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# **Perils of Perspective: Identifying adult confidence in the child's Capacity, Autonomy, Power and Agency (CAPA) in readiness for Voice- Inclusive Practice**

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## **Abstract**

In recent years, children's voice initiatives in education have gained increased recognition and application. However, while the concept of child and student 'voice' is not new, there remains a high level of inconsistency in how voice-focused initiatives are implemented across education sectors. Not all voice initiatives are successful, mainly because such initiatives are not always willingly adopted by the adults directly responsible for the education of children. If authentic Voice-Inclusive Practice is to occur, greater recognition of the impact an adult's conceptualisation of children has on their willingness and ability to embrace Voice-Inclusive Practice needs to take place. Understanding the key informants that adults draw upon to conceptualise children and their capabilities can assist educational strategists in identifying adult readiness for authentic and effective Voice-Inclusive Practice. Voice-Inclusive Practice is defined as actions and processes that incorporate children's perspectives and actively engage with children on matters that affect them. This paper presents a conceptual model CAPA (Capacity, Autonomy, Power and Agency) representing the subjective designations *adults* place on the child that informs the application of sustained Voice-Inclusive Practice and offers a 'pre-voice' exploration of an individual's likelihood of engaging in voice-inclusive practice.

Keywords: agency; autonomy; capacity; child voice; power; rights

## **Introduction**

Educational practices that acknowledge the child's voice, value the child's perspective, and respect the child's experience are increasingly recognised as critical in establishing an inclusive pedagogy (Adams, 2014; Lundy, 2007). Moreover, a commitment to listening to, and taking seriously the perspectives of children has shown to enhance the development of quality educational experiences, learning-centred dialogue, and transformational classroom practice in western education systems (Kane & Chimwayange, 2014; Rinaldi, 2006). However, despite the mounting evidence of its value, strategic action that includes the child's voice in the day-to-day experience of education and social provision remains scarce partly due to competing views on the merits of voice in education (Rudduck, 2007; Robinson & Taylor, 2013). For example, even with the relative success of the UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools program in the UK context (UNICEF UK, 2018), only 19% (n=4700) of schools nationally are participating. As only 7% (n=1720) of schools are accredited as rights aware or rights respecting (as at January 2018), this represents only a small proportion of the 24,372 schools in the UK alone. Approaches such as these promote pedagogical strategies that include student perspectives and have been shown to enable greater student engagement (Baroutsis, McGregor & Mills, 2016; Covell, 2010; Rudduck, 2007), but it remains that in many contexts, intentional Voice-Inclusive Practice (VIP) is limited (Sargeant & Gillett-Swan, 2015). It is clear that significant work remains to establish such practices as mainstream.

Voice-Inclusive Practice is defined as actions and processes that incorporate children's perspectives and actively engage with children on matters that affect them (Sargeant & Gillett-Swan, 2015). Voice-Inclusive Practice contributes to the enactment of the participatory intent of the broader United Nations (2016 para. 11) definition of Inclusion being, "a process of systemic reform embodying changes and modifications in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures and strategies in education to overcome barriers

with a vision serving to *provide all students of the relevant age range with an equitable and participatory learning experience and environment that best corresponds to their requirements and preferences*” (emphasis added).

Voice-Inclusive Practice consists of the four organising elements: everyday *achievable, authentic* and free of burden or guilt, *integral* beyond the pleasure or convenience of the adult, and *compatible* with the rights, responsibilities and citizenship of adults (for an elaboration of these organising elements see Gillett-Swan & Sargeant, 2018a; Sargeant, 2018; Sargeant & Gillett-Swan, 2018). Voice-Inclusive Practice is underpinned by a recognition of each child’s capacity and right to voice as elaborated by the participatory mandates of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989). Within this context, the term ‘voice’ represents the enactment of the child’s participatory rights to express an opinion, remain silent, access information and be included in the decision-making processes on matters affecting them (United Nations, 2009). However, such a broad acknowledgment of the child’s voice is not universally accepted. The variation in student participation in educational decision making, shows that the recognition of the child as capable by the majority of adults cannot be assumed.

Student participation in educational contexts can oscillate from tokenistic consultation through to shared decision making (Hart, 2008; Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2015). This is often dependent on the will of the adults in power (Kennedy & Datnow, 2011; Sargeant & Harcourt, 2012) and typically ignores the mandates of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) that call for regular and authentic consultation. But, simply imploring a change in practice will likely yield a limited effect if teachers lack confidence in the child’s capacity. As such, children’s capacity to express an informed opinion to communicate what is ‘real’ and what is important to them remains contested by adults who have limited confidence in the potential of their insights (Bae, 2009; Komulainen, 2007). It is likely that the more often the child’s voice is enabled and heard, the more likely an adult will give recognition to their capacity

(Bae, 2009).

In contexts where voice is limited and a lack of routine opportunity for children to demonstrate capacity endures, any change in practice may only come when there is a change in attitude. Such attitude reformation may be achieved through guided exposure to the capacities of the child and the UNCRC (Bae, 2009, Horgan et al., 2017; Keddie, 2015). As Woodhead (2005, p.95) proclaimed “implementing the Convention does not just alter the status of children. It also alters the status of adults. Respecting the rights of young children changes the way we think about ourselves!”.

This paper explores the adult conceptualisations of, and confidence in, the child’s Capacity, Autonomy, Power and Agency [CAPA]; the pre-conditions that actualise children’s participatory rights through Voice-Inclusive Practice in education and schooling. By exploring adult conceptualisations of the child’s individual and collective capacity [C], the notion of childhood autonomy [A], the varying delegation of power afforded to children [P] and children’s agency [A], an assessment of a professional’s (adult) readiness for Voice-Inclusive Practice is enabled. Through a process of self-reflection, the recognition of an adult’s conceptualisation of the CAPA of the child, an individual’s level of readiness to engage in authentic participatory methods in education can be realised. This paper does not focus on the child’s voice per se, but instead should be considered a ‘pre-voice’ exploration of the conceptual pre-conditions that serve to inhibit or enable an adult’s willingness to engage in voice-inclusive practice themselves.

### **Conceptualising the ‘child’**

In contemporary educational contexts, numerous learning theories and teaching methodologies abound. Some approaches support an industrial view of schooling through mainstream mass education that groups children with similar age-based capabilities and educational proficiencies (Robinson, 2008). Other approaches prioritise a more free, open

and democratic approach to education where the learners and the leaders engage in dialogue that support common educational goals (Baroutsis, McGregor & Mills, 2016). While all approaches on the continuum of educational provision have some merit, the successful implementation of democratic approaches rely on adults' viewing each child as capable in some way. When deliberating on the child's capacity and the extent to which adults will afford them power and agency in practice, adults will draw upon key informants such as their own personal experience, childhood memories, observations of children, and their own relationships to or with children (discussed later).

However, to meet organisational imperatives the 'child' is often conceptualised according to sometimes contradictory categorisations such as children, class or cohort that diminishes the identity of the individual. The wide-ranging views of the child held by adults (Alderson, 2007; Frierson, 2016) are informed by a number of conscious and subconscious informants that then influence their conceptualisation of the 'child' (as a person), childhood (at a life stage), or children (as a collective).

Adults often draw upon an idiosyncratic schema of either a child, childhood, or children. Some elements of this conceptualisation may be the same or similar to other adults (such as age range) but each conceptualisation maintains a level of personal perspective (Sargeant & Harcourt, 2012; United Nations, 2005, 2009). These perspectives may stem from an understanding of the child based on an individual who fits in their understanding of a 'child', a schema of a group of children who the adult considers representative of a group of 'children', or from a broader representation of 'childhood'. Ostensibly, the conceptualisation of child, childhood, or children may differ depending on the context in which each child is referenced. The body of literature relating to cognitive bias further supports this with acknowledgement that these processes are difficult to measure and understand as they often happen unconsciously (e.g. Einarsson & Granstrom, 2002; Rhodes, Leslie, & Tworek, 2012). However, "gain[ing] a thicker, more compelling picture of the complexity of culture, politics

and psychology of childhood” (Steinberg, 2011, p. 8) is only complete when the child’s voice is heard. By understanding what it is like for children in their context, a wider realisation of their inherent capacities can be achieved (Fernandez, 2011; Gillett-Swan, 2013; Wyness, 1999).

The child can also be defined by relational context (e.g., student, sibling, offspring), physical context (e.g., in the home, at school, in public) and situational context (e.g., school, play, community action) and further influence the possible conceptualisations of what ‘a child’ is at any particular time. As such, each child can be conceptualised in multiple ways according to arbitrary ‘adult’ conditions. In contemporary society, structural conceptualisations dominate the view of children as vulnerable and in need of adult protection and therefore powerless (Burman, 2008; Steinberg, 2011). For example, in the discourse surrounding children’s use of social media, contextualised as ‘cyber-safety’, children tend to be described as incompetent (structural) as opposed to competent (sociological) in their capacity to respond to the challenges of the networked age (Gillett-Swan & Coppock, 2016; Holloway, Greene & Livingstone, 2013; Livingstone et. al., 2011). As Steinberg (2011, p. 7) notes of the structural perspective, “it is adults who decide what children should know and how they should be socialised”. The extent to which each child is afforded opportunities for voice in their daily lives is dependent on the level of adult alignment with these, often deficit-based, perspectives.

Alderson (2007, p. 2276) observes that, “[c]hildhood and youth tend to be associated with being ignorant, volatile, foolish, over-emotional, needy and helplessly dependent”. Such attributions reinforce a wider deficit perception of children and childhood which Alderson notes is counter to the converse view of adulthood which “tends to be identified with being informed, stable, wise, rational, reliable and above all competent. However, at times many children can be wise and many adults can be foolish” (2007, p.2276). Such views pervade many child related systems. As such, in seeking to identify why children continue to be



positioned as passive and unreliable commentators on their own experience, the authors identified key factors that impact on adult conceptualisations of children in context. In order to ‘see’ children differently, one must first recognise (a) *how* children are seen, and (b) how those views are formulated. Once recognised, adult readiness for Voice-Inclusive practice can be identified.

In seeking to ascertain adult readiness for Voice-Inclusive Practice, it remains that “the condition of childhood is one in which the agent is not yet in a position to speak in her own voice because there is no voice which counts as hers” (Schapiro, 1999, p. 729). Contrarily, Chambers (2017, p. 75) notes that “despite lacking the capacities to act as persons, children still have the moral status of persons”. However moral status does not assure autonomy. When considering children in the primary and early-secondary school years, the varying definitions and adult perspectives on the capacities of children and the restrictions imposed on children’s agency continue to exclude children from the processes that ultimately determine their schooling experience at both the systemic and classroom level. It is apparent that many teachers continue to see children as simply ‘tabula rasa’; blank slates with little to offer in terms of curriculum and management perspectives (Heng, 2011). Approaches such as Voice-Inclusive Practice require a fundamental acceptance of the individual child’s capacity and participative potential. By establishing the teacher’s conceptualisation of the child, antecedent to strategy implementation, the adult professional’s readiness for Voice-Inclusive Practice is more likely to be maximised across the different settings, groupings and contexts of educational provision.

However, any assumption that an alignment with either a sociological or structural perspective automatically leads to Voice-Inclusive Practice or otherwise is problematic. It is here that an adult’s **perception** and **action** may actually diverge. Despite holding highly sociological perspective, some adults may still view the child as inferior and incomplete and lack confidence in the child’s ability to demonstrate capacity, autonomy, power and agency

(CAPA) thereby restricting the opportunities for Voice-Inclusive Practice. The key informants to such viewpoints are often personalised, historically biased and subjective. These subjective informants; experience, observation, relationships and, memories discussed below, can significantly impact on adult confidence in the CAPA of the child. Without confidence in a child's CAPA, traditional practice will most likely prevail.

### **CAPA – Capacity, Autonomy, Power & Agency**

If educators seek to engage in Voice-Inclusive Practice and move beyond tokenistic applications of student voice, first an appraisal of their own readiness must be undertaken before institutional readiness can be considered. In this context, 'readiness' for Voice-Inclusive Practice is defined by a professional confidence in the ability of children to make ongoing and worthwhile contributions to the educational process. Such confidence is evident when adults describe children as capable with potential as contributors to the educational process across each of the four pillars that support authentic participation: Capacity, Autonomy, Power and Agency (CAPA). The following sections introduce the CAPA pillars and how they were derived, and discuss how an adult's level of confidence in the child's CAPA impacts on the extent to which Voice-Inclusive Practice is potentiated or inhibited.

#### ***Capacity***

The child's capacity to perceive, understand, evaluate, act independently and participate in educational decision-making commensurate with their age, experience and maturity underpins Voice-Inclusive Practice and is foundational to enacting their participatory rights. However, it remains that the child's capacity is largely unacknowledged across all levels of schooling (Sargeant, 2014).

The United Nations affirms the importance of respecting children's evolving capacities "whereby children progressively acquire knowledge, competencies and

understanding” (United Nations, 2005, p. 8). A child’s capacity to form a view is informed by numerous conceptual informants such as the environment, cultural and social expectations, experience, and access to information (United Nations, 2009, p. 11). However, by restricting the opportunity for the child to *express* to that view, the extent of a child’s capacity is often hidden or dismissed based on external measures of assessment (Bae, 2009). As such, it is erroneous to assume that a child is incapable of expressing her or his own views without evidence of incapacity. Instead we should “presume that a child has the capacity to form her or his own views and recognize that she or he has the right to express them; it is not up to the child to first prove her or his capacity” (United Nations, 2009, p. 9).

Many of the conceptualisations of childhood centre on preconceived notions competence, intellect, capacity, ability, vulnerability and in contemporary contexts, materialism or self-interest (Brady, Lowe, & Lauritzen, 2015; Gillett-Swan, 2013; 2014; Morabito & Vandebroek, 2015; Sargeant, 2014; Sargeant & Gillett-Swan, 2015). These ‘adultist’ perceptions are often informed by context, environment and situation and influence the perceptions, interactions, and practices of adults towards children, many of which are power-laden and restrictive. But, as Woodhouse describes, “[c]hildren do not start out as autonomous beings; they grow into autonomy” (Woodhouse, 1992, p. 1756), yet they cannot do this without adult acceptance and openness to their capabilities.

Traditional justifications pointing to children’s relative immaturity and their need for controlled socialisation are incompatible with processes such as Voice-Inclusive Practice that acknowledge and support the child’s participation and autonomy rights (United Nations, 2005). By recognising children’s *evolving* capacities and development as positive and empowering (Milne, 2005), rather than as an excuse for authoritarian practices that restrict the child’s autonomy and self-expression, greater access to the child’s potential is enabled.

## *Autonomy*

Fundamental to Voice-Inclusive Practice is the child's right to freedom of opinion and expression (Gillett-Swan & Sargeant, 2018b; United Nations, 1989). Such freedom is actualised through a recognition of the child's capacity to act with autonomy and forethought. Autonomy is ostensibly a demonstration of Capacity through expression, dialogue and decision making, and action. Children's autonomy is directly related to their "continually emerging capacity that develops through relationships" (Binder, 1994, p. 1154). As it is adults who have the power to afford or restrict children's autonomy in different contexts, the confidence adults have in children's capacity to exhibit autonomy is significant. If the prevailing view of child is one of dependence and (lacking) capacity, a view described by Frierson (2016) that has much consensus and wide adult agreement, autonomy will be limited.

Autonomy is often considered in terms of an aspirational end state of childhood (Feinberg, 1994) and linked to citizen independence (Clayton, 2011). However such restrictive views places the child at risk of violation by others who have the power to "determine which goals she pursues when she is [assumed to be] unable rationally to decide for herself" (Clayton, 2011, p. 361). Like us, Bou-Habib and Olsaretti challenge the simplistic 'becomings' view of childhood, as such perspectives fail to "take the autonomy of children *as children* seriously" (2015, p. 27). Such arbitrary life stage demarcations between childhood and adulthood expose the flawed arguments of 'becomings' as "[t]here is no sharp line between the two stages of human life; they are really only useful abstractions from a continuous process of development, every phase of which differs only in degree from that preceding it" (Feinberg, 1994, p. 95).

Despite the research that supports the view that even very young children seek autonomy (Mullin, 2007), the prevailing view that children lack or have undeveloped capacity remains (Frierson, 2016). Such viewpoints are particularly evident in education

where policy and dominant pedagogies preserve a developmental rather than democratic model. More relevant to contemporary understandings are models such as democratic mentorship that apply a developmental understanding of the child's existing *and* developing capacities. While Cook-Sather (2002) urges educators to embrace the capacities of children to speak on their own behalf and contribute to the critical conversations around educational enhancement, this is not yet commonplace in schools and therefore limits the space for Voice-Inclusive Practice.

### ***Power***

As with autonomy, the child's expression of personal power is often subject to the designation of an (adult) authority, based on an assessment of their capacity. Power is a complex phenomenon that manifests differently dependent on individual characteristics, attributes, and social position. Power involves the "capacity to influence others ... [with] the overall power of an individual as the maximum possible influence he or she can exert on others" (Scott, 2001, p. 131). Children experience the impact of power hierarchies daily as they are structurally marginalised in relation to adults (Gillett-Swan & Sargeant, 2018c; Punch, 2002). Power is integrally connected to an individual's agency (Holland et al., 2010) and inherent within education through everyday governance, routine and classroom practices. Furthermore, "children are marginalised in an adult-centred world and they are controlled and constrained by adults within an unbalanced power relationship" (Meehan, 2016, p. 383).

Foucauldian understandings of education illustrate how the modern schooling system serves to both impose power on and restrict children's power through institutional practices and discipline. As Oswell (2013) describes, the very structure, organisation and division of schools perpetuates the restrictions on a child's ability to enact their personal power.

In forming a view of the child, whether consciously or not, past and current experiences, relationships and interactions influence how adults conceptualise and

subsequently designate power to the child in practice. Equally the allocation of power reveals the extent to which an adult has confidence in the child's capacity. For some children, power is authorised depending on the context and the associated (adult) authority within that frame. Differing contexts such as school, home, organised activities or in the community along with adults' personal experiences, memories from childhood, observations, and relationships with children both informs and influences whether the child is afforded power in a particular context. These subjective conceptual informants all influence how an adult assigns power that either inhibits or promotes the child's participatory position. These conceptualisations of the 'child' ultimately determine the extent to which adults acknowledge and enable the child's participation (Binder, 1994; Reyneke, 2013; Richman, 2005; Ronen, 2002; Todres & Higinbotham, 2013).

The emergence of child-centred pedagogy enables a different approach to children's role and relative power in education where each approach is "based on different ideas about the child, different systems of knowledge, and different notions of learning" (Oswell, 2013, p. 123). However, just because a teacher utilises a 'child-centred' pedagogy, does not mean that children's power will be enabled in the classroom or educational context. This is evident through the various hierarchies and models of participation such as Fielding (2011) and Hart (2008) as considered in schooling contexts.

### ***Agency***

Agency enables the voice of the child (Meehan, 2016) and in essence represents the combined manifestation of the preceding elements of CAPA- Capacity, Autonomy and Power. Agency is an individual's personal expression and active participation in the process of decision-making on matters affecting them. But, as Wyness (2015, p. 15) notes, "agency is not simply an autonomous space within which children are free to make choices; it is 'inflected with power'". Despite such assertions and the key mandates of the UNCRC that

assure to the child the right to personal control the affordance of agency remains at the discretion of those in power and in education, this discretion typically lies with teachers at the classroom level. As Wyness (1999, p. 354) describes, “the tradition within both sociology, psychology and educational studies has been to ignore or deny children any sort of status that would ground what children do in socially meaningful terms”. Such traditions consider children replete of the capacity to respond to important matters affecting their lives. This view is countered by the significant evidence alongside the mandates of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989, 2005, 2009) demonstrating that children *are* capable and connected to their educational experiences, yet receive limited opportunity to have a say or be involved (Gillett-Swan & Sargeant, 2018a; Hunleth, 2011; Mitra, 2014; Quinn & Owen, 2016; Sargeant & Gillett-Swan, 2015).

Despite evidence to the contrary, a number of deficit perspectives regard children “as lacking a capability for agency”, (Frierson, 2016, p. 334). Children are described as impulsive (Frankfurt, 2006), unfinished (Purdy, 1992), intensely demanding (Herman, 2009), incompetent and incapable decision-makers (Brighthouse, 2002; Schapiro, 2003), and internally dependent in their actions (Schapiro, 1999). Frierson (2016, p. 334) describes such critiques of **children’s agency** as grounded in assumptions that “children’s ‘wills’ are merely the immediate expressions of their passing desires. Even as they grow (slightly) more mature, they lack the requisite reflectiveness and sense of life as a whole to be autonomous choosers.”

Conversely, Giddens’ discussion of the complementary relationship between structure and agency underpins an understanding of the continua of children’s agency within educational contexts. To this end, “agency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place” (Giddens, 1984, p. 9). Agency in childhood is interesting as “for children themselves, childhood is a temporary period. For society, on the other hand, childhood is a permanent structural form or category

that never disappears even though its members change continuously, and its nature and conception vary historically” (Corsaro, 2005, p. 3). Adult conceptualisations of the child, childhood, and children, their relative capacity, autonomy, power and agency may prevail despite the movement out of childhood (growth) of the person upon which such conceptualisations are founded. The social, cultural, and structural relevance of conceptualisation therefore has the potential for significant influence on subsequent interactions with children beyond those originally considered.

The UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) offers a significant blueprint for including children’s views on issues that affect them and provides a foundation for developing policies where children are engaged as social actors. Yet, the agency of children to participate in their society and contribute valid opinions remains at the discretion of adults. As Oswell (2013, p. 37) describes, if agency (making some impact on the world) in childhood is to be recognised, adults must develop a greater openness to “the dynamic interactions and influences of children as agentic beings”. Considering the agency of children therefore grounds understandings of children as both *being* and *becoming* where they can be considered as “participants shaping, as well as being shaped by society” (Prout, 2000, p. 2).

Children’s participation and increased opportunity for agency also has positive effects for teachers, as Flutter (2007, p. 350) found, “[f]or teachers, the discovery that pupils can offer constructive criticism has had a profound impact on their practice, and has allowed them to reassess pupils and their capabilities”. An increased prioritisation of children’s participation rights in educational planning and provision can draw upon children’s unique perspectives and potentially influence the view that adults hold of children and the degree to which they afford them power and autonomy (Horgan et al., 2017; Pearce & Wood, 2016). As Oswell (2013, p. 38) notes, “the original interest in children’s agency was [political]...in many ways, [it was] to rebalance the perceived inequalities of power or to find ways of researching children that did not reproduce the prejudices of power.” Through such



interactions, the extent and presence of Voice-Inclusive Practice can be facilitated.

While each element of CAPA has some degree of interplay, each is unique and contributes to the broader facility of Voice-Inclusive Practice. The preceding discussion has provided some of the theoretical basis/underpinnings of the CAPA model so that the model itself can now be explained. The following section describes the conceptualising informants that teachers may draw upon that result in CAPA attributions that influence their practice.

### ***Subjective Informants***

When deliberating on the child's capacity and the extent to which adults will afford them power and agency in practice, adults will often draw upon four key, yet subjective, informants; personal experience, childhood memories, their own relationships to or with children and general observations. Malaguzzi<sup>1</sup> (1994 p.52) noted "there are hundreds of different images of the child. Each one of you has inside yourself an image of the child that directs you as you begin to relate to a child. This theory within you pushes you to behave in certain ways, it orients you as you talk to the child, listen to the child, observe the child. It is very difficult for you to act contrary to this internal image." An awareness of these informants to a CAPA conceptualisation (experience, memories, observations, relationships) enable practitioner adults to self-assess their confidence in the child and, by extension their readiness for Voice-Inclusive Practice.

The identification of the key subjective informants that influence CAPA confidence are drawn from a synthesis of relevant research literature including that outlined earlier in the paper, and from the prevailing commentary by adults completing professional development

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<sup>1</sup> Loris Malaguzzi is the founder of the Reggio Emilia approach from which an entire philosophy of education has evolved and further validates the significance of adult conceptualisations of children for practice

and teacher education workshops with the authors on child voice and the child's participation rights over the past 20 years. In conducting these workshops and critically considering the associated commentary relating to the workshop activities, the authors noticed that adults often considered the capacity of children, based on their subjective perceptions of children's capacity, autonomy, power and agency. When asked to take the perspective of a ten-year-old, many of the participating adults commented anecdotally that they used references such as a ten-year-old they personally knew, a collective of ten-year olds they observe, or based their thinking on their memories of when they themselves were 10, further reinforcing Malaguzzi's (1994) explanation of adult attributions of the child, and also the authors' own observations. In exploring these ideas further, the authors revisited the literature and previous work in order to make sense of their hypothesis that adults primarily base their assessment of children on particular subjective informants. In identifying these key influences on CAPA confidence the authors devised the *Subjective Informants of CAPA model* (Figure 1 below). The identified elements of the model, 'Focus' and 'Subjective Informants', were further identified through an analysis of previous work by the authors (e.g. Gillett-Swan & Sargeant, 2018a; 2018b) and in the qualitative data from a scoping study of Adult Perspectives of Tweens (APTQ)<sup>2</sup> (see Sargeant, 2014) which surveyed 124 adults from 24 countries on the topic of children's participation rights using an anonymous web-based survey instrument<sup>3</sup>.

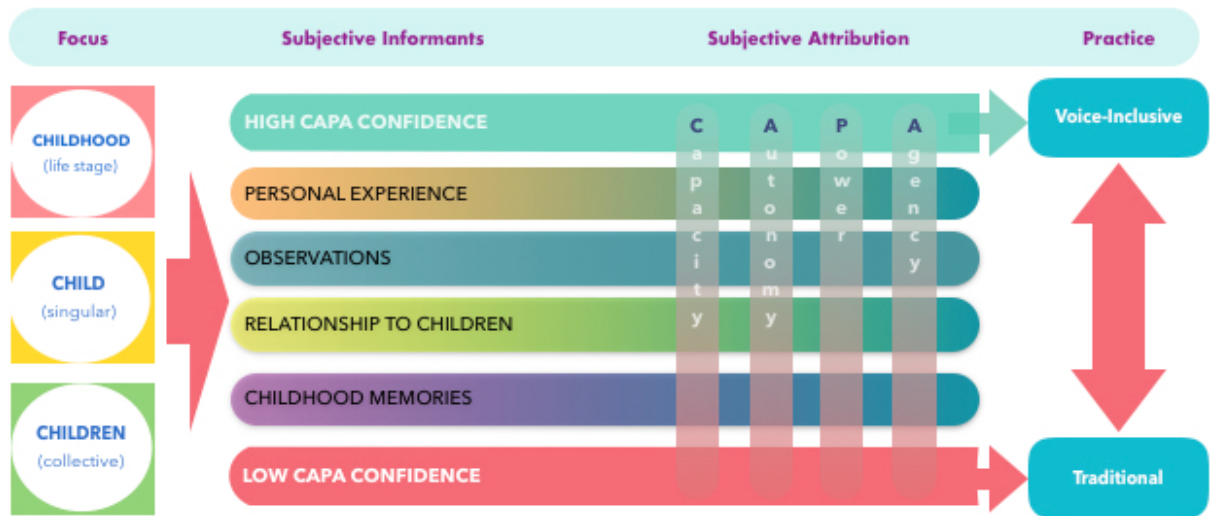
[Insert Figure 1 near here]

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<sup>2</sup> General topics addressed in this scoping study included adult conceptions of tween capacity, participation, protection, relationships, materialism, and gender.

<sup>3</sup> Snowball sampling method beginning with distribution to existing researcher contacts involved with children in middle childhood in professional capacities (e.g. teacher, educator, researcher, academic etc).

**Figure 1 The Subjective informants of CAPA**



To provide context to the remainder of this paper, the discussion below includes examples of commentary by adults from the APTQ that reveal varying levels of confidence in the participatory potential of children in middle childhood based on subjective informants. The examples are responses to the provocation “*Children should be included in the decision-making processes on matters affecting them*”.

***Experience***

When considering the CAPA of children, many adults will draw upon their own interactions and experiences with children directly. They often describe children based on these experiences and draw conclusions that support a particular predisposition. This is not unique to the educational context. For example;

*Children are very much moulded by the environment they grow up in. Ours grow up surrounded by books, limited TV and internet... and don't complain about it. Much! A cool bike was a more coveted present than a computer. They try to understand politics, they talk about the environment, endangered animals. They may not extrapolate this to a dying world or such a dramatic conclusion, but they are*

*interested in how we can affect the world and how we coexist with other creatures. I credit my 8-12 yo's with a fair bit of consideration of such issues. And I've got two in that age group. (Government worker)*

and

*As a person who has been teaching in Catholic Primary schools for the past 27 years, I feel that it is very important to include children and their voice in the majority of decisions that need to be made but not in all decision-making processes in the school (Principal).*

These examples illustrate some of the ways that adult's draw on their personal and direct professional experiences in the formation of a conceptualisation of the child. These experiences are often further reinforced through adult observations of the child in different contexts.

### ***Observations***

The conceptualisation of the child in educational contexts is often socially constructed, culturally and contextually grounded (Mayall, 2002; Wyness, 1999) and influenced by many factors, not least of which is their observable behaviour in a classroom context (Lee & Choi, 2008). Frequent observations of children in their natural habitat can lead to opinion formation that reflects a particular viewpoint. For example;

*I think tweens are trying to act older than they actually are (i.e. the way they dress and the way they talk) - I don't think they understand what it really is to be an adult however they are trying to act that way nowadays. (Government worker)*

and

*I believe the decision-making process should be entirely left to more knowledgeable, responsible individuals. (Teacher)*

While not all children fit these particular observational moulds, the regularity by

which they are referenced according certain stereotypes reflects the influence of the societal viewpoint and social essentialism (Rhodes, Leslie, & Tworek, 2012).

### ***Relationship to children***

The role of the adult in the lives of the child can also have a significant influence on their CAPA attribution; carer, parent, teacher all hold different responsibilities. For example;

*As an Early Childhood Teacher in a kindergarten setting I can see how children react when given time, choices, have opinions listened too, feel validated and have the opportunity to practice autonomous decision making. I have also seen that they need boundaries and guidelines to work these skills out and for some children this type of opportunity is overwhelming, and this causes negative reactions and behaviours. (Teacher)*

and

*This fostering of partnerships and relationships is so important for the development of mutual respect that happens when one allows another to voice an opinion and to be heard. (Teacher)*

The above commentaries reflect how, in the professional context, the teacher's legal and ethical obligations can impact on their view of the child as capable. However, the extent to which these teachers implement, with conviction, these obligations, may be informed or challenged by their personal memories of childhood.

### ***Memories***

Drawing on personal experiences of childhood through memory provides a significant reference point for developing a perspective on the pros, cons and worth of contemporary childhood. For example;

*Children vary greatly, not only in development, but in relation to their sibling*

*positions. Only children have adult input, while younger children receive input from older siblings as well as adults (and now media). Their views reflect the quality of information they receive. Their apparent materialism is no more than the reflection of what is available. A bike in 1945 was just as unattainable as a Wii in 2010. Their expectations are just higher. (And I think their parents' expectations for responsible actions may be lower. Some kids never get the chance to act responsibly.) (Retired)*

And;

*When I was provided with opportunities to have an opinion in decision making processes I did feel empowered but it also arose anxiety as I was a very shy child.*

(Teacher)

The above commentary illustrates the lasting influence of childhood experience and the potential of these memories to influence contemporary perspectives. These personal informants in isolation or collectively may therefore contribute to informing adult conceptualisation of the child, children, or childhood, and subsequently how they respond to, and interact with them in given settings or contexts.

### ***Countering the subjective***

By recognising the subjectivity of these informants and their effect as potential blockers or enablers of innovative voice-inclusive practice, teachers can build a professional culture of self-awareness.

In identifying the unreliability of such informants (Brewin & Andrews, 2017; Hardt & Rutter, 2004), adults and helping professionals will be better equipped to identify and ameliorate the elements of their personal CAPA conceptualisation that sustain a deficit view of 'the child' based on stereotyping. Perhaps by adding a fifth informant – Knowledge and Perspective Awareness, adults may be (a) able to recognise the unreliability and subjectivity

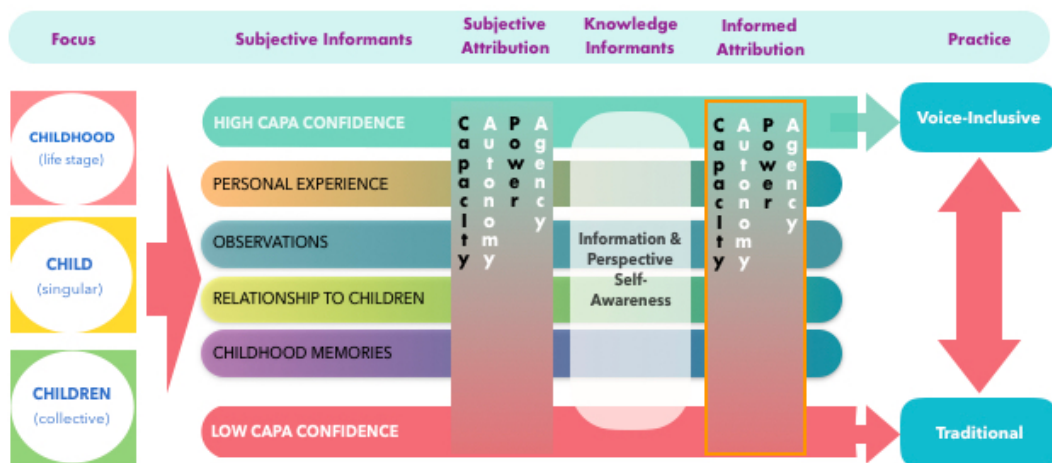
of their current thinking, and (b) build a more informed knowledge base on child capacity that draws upon both experience and evidence.

***The CAPA Model of Voice-Inclusive Practice Readiness***

The addition of a Knowledge informant of ‘Information and Perspective Self-Awareness’ to the CAPA conceptualisation acknowledges the role of reflexivity, which may therefore better enable Voice-Inclusive Practices to occur. Tisdall (2015, p. 186) notes that the process of participation remains at risk of tokenism if not directed towards impact. To this end, the model recognises the importance of knowledge and cognisance of one’s own perspective relating to children’s CAPA. Acknowledgement and awareness of these perspectives may enable a greater understanding of the conceptual pre-conditions that support or hinder the implementation of Voice-Inclusive Practice. Increased knowledge of the child’s participatory potential and a self-awareness of one’s own subjectivity will also possibly support a more refined perspective on the merits of Voice-Inclusive Practice as illustrated in Figure 2.

[Insert Figure 2 near here]

***Figure 2 The CAPA model of Voice-Inclusive Practice [VIP] Readiness***



As illustrated in figure 2 (above), the clarity of perspective that emerges from increased knowledge and self-awareness is exemplified in the following commentary by teachers who participated in an APTQ an workshop (aforementioned, as distinct from the main APTQ study),

*I began to reflect on my own practice and realised that I occasionally have a 'voice inclusive approach' but as more of an add-on in some curriculum areas, rather than an authentic approach encompassing all areas of the school experience. Upon review of current literature, I have gained a greater conviction to become a teacher committed to recognising and including the "child's voice" on different aspects in the educational experience. (Teacher)*

And

*After reading the relevant literature, it is now my belief that for children to be able to gain the full educational experience, they need to be consulted about their learning spaces. After all, it is teacher and student in partnership who use the spaces and so, to sustain the idea of partnership. (Teacher)*

The above commentary reveals a level of transformation in CAPA attribution through the addition of knowledge informants such as focused research and reflection.

#### Informing subjectivity

As described above, adult conceptualisations of and affordance to the child's capacity, autonomy, power and agency are informed by a multitude of sources that build an individualised image of the child within presenting contexts. With limited direct input, children remain predominantly misrepresented and misunderstood, as the adult community, to its detriment, may make judgements but largely ignores the perspectives they offer (Bragg, 2007; McIntyre et al., 2005). Changing dominant perceptions of children and young people as needing to *become* capable (as opposed to being *and* becoming capable [Prout, 2000]),



mature and competent therefore requires a fundamental change in the way adults conceptualise ‘the child’ (Fernandez, 2011). At each stage of childhood, images are constructed to disempower the child and associate the individual with the child collective or with other pejorative norms associated with childhood, thus ‘keeping them in place’. As Mannion (2007, p. 414) describes, “‘the adult’/childhood and ‘the child’ are mutually and inextricably interdependent” yet adults’ often do not recognise that their inherent bias in attributing their understanding of a child, childhood, or children is contextually grounded in their own experiences. Rudduck and Fielding (2006) observe that those willing to seek and incorporate student voice often focus more on the *how* rather than the *why*, without necessarily considering their underlying standpoint on children. Even those who *believe* they are firmly committed to participation may hold varying levels of confidence in the particular elements of CAPA thereby threatening the authenticity of student voice initiatives.

By acknowledging the subjective designations adults place on the child, the extent of practitioner readiness on the continuum towards Voice-Inclusive Practice in a particular educational context is likely to be better understood. An individual’s increased readiness for Voice-Inclusive Practice is achieved when there is a confident attribution of Capacity, Autonomy, Power and Agency (CAPA) to the child. When acknowledged, CAPA may be a powerful instigator of change at the local level (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004; Niemi et al., 2015; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004; Thomson, 2010) that, through a ripple effect, may stimulate positive change across the wider school system. The graphical representations of CAPA presented above consider the wholly unreliable yet pervasive informants that result in attributions that either raise or diminish the participatory potential of the child. The CAPA model and consideration of subjective informants attempts to synthesise the complexity associated with instigating change and the conceptual pre-conditions required for the enablement of authentic Voice-Inclusive practices.

The CAPA model also provides a visual representation of how adults can form a view

and hold confidence in a child's capacity, autonomy, power and agency. By recognising, (1) the focus, (2) the informants and (3) the level of confidence held by adults, the likelihood of VIP or other, more traditional pedagogies, can be ascertained. Through CAPA, adults seeking to utilise Voice-Inclusive Practice may better recognise where their conceptualisation of the child may lack in confidence and importantly, which key informants may be influencing that viewpoint. An awareness of how confidence in 'the child' and their capacity can either block or enable effective and authentic Voice-Inclusive Practice is critical to effective planning. By identifying from a holistic perspective how we as adults 'see' the child across each CAPA principle, our readiness (and capacity) to employ Voice-Inclusive Practice is likely to be better informed and understood. This aspect could be explored in future research. Further consideration as to the applicability of the model for understanding institutional readiness, as well as the role of cultural, institutional or contextual factors that may also contribute to the CAPA conceptualisation could also be considered in future work.

The importance of considering a model such as CAPA is essential for educational reform as Fischman & McLaren (2005, p. 426) state, "it is not enough to understand any given educational reality: there is a pedagogical mandate to transform it with the goal of radically democratizing educational sites and societies through a shared praxis" (in Oswell, 2013, p. 136). This "requires a preparedness to challenge assumptions about children's capacities, and to encourage the development of environments in which children can build and demonstrate capacities" (United Nations, 2009, p. 31).

The CAPA model represents a process to determine the extent to which adults consider children as capable serves as a precursor to the implementation and achievement of Voice-Inclusive Practice. By assisting adults to be aware of their own CAPA conceptualisations may inform their understandings of, and interactions with, children. Acknowledging which of the CAPA elements that adults align, may also minimise the power

imbalances that prevent authentic Voice-Inclusive Practice in education.

By identifying where the adult's conceptualisations of 'the child' sit, education and training can be targeted to the individual's need in providing additional supports to enable and facilitate authentic Voice-Inclusive Practice and put both the 'how' and 'why' at the forefront of decision-making and action. Targeted education and training can therefore be focused on education about capacity or understanding power relations. Understanding that giving power is not about losing power will challenge the 'one size fits all' approaches to seeking and incorporating voice that ultimately results in tokenism (Quinn & Owen, 2016; Warwick, 2008).

### **Conclusion**

While significant attention focuses on child and student voice in practice, there is perhaps a step that has been missed in the pursuit of a more authentic way to include and involve children in matters that affect their lives - attitude. In practice, two types of adults still share the educational space: those ready to move to strategic Voice-Inclusive Practice and those who are yet to be convinced that children indeed have such capacity. Entrenched ideas about children and what they can and cannot do (or should and should not be able to) continue to hamper educational reform and whether or not the field is ready to move beyond educating about the importance of voice towards action, remains contested (Sargeant, 2018). Recognising the perspectives that block or enable authentic Voice-Inclusive Practice within the principles of Capacity, Autonomy, Power and Agency (CAPA) is critical to a futures view of pedagogical development. Enacting Voice-Inclusive *Practice* requires a Voice-Inclusive *consciousness*.

It is not the intention of the authors to persuade the reader to place children's voices at the forefront of all research and practice endeavours, nor is it the authors' intention to undermine or criticise the work being done to promote and include children in research and

practice on matters that affect them. Instead, by illustrating the complexity of how we as adults consciously and sub-consciously conceptualise ‘the child’, the potential for miscommunication resulting from a misalignment between the adults’ view of the child’s CAPA and pedagogy is reduced.

In attempting to understand the relationship between adults’ perspectives on children and how this informs practice, we have attempted to map a possible theoretical pathway that could be used to conceptualise the life stage of childhood, ‘the child’ as individual and the collective of ‘children’. By recognising that these adult perspectives begin in the subjective domain and progress or remain, depending on new learnings, experience and self-awareness, the CAPA model offers a ‘pre-voice’ exploration of an individual’s likelihood of engaging in voice-inclusive practice. The extent to which an adult affords each child any power, autonomy and ultimately, agency is dependent on the adult’s personal conceptualisation of the child’s capacity informed by personal experience, childhood memories, observations, and their own relationship to and with children, whether conscious or not. As such, any movement towards Voice-Inclusive Practice by individual or institutional educational strategists must include personal ideological reflection.

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