were gathered through an online survey that was disseminated using Starcatchers contacts and their social media platforms. Respondents were asked to confirm their eligibility and were directed to the relevant set of questions depending on their status as artists or arts manager/coordinator. Both open- and closed-ended questions were used in the survey.

In addition to the survey, current Starcatchers staff and associate artists were invited to take part in a group interview to discuss the ways in which the pre- and/or non-verbal child's voice is sought and understood, and what influence it has on the artistic experience/practice. Interviews were held online via Zoom and were recorded before being transcribed.

Quantitative data were analysed using basic descriptive statistics and qualitative data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (as described by Braun and Clark 2022).

## Ethics

Ethical Approval was granted in full by the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of the research.

# Key Findings

## Systematic Scoping Review

The research methods used across the articles varied, however ethnography was by far the most popular approach.

The articles included in the review came from a range of countries and, therefore, each study was underpinned by specific domestic cultures and attitudes surrounding childhood. This was observed to influence the research process at every level, most of all in the context of early childhood education and care facilities, for which there is a great deal of global variation in policies and guidelines.

The concept of adults ceding power to infants was a common theme across articles. It was found that adults demonstrate varying degrees of comfort with the idea of very young children having more control and this was often borne out of a desire to safeguard the child from situations which may prove overwhelming or frightening.

The richness of children's own peer groups and social experiences with other infants was also an emergent theme from our analysis. It was found that adults run the risk of oversimplifying a child's social world, and not accounting for the fact that children's peer groups have their own power dynamics and hierarchies. A lack of understanding of children's emotional complexity can lead to the consideration of their spaces and social groups as less valuable than those found with adults, which can result in a lack of understanding on how best to empower children to participate in their own social worlds.

The importance of adult mediation in work with very young children was a strong theme within the literature. Guidance for any caregiver or educator, when working with this age range, stipulates that they should never be left alone, therefore, the presence of the adult is a given in almost all of the waking lives of young children. Furthermore, adult mediation has the potential to empower infants to participate authentically and assert their own agency, when done in a way that is receptive to the child's input, mindful of not over-interpreting, and aware of any inherent prejudices. This was frequently found to be more effective than zero adult involvement.

There seems to be no 'one size fits all' approach which can maximise a child's authentic participation. Rather, the attitude of the adults caring for the child was found to have the greatest impact; when adults hold genuine beliefs about children as being competent individuals with valid perspectives, children have a greater opportunity to express their opinions on matters which affect them.

A limitation of the literature identified in this review was that all the included articles were conducted either in an early childhood education and care facility, or in an otherwise controlled research context. This dearth of literature on children and their caregivers within their domestic or social contexts has the potential to limit our understanding of how the participatory rights of very young children are actualised outside of educational or research-based settings.

An understanding of the role of the arts was one of the aims of this review. As such, it is important to note that none of the included articles had a dedicated focus on the role of the arts in relation to infant participation, despite the fact that the use of the arts through music and drawing activities was commonly referenced across the articles. This suggests a gap in established practices for utilising the arts as a means of encouraging the participation of very young children.

## Survey

The survey generated a total of 31 responses which included 16 artists and 15 arts managers / coordinators. Between them, the artists had worked with 15 different arts organisations and 2 regional councils over the last 12 months. In addition, three artists reported working freelance with one running their own projects. A total of 13 different arts organisations, and three regional councils were represented through the responses from Arts Manager / coordinator survey.

## Key findings

### Arts disciplines

The majority of artists who responded to this survey tend to have more than one art form through which they operate when it comes to work with children aged birth to 3 years. Individual artistic practice that is cross-disciplinary (between 2 or more art forms) and collaborative practice between artists could be seen as facets of the 'specialism' required for working with early years participants, in a way that they are perhaps not seen as valuable (or desirable) for professional artistic work with other age groups.

A third of responses from arts companies reported that they specialise in one art form only with the rest of the responses reporting 2 or more art forms within their offering.

The majority of artists and arts organisations who responded to the survey work across a variety of age ranges, as opposed to specialising in work with children aged birth to 3 years.

The results show that a series of workshops is the most popular offering from arts organisations for children aged birth to 3. This format allows for a relationship to be built between artist and child with their significant adult over a number of days, weeks, or sometimes months.

### Feedback

- Responses suggested a heavy reliance on adult interpretation of the child's experiences: the most popular way of gathering feedback for both artists and organisations was through parent/caregiver feedback. The second most reported way of gaining feedback was through the child themselves.
- When asked specifically about gathering feedback from the child, artists seem to show a more nuanced understanding of this and reported observation of behaviour and body language as favoured methods. The most popular response from arts organisations was reliant on verbal feedback (a method that excludes pre- and non-verbal children).

- The most frequent answer given to the question around how feedback from children aged birth to 3 influenced artistic practice was that it helped to inform future practice. This was true both of future practice with the same individual infant / group of infants, and between work with different participants.
- Whilst there does not appear to be a shared formal model by which artists gather feedback from pre-/non-verbal children, there does seem to be a common and intuitive understanding amongst artists who work with this cohort.

## Voice of the Child
Significant adults were seen as integral to artistic experiences for pre-/non-verbal children and contribute to the interpretation of the child's voice

The notion of voice of the pre-/non-verbal child is broadly interpreted as being inclusive of physical, behavioural, emotional and sound cues

## Rights-based approaches
The results show that only 20% of arts managers / coordinators, and just over a third of artists, represented in this survey, have received training in rights-based approaches from the organisation(s) they work for.

Under half of the arts organisations (6 out of 15) represented in the responses to this survey have rights-based approaches that feature in their policies for working with children. In addition, only 3 organisations have offered training in this to the artists that work for them.

Artists and Arts organisations are keen to develop their knowledge in this area.

## Limitations
Care should be taken in generalising the results of this survey too widely due to the relatively low rate of responses (in relation to the number of artists and arts organisations approached)

## Group Interviews
A total of 6 participants (staff and associate artists) from Starcatchers took part in the 2 group interviews. The initial analysis of this data revealed 8 themes:

1. Choice
2. Space
3. Interpretation (of communication)
4. Identity
5. Expectation and perceptions
6. Power and Empowerment
7. Social relationships
.

## Choice
The notion of choice was considered a vital element in artistic practice for early years, particularly in relation to engagement. Choice was seen by artists to afford the child agency and autonomy within an activity and infants were seen as highly capable of showing what they like, and presumably, therefore, what they don't like.

The idea of restricting choice when there are too many creative possibilities was also discussed by the artists as part of their role in facilitating a meaningful artistic experience for infants. This is interesting to consider alongside the (mis)perceptions of what 'child-led' practice involves.

## Space
The concept of space was described both in terms of what it was, and what was possible within it. Artists agreed that the space belonged to the child and that they, and the child's significant adult(s), were inhabiting it. In addition, it was suggested that an artistic space was one that had the potential to create a temporary idyll for both the infant and their adult(s). The space also necessitated a shared understanding of 'rules' or parameters that are specific to that particular context (in other words, that don't necessarily apply elsewhere).

## Interpretation of communication
The interpretation of 'voice' was, unsurprisingly, seen as a key issue in relation to rights-based approaches for early years. The notion of interpretation was seen both as a unique challenge in relation to pre-/non-verbal children and, at the same time, recognised as something that is needed irrespective of the form of a communication. Even with sophisticated language containing semantic qualities, there is always a level of interpretation needed to understand fully the meaning (and/or intention) behind the communication.

There is also the notion that no one interpretation is necessarily right and so the term 'voice' becomes something that is indeed socially-constructed and its meaning is found through interaction and reciprocity. This is just as true for non-verbal conversation as it is for verbal. Finally, it was recognised that the arts can help to normalise different ways to communicate as art in itself is a form of expression and communication.

## Identity
It was recognised that babies are highly capable communicators but that this communication is demonstrated in a different way to the spoken communication carrying semantic meaning that is used by the majority of the population. Infants were also recognised as equals in relation to artistic participation and the development of artistic ideas. In this way, the context of the arts allows the infant to either identify as, or be identified as, an equal capable of meaningful communication and participation.

The notion of the parent and child as one entity, and the parent and child as separate entities was also discussed by artists in relation to their practice. It is widely recognised that individuals are made up of multiple identities and the child's identity as themselves, and as part of a group (with their significant adult(s)) are identities that can sit alongside one another even when one come to the fore in a certain context. This can also be true of the adult's identities as individual and group (with their child).

Another element of artist identity that was discussed centred around the motivation for the work and the importance of the artistic lens, as opposed to the many non-artistic impacts of their work for the stakeholders. Artists felt there was intrinsic value in their art form(s) and this fed into a pride in their identity as artists. Equally, there was also recognition that their art form was often used as a vehicle to achieve outcomes whose value was entirely separate from the art form used to initiate it.

## Approach

A term that was used throughout the conversations with artists was a 'child-led' approach. The discussion amongst artists involved in this research revealed that their shared definition of child-led was practice that allowed children to explore creatively, and afforded them agency and autonomy, within parameters that were facilitate by an adult. Artists also agreed on the importance of modelling different possibilities to encourage a child to generate their own creative options within an activity.

Community arts was presented as being a co-construction or co-creation of an experience, in other words, something done with the community as opposed to done to it. As such, a community artists' work can only be developed with the input of co-creators and, furthermore, if the co-creators happen to be infant, the voice of the infant is absolutely integral to the artistic process and output.

## Expectations and perceptions

The concepts of expectations and perceptions can both bring benefits and challenges to arts in early years. Through the focus groups, arts was perceived to be a medium through which adults perceptions of their child (and art) could be challenged and artistic activities often helped adults' understanding of the infants' behaviour(s). It was recognised that adults expectations of infant behaviour can often be influenced by societal norms or what could be termed as 'adult-oriented' social conventions.

Arts experiences have also been suggested as a means of challenging adults' perceptions in relation to the capabilities of infants. This may come in various forms such as length of engagement, ability to interact with an activity, and communication of ideas. Finally, it was recognised by artists that infants may have limited cognition of an 'artistic concept' (in relation to adults), but that does not mean that the cognition they do have is not valid in the space.

## Power and empowerment

In an arts setting, there is the opportunity for the power hierarchy between adults and children either to equalise or to flip in favour of the child. When an adult enters an arts experience designed for children, they are in effect entering a child's space where adult-oriented social conventions and rules no longer apply. In this way, the arts can offer an environment which removes barriers that exist in other contexts in relation to adult perceptions and expectations.

This also applies to the artist and there was strong acknowledgement that community artists' work can only occur (and be developed) with the input of 'co-creators', in this case, infants. Without the infants, the artists' work would not exist; without the artist, the infant would not be able to engage in the artistic experience. In this sense, the power balance is wholly equal.

The relationship between power and empowerment is an interesting one to contemplate. Artists noted that being an advocate for children's rights is part of their role but there are both ethical and moral considerations around when a child should 'speak' for themselves, and where artists have a responsibility to 'speak' on their behalf. The work 'speak' in both cases (whether it comes from the child or the artist) may not necessarily mean spoken language and could refer to an artistic process or outcome. The overall consensus was that advocating for a child is a balance.

## Social Relationships

Social relationships appeared to be an important factor in relation to work with very young infants. There is a complexity of social relationships in this kind of work given that an artist is concurrently working with both the infant themselves, and their adult. Comments around wider issues of social relationships highlighted the vulnerability of those either without a (common) language, or with a language that has no semantic properties, and the potential that has to cause social isolation. This not only applies to pre-/non-verbal children but also to some of their adults where English is not the first language.

Artists saw their role as multi-faceted. Not only was their role to make positive connections with the child and their adult, they also reported their role in connecting the adult with the child, and the child with the adult, thereby strengthening parent-child relationship and effectively, using art to build relationships within family units. One example of this was the idea of reflecting a child's 'voice' back to the parent so that the parent has a different take on what the child may be communicating.

## Conclusions

This research has explored current and emerging rights-based approaches for children's participation in early years practice through engagement with research literature, staff and associate artists from Starcatchers, and the wider arts sector in Scotland. Whilst there are limitations to our results, findings have demonstrated the potential of the arts as a promising context in which to situate research into children's rights and provided a basis for developing a framework for participation for pre- and non-verbal children.

Whilst artistic activities are discussed in the existing research literature, there review has identified a clear gap in relation to research that is specifically situated in an arts context (as opposed to education and care facilities).

The fact that arts activities were commonly referenced throughout existing studies suggests that research situated in the arts context may bring benefits that extend beyond its boundaries.

Something that sets arts for early years apart from artistic experiences designed for other age groups is the fact that infants are always accompanied by, and reliant on, their significant adult(s). This creates a triangular model for communication involving the artist, child and significant adult, and the interplay between all these relationships appears integral to the child's participation and their voice.

Whilst some artists seem to have a common and intuitive understanding of how to gather meaningful feedback from pre- and non-verbal children, there is currently no obvious shared formal method by which to do so.

Arts experiences seem to create a temporary idyll for both child and significant adult where power hierarchies (normally favouring the adult) can be disrupted, and the child can be empowered. This makes it an interesting context in which to explore the voice of the child.

Rights-based approaches can only be understood fully in the geographical, cultural, political and societal context in which they are being explored. This highlights the importance of research that is specific to Scotland both in developing a robust understanding of children's rights and the arts in this country, and in contributing to the wider understanding of children's rights across the world.

# Included Articles

**Alasuutari, M. (2014).** *Voicing the child? A case study in Finnish early childhood education.* Childhood, 21(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568213490205

**Berthelsen, D., & Brownlee, J. (2005)**. *Respecting children's agency for learning and rights to participation in child care programs.* International Journal of Early Childhood, 37(3). https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03168345

**Blaisdell, C. (2019).** *Participatory work with young children: the trouble and transformation of age-based hierarchies.* Children's Geographies, 17(3). https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2018 .1492703

**Boardman, K. (2022)**. *Where are the children's voices and choices in educational settings' early reading policies? A reflection on early reading provision for under-threes.* European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 30(1), 131–146. https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X. 2022.2026437

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

**Cárdenas, K., Moreno-Núñez, A., & Miranda-Zapata, E. (2020).** *Shared Book-Reading in Early Childhood Education: Teachers' Mediation in Children's Communicative Development.* Frontiers in Psychology, 11. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.02030

**Ceballos, N., & Susinos, T. (2022).** *Do my words convey what children are saying? Researching school life with very young children: dilemmas for 'authentic listening.'* European Early Childhood Education and Research Journal 30(1), 81–95. https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2022.2026 435

**Cologon, K., Wicks, L., & Salvador, A. (2017)**. *Supporting caregivers in developing responsive communication partnerships with their children: Extending a caregiver-led interactive language program.* Child Language Teaching and Therapy, 33(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/02 65659016650978

**Ebbeck, M., Warrier, S., & Goh, M. (2018).** *Early Experiences Matter: A Relationships-Based Curriculum for the Birth-to-Three Age Group.* Early Childhood Education Journal, 46(1). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-017-0847-9

**Holyfield, C., Drager, K., Light, J., & Caron, J. G. (2017).** *Typical toddlers' participation in "just-in-time" programming of vocabulary for visual scene display augmentative and alternative communication apps on mobile technology: A descriptive study.* American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology, 26(3). https://doi.org/10.1044/2017_AJSLP-15-0197

**Katsiada, E., Roufidou, I., Wainwright, J., & Angeli, V. (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). https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2018.1446429

**Katsiada, E., Roufidou, I., Wainwright, J., & Angeli, V. (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). https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2018.1446429

**Kern, P., & Wolery, M. (2001)**. *Participation of a preschooler with visual impairments on the playground: Effects of musical adaptations and staff development.* Journal of Music Therapy, 38(2). https://doi.org/10.1093/jmt/38.2.149

**Kramer, J. M., Hwang, I. T., Levin, M., Acevedo-García, D., & Rosenfeld, L. (2018)**. *Identifying environmental barriers to participation: Usability of a health-literacy informed problem-identification approach for parents of young children with developmental disabilities.* Child: Care, Health and Development, 44(2). https://doi.org/10.1111/cch.12542

**Maconochie, H., & McNeill, F. (2010**). *User involvement: children's participation in a parent-baby group. Community Practitioner :* The Journal of the Community Practitioners' & Health Visitors' Association, 83(8).

**Maitane Belasko, Elena Herrán, & M. Teresa Anguera. (2022)**. *Observation dressing in a collaborative or trusting environment: The right to participate in one's own care at the Emmi Pikler Nursery School in Budapest.* Early Years. https://www.webofscience.com/wos/woscc/sum mary/337a4b21-bcea-4c3f-8aaf-caf03e7031f7-30f7901e/relevance/1

**Nome, D. Ø. (2022).** *Toddlers as ignorant citizens: An explorative study of conflicts and negotiations involving toys in kindergarten.* Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 23(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949120906807

**Quennerstedt, A. (2016)**. Y*oung children's enactments of human rights in early childhood education.* International Journal of Early Years Education, 24(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2 015.1096238

**Robinson, C., O'Connor, D., Wildy, H., & Neylon, G. (2019)**. *Contemporary perspectives of the child in action: an investigation into children's connectedness with, and contribution to, the world around them.* Education 3-13, 47(3). https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2018.1457704

**Rowe, D. W., & Neitzel, C. (2010)**. I*nterest and Agency in 2- and 3-Year-Olds' Participation in Emergent Writing.* Reading Research Quarterly, 45(2). https://doi.org/10.1598/rrq.45.2.2

**Salamon, A., & Harrison, L. (2015).** *Early childhood educators' conceptions of infants' capabilities: the nexus between beliefs and practice.* Early Years, 35(3). https://doi.org/10.1080/09 575146.2015.1042961

**Ulrich Hygum, C., & Hygum, E. (2021)**. *Crèche and cry, here and there: exploring children's agency in Romanian and Danish nurseries*. Ethnography and Education, 16(3). https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2021.1911669

**Zachrisen, B. (2016).** *The Contribution of Different Patterns of Teachers' Interactions to Young Children's Experiences of Democratic Values During Play. International Journal of Early Childhood*, 48(2). https://doi.org/10.1007/s13158-016-0166-0