

Futurelab event presentation

Challenging Learner Voice

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What does it mean to be an 'adult' in an era of children's rights and learner voice?

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A cautionary tale - the danger of seeing one set of rights or voice in isolation

In the 1990s, the Labour party came to power with a commitment to enhance women's rights in the workplace. Committed and seasoned feminist campaigners strongly advocated for rights such as maternity leave, equal pay and childcare provision. A major success for this movement was the new commitment to an entitlement to up to one year's maternity leave, with guaranteed job security for women on their return. However, according to the Chief Executive of the Equalities and Human Rights Commission¹, this legislation has served only to provide a new obstacle for women of childbearing age in gaining employment. Employers now are nervous of appointing or promoting women of this age.

Indeed, rather than promoting women's rights, this one policy has succeeded in making it much more desirable to appoint men than women and actively worked against the attainment of gender equality in the workplace.

Why were the intentions to enhance women's rights so spectacularly unsuccessful in this case?

They were unsuccessful because they failed to realize that rights and identities are not simply the attributes of an individual or a discrete group, but that they are produced and negotiated and realized in interaction with other groups in society.

They were unsuccessful because they failed to realize that for women to achieve equality and fairness in the workplace, it required a change not only in women's rights, but in the identity and rights of men as well.

In other words, this policy failed because it simply asked 'how can we increase 'women's rights'?' rather than 'what are the policies and practices that produce inequalities and disadvantage around parenting and motherhood in the workplace?'

The wider 'frame' of this second question would necessarily have taken into account questions of fatherhood and men's relation to parenting. It would have addressed the question of how 'equality' is produced for anyone in the workplace – and would have led to very different policies. These policies would have been built not only upon increasing women's entitlements to leave, but upon an opening up of the possibility of equal rights and responsibilities in parenting to both sexes equally.

Only this sort of analysis would have removed the root causes of discrimination. I wanted to start with this example for the simple reason that it highlights the risks involved in an isolationist analysis of the 'rights' or 'voice' of any particular group. It foregrounds the importance of realizing that negotiations over rights and voice are not only negotiations of empowerment for one group, but also negotiations in which other groups will be asked to change their identities and their entitlements.

¹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/newsid_7504000/7504637.stm ;
<http://business.timesonline.co.uk/tol/business/law/article4327438.ece>

And in relation to the subject of our conference today, this example suggests that, if we are interested in working to promote children's rights – which surely is what we are trying to achieve when we talk about 'learner voice' - we cannot afford to ignore the implications of such changes for adults' rights and identity.

I know that many of the presentations today have talked about the cultural changes that are required to enable learner voice, and have talked about the range of techniques and practices that can be used to facilitate it. But what I want to do at the end of the conference, is to turn the lens back upon ourselves as a focus of attention, and to ask 'what are the implications for adult identity' of taking children's rights and learner voice seriously?

There are three key areas that I particularly want to explore

First, I want to explore some of the ways in which 'traditional' adulthood has been challenged by ideas of children's agency in the 'digital age'

Second, I want to consider some responses to this in education – in particular I want to interrogate the models of 'adulthood' that are offered by advocates of personalized learning

Third, I want to explore how a deconstruction of 'adulthood' might be an important initial step in developing an education system that truly enables learner voice.

Before I do this, though, I think it would be helpful just to provide a little historical context – and apologies for those of you to whom this is very familiar.

What do we mean by 'childhood'?

It seems a strange question to ask – after all, we all 'know a child when we see one'. See – there's one. My niece Emilia.

And yet, at different times and in different places, childhood means different things. Childhood lasts for different periods of time, for example, depending on where you are in the world and what cultures you participate in. And it involves widely different taken for granted activities - in Mayan culture, for example, it's not unusual to see four year old children handling machetes, while in the UK children under 16 are banned from buying kitchen knives. Even in the UK we do not have a firm notion of when 'childhood' or 'youth' is seen to finish – for example, for the purposes of having sex, you're deemed an adult at 16, but you're not deemed an adult for the purposes of drinking until you're 18. Childhood, then, isn't necessarily something that has an inevitable character that is intrinsic to the biological age of the human. Instead, childhood is socially constructed by the contexts and values of different societies².

Indeed, our current notion of what counts as 'childhood' is a relatively recent development emerging from the practices of industrialization and mass education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The rise of the so-called 'standard model' of childhood emerged from the rise of the 'developmental' state (closely tied in with the rise of modern capitalism) which saw material and human resources as sites of investment for future return.

Children, in this social structure, were the paramount investment that needed to be quarantined by parents and the state from potential corruption. This perspective, influenced further by sociologists such as Parsons and psychologists such as Piaget, produced an idea of childhood as a stage of 'development' and 'investment' requiring

² See Aries, Holland, Prout, James, Jenks, Lee etc etc etc for longer analysis and critique...

protection.

This idea of childhood produced, reciprocally, an idea of adulthood as a time of 'completion' (if childhood was about development, then adulthood necessarily had to be about the achievement of the end point of development); as a time of responsibility (if children needed protection, then adults needed to become protectors); as a time of independence (if children were dependent upon adults for their well-being).

Just as modern 'childhood' was brought into being through the structures and institutions of modernity, so too was modern 'adulthood' brought into being at this time. What children lost in the rights and opportunities of full personhood – the ability to be considered full members of society – some would say they gained from the development of responsibilities of adults to care, protect for and invest in them.

<i>Childhood</i>	:	<i>Adulthood</i>
<i>Private</i>	:	<i>Public</i>
<i>Nature</i>	:	<i>Culture</i>
<i>Irrational</i>	:	<i>Rational</i>
<i>Dependent</i>	:	<i>Independent</i>
<i>Passive</i>	:	<i>Active</i>
<i>Incompetent</i>	:	<i>Competent</i>
<i>Play</i>	:	<i>Work</i>

(Prout, 2005:10)

This balancing act, in which adulthood and childhood are produced in relation to each other, is played out through all of the institutions of childhood today. Modern schooling is fundamental to reproducing this relationship – it separates children from the potentially malign influences of the world, it places adults in a position of care and responsibility, it requires adults to work on behalf of children in the public sphere. It also ensures that children are seen as unable to have a voice in the world, and are assumed to be incompetent until they reach maturity.

These two sets of identities 'the dependent child and the responsible adult' are reciprocally constructed. They feed into and nurture each other.

If we want to challenge this traditional notion of childhood we therefore need to be aware that we may also, in so doing, need to challenge the traditional notion of adulthood. And that this carries some risks for children.

To elaborate that point, I want to talk about a particular phenomenon that has emerged over the last quarter century and the implications this has had for ideas of child-adult relations. I want to talk, specifically, about the ways in which the idea of children's ability to use technologies has been used by many, including myself, to argue for the need to take children seriously as social actors and to pay more attention to their voices in redesigning education. But that this has, also led to the construction of some new models of adulthood in education which pose, I would argue, significant risks in the long term to some children's wellbeing and rights.

The challenge of the 'digital native' to traditional adulthood

Childhood in Western industrialised countries has clearly been changing over the last quarter century:

for example, children have become identified as a significant consumer group and identified as a target market in their own right;

children have been identified as having rights independent of their parents – and have

been considered as worthy of attention outside of their families for the first time;

children have also been subject in the UK to significant new laws constraining their mobility and access to public space – to name a few areas.

I would argue, however, that it is in children and young people's use of digital technologies, that we have seen the most fundamental change in our understanding of what 'childhood' and by implication 'adulthood' means today.

Let's consider some of the arguments that are commonly made about young people and technologies, often grouped under the generic heading of the 'digital natives' thesis:

Young people were born into a period in which digital information and communications technologies were taken for granted; they have a natural affinity for these technologies because they have grown up around them; they are developing completely new approaches to learning and to working by using these new technologies; such as multi-tasking, rapid information assimilation, using trial and error, networked logic and communication young people are leading the way in redesigning the future of work and education through these new practices.

These ideas are pervasive in political, media and academic analysis of childhood at the turn of the 21st century. The following are just some examples, but I'm sure you could all include your own:

For most adults the digital ecology in which we now find ourselves grew up around us and we have adapted accordingly, some more readily than others. Our young were born into it; it is their natural environment. (Green and Bigum, 1992:135)

In today's world most adults would do very badly as kids. There are many more complexities, ambiguities and differences...because we have an information access which reaches across the planet. (Negroponte, 1996 p x)

Ask me my three main priorities for Government, and I tell you: education, education and education. The first wonder of the world is the mind of a child. I sometimes sit reading a paper or watching TV, and look up to see my children at a computer, and marvel at what they can do; using that computer as easily as we read a book. (Blair, 1996)

On an average school night, he spends an hour on the computer and at the weekend he's capable of spending the entire day in front of the screen. 'He doesn't play games, he just sits there programming.' Mrs Dorey said Christopher's talent did not run in the family. 'His stepfather is a policeman and his natural father is a VAT officer, so none of us have got a computing background or a particular flair for it,' she said. (Daily Mail, 2000)

The idea of the digital native produces an idea of childhood that is fundamentally at odds with the standard modal. It produces an idea of childhood that is active, competent, able to act in the real world (consider the number of stories of child entrepreneurs or even hackers), able to master the dominant symbolic tools of the culture to meet their own ends, and independent of adults in the effects they are able to have on the world.

In many ways, this is a powerful idea. It foregrounds the capacities that children have

when they are enabled to learn and work in environments that motivate and engage them; it foregrounds the capacities that children may have to act as social agents on the world. For many advocates for children's rights, the 'discovery' of the digital native over the last quarter century, has been a powerful lever to make the case for changes in educational practices and policy. How many of us have argued, for example, that schools need to take seriously children's out of school lives because they are developing skills and tools that adults are not yet familiar with?

And yet, what is often overlooked in the myth of the 'digital native' is that it is not only producing a new model of childhood, but also a new model of adulthood. If we remember, the standard model not only involved costs to young people (in removing their rights and their identity as social actors), it also involved benefits – protection, advocacy on their behalf, responsibility by adults for their wellbeing. The myth of the digital native, however, fundamentally undermines the capacity of adults to play these roles:

For example, this myth suggests that adults' knowledge and experience is no longer relevant for the world of today

Second, this myth suggests that adults cannot provide guidance for young people on how to learn and develop and move into the world around them.

Third, this myth suggests that adults need, instead, to look to young people for leadership in entering a new technological and social era.

This is summed up in one of the statements presented by an information minister in 1997

Our children are already moving into the digital future. They are quickly mastering the tools that they will need for the new century. Some of us need to catch up. (John Battle MP, Hansard, 1997)

Now, while there have been critiques of the standard model of adult-child relations in the past, what is interesting is that over the last 10 years, we have seen this idea of the 'digital native' picked up and used, not to advocate for children's rights, but to construct a new adult-child relationship at the heart of the education system.

Consider, for example, the following quotations from Will Hutton and Charles Leadbeater. In both cases, these commentators take the myth of the child as the naturally canny consumer and apply it to the creation of a fundamentally new adult-child relationship in education: personalization.

Young people are far more avid and aware consumers than they used to be. This culture is bound to have an effect on how they view education. Many secondary school age children now have mobile phones for which they can get 24/7 telephone support, different price plans, equipment and service packages. They are used to a world in which they can search for, download and share digital music on the Internet. (Leadbetter, 2004:10)
On my son's Xbox we choose each member of the football teams we pit against each other. I inevitably lose. 'You can have Beckham, Lampard and Gerrard' goes his challenge. 'And I'll be Northern Ireland with 10 men'. This is personalisation a la mode, even if the result never changes. The Xbox generation is growing up in a world which it expects to shape to meet its particular needs. From the iPod playlist to the blogging sites, it's all about choice. [...] These phenomena – personalisation and plural, diversified production – are the unavoidable realities of modern business life [...] (Hutton, 2006)

This new relationship loses all reference to adult responsibility and caregiving in the inter-generational contract and, instead, presents a picture of adults as salesmen and marketers 'selling education to children as canny consumers. Consider, for example, Tom Bentley's influential 'Classroom without walls', which argued that:

Young people have a far wider range of distractions and alternative pursuits on offer than ever before. The growth of multi-and mass media, including computer games, pop music and the Internet, as well as the proliferation of retail and consumer goods, and leisure activities and facilities, means that young people choose between an increasingly wide range of alternatives. [...] Information is accessible in ways which older people are still struggling to get to grips with, while the young, more often than not, take to them like ducks to water. Educational institutions must compete with a dazzling array of alternative information, distractions and sources of motivation and example.[...] Whether we think that teachers ought, in principle, to have to compete with such influences on their pupils' attention, they already do (Bentley, 1998: 80-81)

The implications of this analysis were to suggest that we rethink the education system around a new unit, the unit of the individual child:

...a shift in our thinking about the fundamental organisational unit of education, from the school, an institution where learning is organised, defined and contained, to the learner, an intelligent agent with the potential to learn from any and all of her encounters with the world around her. (Bentley, 1998:1)

What these accounts do is create a rationale for an education system that is based upon the notion of the child as autonomous and independent from their environment. It creates a rationale for an education system premised upon the notion that children naturally and easily become clever consumers of multiple choices. It creates a rationale for an education system premised upon an adult-child relationship in which the child is assumed to have agency, knowledge, rational decision-making abilities and the adult is simply there to provide a set of choices designed to lure children into one educational option or another.

And it is in this assumption of a new adult-child relationship that there are real risks for different groups of children. These risks become visible when we ask the simple question – how is it that children are enabled to become active and informed consumers and choice makers?

When we return to the accounts that I've already presented, one of the common tendencies in the 'digital native' field is the extrapolation of personal experiences to 'universal realities'. Consider, for example, Tony Blair's observation that his children 'use the computer as easily as I read a book'; or Will Hutton's analysis of his own son's choices in playing Xbox, or Charlie Leadbeater's argument that many children have 24/7 phone services. What these accounts do is to make invisible the work of adults (in this case middle class adults with significant financial and cultural capital) which goes in to making it possible for these children to become 'digitally native' and familiar with the world of computers, 24/7 services and gaming. These accounts universalize one set of experiences and argue that they should become the model for all future adult-child relationships, without acknowledging the necessary role played by adults and social networks in achieving this identity.

Empirical studies, in contrast, which actually attempt to understand what it is that goes into creating digital natives, show a complex picture of the types of support needed to develop mastery and full participation in the digital world. This includes:

1. *access to digital technologies*
2. *the opportunity to have time to play with and use digital technologies*
3. *a supportive domestic environment in which the dispositions to use digital technologies are encouraged and promoted*
4. *resources to provide help when children get stuck*
5. *resources and cultural practices which encourage participation in cultures which encourage mastery and development of capacities*

Indeed, when we examine the processes by which children come to develop their competencies as digital natives, this is seen to be the product not so much of birth and biology, but of their participation in a complex set of networks and their access to diverse material and cultural resources.

The suggestion, then, that we should structure an education system around the myth of the digital native is particularly dangerous if we have any interest at all in ensuring the rights and voice of all children. If we did so, we would be designing an education system premised on the notion that there is no longer a need for adults to take a role in guidance, in care, in responsibility and support for young people. While those children with access to these networks outside school might flourish given the opportunity to set their own direction, those children without those networks are likely to be seriously disadvantaged.

What the analysis of the digital native myth suggests, then, is that the question we need to ask in relation to adult-child relationships in the digital age is not 'how do we redesign education around the idea of the newly competent child', but how do we design education systems to ensure that all children are able to build and exercise such competencies.

As such, those of us with an interest in *all* children's rights and voice, necessarily find ourselves having to argue for the importance of the role of the adult in enabling children to build their agency and their voice.

There is, of course, a significant risk in this acknowledgement. By reinforcing, again, that children are dependent to a significant extent upon adults for building and exercising their voice, we run the risk of conspiring with all those who would argue that children's views and ideas should be ignored until they reach maturity.

We seem caught in a double-bind then – it is as though by acknowledging that children at different times are dependent upon adults for support, we have to ignore their rights and their voice; or that by recognizing their competencies and abilities, that we have to ignore their need for support. It is as though there are only two possible 'identities' for adults in this context, a debilitating choice between the strict paternal role of 'father knows best' and an impoverished identity as marketeer, simply 'selling education to the kids'.

The only response to this double-bind is to begin to explore a new notion of adulthood and to build a new set of inter-generational relationships which are not premised upon 'fixed' identities. Rather than sustaining the standard model of childhood, or simply flipping it on its head so that adult and child relationships are reversed, we need to develop a model which acknowledges that certain attributes are not mutually exclusive; in which, for example, children's need for support and their capacity to be powerful social actors can co-exist; in which adults need to learn new skills and their capacity to provide responsibility and care are seen as compatible. This model requires the development of a new and more fluid notion of identity and generation than the model

that we operate with at present³

What might be the building blocks for a new adult identity?

This new adult identity needs to start with a recognition that adulthood is already an increasingly fluid identity. The notion of adulthood as a time of stability and completion, of fixed identities and lifelong roles, has become increasingly fragile as we have seen a loss of 'jobs for life' or even 'careers for life'. Adults increasingly have to see themselves as learners and as subject to significant professional change if they are to thrive in the economic and social contexts of today.

We have also seen a shift towards more fluid social and personal relationships; changes in family make-up increase the likelihood of us having to develop, invent and inhabit new family roles (extended family/ friend-family) while maintaining old ones (carer, sibling, parent).

We have also seen a disentanglement of cultural identity from geography and class, which allows the exploration of multiple identity roles and practices. Our political views, our religion, our sexual orientation are now much more likely to be expressed through choice than through historical and familial norms.

As such, when we examine adulthood, we already begin to see that it is a time of change, of flux, of development and of learning. The idea of adulthood as this state of secure knowledge, stable roles and permanent identities needs to be replaced with a notion of adulthood as significantly more provisional.

The second step towards building a new model of adulthood might be to examine how adulthood is described by those experiencing it. Studies of transitions to adulthood suggest that, rather than seeing adulthood as a 'destination' which is defined by biological age, we tend to live it as an achievement produced through specific roles, activities and events. These activities include such events as becoming a parent, getting a job, taking on certain financial responsibilities; but they are also dependent upon how family, friends and others articulate and interpret those new roles and your identity in them. How many of us, for example, find ourselves growing or shrinking in age and maturity depending upon what role we are playing – with our parents? Our children? Our work colleagues? Our friends? Adulthood, from this perspective, is less a permanent biological state, than an ongoing achievement produced in relation with the individuals and society around you.⁴ By this criteria, many children, those caring for others, those with parental responsibilities, those working, would be considered 'adults' at a time when other adults, living at home, as students, unemployed, for example, might not be.

The third step, I would argue, is in relation to the question of how we tackle the issue of 'technological change'. For the last quarter century, as I've said, we have seen technological change as something that children are uniquely well placed to adapt to.

Arguably, however, we can no longer sustain this argument. First, because those children who were first defined as digital natives (the post 1974 generation) are very definitely adults now. Second, because the pace of change is such that both children and adults are equally confronted with the need to develop new skills and create new social practices. While Douglas Adams used to say that 'technology is whatever was invented since you were born'. Today, it is clear that whatever your age, adaptation to and appropriation of new tools is likely to be an ongoing task. The tools that everyone is so

³ This analysis is indebted to Nick Lee's account of emergent forms of childhood and adulthood in 'Childhood in the Age of Uncertainty'.

⁴ See Douglas Hartman and Teresa Toguchi Swartz, The transition to adulthood from the perspective of young transitioning adults project, University of Minnesota 2006

excited about today, Social Software for example, have only been around in their current form for 4 or 5 years⁵. The idea that children are uniquely privileged in their understanding and access to technology is unsustainable; they too need to adapt and change their practices on an ongoing basis. We need, then, to challenge the use of technology as a generational marker that is distinct to the adult-child divide, and instead, we need to adopt a notion of multiple 'waves' of practice which are much more finely grained than along generational lines. At the same time, we also need to recognize that digital technologies are, in the whole, designed, manufactured, marketed and purchased by adults for adults. Far from being a 'youth sphere', the digital world is intimately tied to the adult world.

A fourth step requires an analysis that moves beyond a generational account of society, to explore the shared challenges and risks faced by individuals and groups across the age divide. It is one which attempts to ask, more generally, what does it take to be able to fully and actively participate in these domains? What are the tools, networks, resources and practices that characterize and enable participation?

And in this analysis, we need again to challenge the old notion of adulthood as independent and autonomous, and instead acknowledge that agency is produced in the world not so much by the capacity of individuals to separate themselves from the world and to act in isolation, but by their capacity to connect with the world, to depend upon it, to network with it in order to be able to effect change. Whether children or adults, the more agency we have in the world, the more we are likely to be dependent upon others and upon other resources for that agency. For example, the most powerful man in the world, George Bush, is dependent for that power not upon his independence and his autonomy, but upon the networks and resources he is connected with.

A new model of adulthood, then, is one which recognizes that identity and agency is produced in inter-relation with others. That agency is built through networks of people and resources, and that we, in turn, play a role in structuring the agency and voice of others. This analysis of agency moves us away from the dichotomy which sets up dependence and responsibility in opposition and which argues that we cannot both recognize children's needs and their voice. Instead it suggests, as Nick Lee argues, that our challenge is to understand how the networks of which we are all a part go to build the agency of different children and adults.

We need to move away from the dichotomy of independence and dependence, towards a new notion of interdependence as the underpinning means of producing social agency.

Implications for Learner Voice and Children's Rights

But now I want to come back to consider the implications of these thoughts for learner voice strategy in schools.

If we look at learner voice strategy in schools we are familiar with looking for a whole range of markers of children's involvement in educational decisions and day-to-day life. We have ladders of participation that identify different roles for learners, and against these different roles we judge the degree to which schools can be said to promote learner voice.

What I am trying to suggest, however, is that we might want to explore a different approach which focuses not only on the creation of new roles for young people in schools, but on the reciprocal construction of new roles for adults in the school setting. After all, if we are serious about challenging the standard model of adult-child relations, and equally serious about not simply replacing it with an impoverished view of the adult

⁵ Thanks to Ewan Macintosh for pointing this out so clearly (see www.edublogs.org.uk)

as salesman, we need to think equally seriously about what the new 'teacher' identity is in a world of 'learner' voice. And the catchphrase 'the shift from the sage on the stage to the guide by the side' simply isn't going to cut the mustard.

So, what might a learner voice model premised upon rethinking adulthood look like in practice? It could involve two key principles:

- Context-dependency of roles
- Educational goal is to build the dependencies and networks that enable the achievement of agency

Context-dependency of roles

What this means is that 'who gets to be teacher is dependent on the specific context'. We are already, in the micro-interactions of parents and children, teachers and students, beginning to see some recognition of the fluidity of roles of expert and novice. This teacher, for example, is presenting themselves as a learner as well as a specialist:

I'm not so stupid as to think that there isn't someone in that room who knows a lot more about it than me. And that doesn't bother me, I don't care. If there's a child who's a real expert you learn from them, don't you? It doesn't matter

Similarly, this parent clearly articulates that in some settings, she plays the role of advisor and protector, while in others her children play this role:

Mrs S I think, because they always talk to me about things, why this, and I explain to them, this is good or bad, why it isn't good, why it isn't bad

KF And then they explain the computer to you?

Mrs S Yes, they do. They always say if you buy.... This is good, this is bad, and we can have this and then this

However, for this sort of recognition of the potential for children and adults to occupy multiple positions in relation to expertise to be embedded in school systems, we would need to rethink the basic categorisations we use to identify children and adults in schools. The idea of the child as 'learner' and the adult as 'teacher' immediately reinforces the standard model, and immediately renders adult-child relationships fragile as soon as we take children's rights seriously. How then, should we describe adults in school settings? One school I know talks about teachers as 'lead-learners'. This is an interesting way of thinking about it – it makes visible the contingency of adult knowledge, and the continuity of change. It opens up the possibility of children and adults to learn together.

In addition to changes in language, another marker of a school with this new model of adulthood, might, then, be the availability of systems which made visible the identity of adults as learners and the possibility of knowledge exchange between children and adults. Would there be noticeboards where adults could sign up alongside children to learn new things? Would there be clear communication of adults' progress in professional development activities alongside SATs results? Embedding fluidity of roles requires more than enabling children to act as leaders and teachers, it requires the sanctioning of the possibility of teachers to act as learners as well.

We might see the development of new criteria by which you would be considered a 'teacher', and these might be open to multiple groups and individuals. This approach would, for example, use the idea of peer-referencing – once you'd been able to demonstrate competence in an area, you could teach and share this. The Personalisation

by Pieces approach that Cambridge Education is a practical strategy for achieving this. And the Virtual Workspace in Wolverhampton also shows what happens when you allow multiple age groups to set up their own interest groups – adults can then articulate their identity as learners as well as educators, and reciprocally children are enabled to develop these multiple roles. Adulthood and teaching, then, becomes tied much more to the achievement of specific roles, responsibilities and experiences, rather than to biological age.

This might lead to the development of completely new approaches to timetabling – the idea of separate teacher/ student timetables might disappear – instead, we would see students and teachers operating in much more fluid ways in which there are times set aside to share knowledge and communicate progress. There is an approach to conferences called the 'unconference' which demonstrates how it is possible to generate programmes on the fly that allow for flexible knowledge sharing and learning amongst different groups.

We would also, likely, need to see a very different approach to curriculum and pedagogy. If we acknowledge that the quality and validity of knowledge is context dependent rather than universal, we then need to build educational practices that involve the co-development of knowledge and the opportunity for both children and adults to work together to explore new domains. The Enquiring Minds programme at Futurelab has gone some way to modeling how this approach might play out in schools.

Changing the Educational Goal to build the dependencies and networks that enable the achievement of agency

The rethinking of the model of adulthood also changes the educational objectives of schooling and hence the relationship between adults and children in that setting. In the past, the educational contract was one that characterised the adult-child relationship as being one of protection and separation from adult life, and the acquisition of the fixed 'stock' of knowledge required to enable the child to enter stable adulthood.

In contrast, the 'free-market' solution suggests the adult-child relationship should be reconfigured as a salesman-consumer relationship, in which the adults are responsible for ensuring that there are a range of knowledge choices on offer and the child is responsible for navigating their way through these to successfully develop the skills of successful adulthood.

However, if we take seriously the new model of 'adulthood' I have already outlined, which sees adulthood as contingent, an achievement and dependent upon others, we need a new adult-child relationship in the school setting. The goal of the adult, in this model, is not to defend the child from the real world, nor to simply absolve themselves of all responsibility for the child's development by offering choices, it is, instead, to systematically identify the resources – knowledge, people, skills, networks, experiences – that the child needs to build to achieve agency and voice in the world.

If we were looking for examples of this principle in schools today, what would we be looking for?

We would be looking for examples of the extent and reach of the networks that children were being enabled to participate in - who are they encouraged to connect with, what roles are they encouraged to play?

We would look to understand the extent and reach of the resources that children were being enabled to mobilize - what skills and competencies are they developing in using resources that enable them to participate in different communities? How far are tools and resources enabling children to communicate with others?

We would look to understand the extent and reach of children's ability to act in and effect change in their environment. What roles are children enabled to play, what impact are they enabled to have upon and in the world, how local and specialized or global and generalized are these roles?

Many of these indicators are those that are familiar from the learner voice movement. And indeed, this is my point. In an analysis of learner voice which takes into account the changed identity of adulthood as well as childhood, it becomes possible to embed learner voice approaches not as a marginal 'nice to have' recognition of children's rights, but at the heart of the educational endeavour. If our notion of what it takes to be 'successfully adult' has changed, so to do the processes by which that adulthood is developed and enabled need to change.

Conclusion

I started by talking about the risks involved in considering only one group when we were trying to advocate for their rights and voice. And I have finished by arguing that a re-examination of what it means to be 'adult' is a powerful strategy for further embedding new ideas of childhood in the education system.

The challenge, then, for those of us keen to enact children's rights through learner voice is as much the challenge of creating the opportunities to express the fragility and contingency of adult knowledge, as it is in creating the opportunities to express the expertise and competence of young people.

My feeling then, is that unless we fundamentally destabilize the binary oppositions of adulthood and childhood, unless we realize that there are shared agendas and concerns across the age gap, then we risk both abandoning those children who do require our support, and failing to take seriously those children who are already leading the way to new ideas, practices and ways of living in the world.

The only way of creating this new adult-child relationship that is both empowering and responsible, is by unsettling and challenging our notions of adulthood and reflecting upon what it is that enables any of us to have a voice, to achieve agency and to act in and upon the world.

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