

## **The Rights of the Talker**

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## **The Rights of the Talker**

**A manifesto for chattering, whispering, translanguaging, not-speaking, non-verbalising, screeching, signing, clicking, twirling, stimming, assistive technology-ing, jumping, shouting, grasping, gasping, dancing, drawing, repeating, refusing, gesturing, glancing, smirking, eye-rolling, whistling.....**

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### **Abstract**

In this short polemic chapter, the editors are inspired by Pennac's (2006) 'Rights of the Reader' to offer suggestions for a manifesto for the 'Rights of the Talker'. The notion of 'rights' (whilst also problematised in the chapter) is intended as a route to unsettle the often unspoken rationale that intervening early to shape children's language in narrowly controlled ways is benign because it is intended to secure their future educational success. As a counter, 'Rights of the Talker' makes the argument that all children should have the right to take their time, to remain silent, to make up words, to speak in all their languages, and to choose how and when they speak.

The aspiration of this book has been to make space for a different, more capacious view of childhood, language, and what it means to make meaning and connect with others. A generous view of what 'counts' and what should be valued in relation to children's language is essential for numerous reasons. As reflected in the title and subtitle of this chapter, we even struggle for a word generous enough to encapsulate everything we love about how children make meaning in their worlds. Instead, we settle for the simplest of words 'talker', adding a long and incomplete list of all the modes, forms, actions and (un)making of meaning this should include.

### **Rights of the Talker?**

In 2006, Daniel Pennac wrote a manifesto called '[Rights of the Reader](#),' which, with the addition of illustrations by Quentin Blake, has been taken up by educators, advocates such as

the National Literacy Trust, and those interested in celebrating children's engagement with books. Arguing for a capacious approach to how adults imagine and validate children's reading, (such as skipping, dipping in, reading anywhere, and not finishing the book), Pennac writes

“When it comes to reading, we grant ourselves all kinds of rights, starting with the ones we deny the young people we want to initiate into the world of books.” (p.145).

Whilst we would caution against assuming that a child's (or anyone's) viewpoints and feelings are similar to our own, we agree that reflecting on what we, as adults, might prefer or find challenging when it comes to talk can, likewise, be a useful starting point. One example of this would be Jones' (2013) powerful description of doing a round robin reading exercise with her teacher trainee students, in order for them to experience how this kind of exercise can bring back difficult past experiences that manifest as tension in the body. If you would not enjoy performing in this way, likely many children would not either!

### **For their own good?**

We are inspired by how Pennac's notion of Rights of the Reader has captured the imagination. The notion of the talker or reader having *rights* reframes many ways in which adults have policed, evaluated or intervened into children's language and literacy practices in the past by asking;

*How would this feel?*

By pausing to ask how it would feel, we nudge towards the question;

*Do children's feelings matter?*

These simple questions can be easily lost in a neoliberal education context. They can get lost when children are regarded mostly as developmental projects, whose language is assumed to progress in a neat and predictable way through ages and stages of development.

Shaping children's language practices in specific and narrow directions, heavily incentivizing certain ways of communicating, and acting quickly and decisively to squash deviance is often seen as benign, as being “for the child's own good”. This is exemplified in a recently leaked Ofsted (school quality assurance body in England) briefing document, instructing inspectors

to answer any teachers who protested that they did not require all children to speak in a middle-class way, with the response that “Teaching standard English is a matter of social justice.” When children are primarily developmental projects, intervening into their language is considered benign and ‘for their own good’, no matter how bitter the medicine tastes at the time.

With this in mind, we invite you to engage in making a speculative, unfinished list with us; the Rights of the Talker.....

This is a list concerned with what it might mean to love everything about children’s language, and what our role as grown ups might be in making space for language, place and body in childhood.

## 1. The Right to Time



Figure 5.1 The Right to Time

Language development has a close but problematic relationship with *time*. Children’s talk is often measured against a fixed timeline of ‘normal’ development. Labels such as ‘language delay’ or ‘disorder’ are labels of being ‘out of time.’ Discourses of ‘catching up’ with ‘lost’ time prevail in discussions of (for instance), the summer-born learning gap, summer learning ‘loss’, and children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds starting ‘behind’ other

children. These ideas about language and time have intensified since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As well as developing in a fast and predictable fashion, children are often also required to communicate in ways that are efficient and do not take up unnecessary time. Children's speech can be judged as moving too slowly (deficient) or too quickly (cognitive overload). Stammering (or 'dysfluency') is commonly understood as wasting time. All of these understandings and uses of time rely on normative ideas of *when* speech and language should develop. They make assumptions about the purposes of speech and language: namely, efficiency, clarity, and productivity of communication. Moreover, this take-up of talk is assumed to be location independent - it must be reproducible in school (not just *when*, but also *(any)where*).

We affirm that children have the right to take their time when it comes to talking. They might prolong, repeat, trip, tip, stall, or pause in their language-ing. They might speak in different time signatures, with different rhythms, paces, and tempos (fast, slow, regular, irregular, on-beat, off-beat, iambic pentameter, triplets, quintuplets, or swung). Children's talk can develop in ways that are erratic, unpredictable, and contrary to adult expectations of development, progress, and growth. And finally, we affirm that *when* is not separable from *where* – as the case studies in this book have amply demonstrated, children will language differently according to context, to how their bodies feel and move in places. Children have the right to take time differently in different places.

## **2. The Right to Silence**



Figure 5.2 The Right to Silence

Frequently, children who do not respond to grown ups' questions or speak on cue, are assumed to be incapable, "too shy", unable to speak or lacking enough knowledge of words. A child who does not answer is deemed not to have the capacity to answer. Bilingual children in particular are frequently deemed "silent" in classroom settings. In their study of young children in classrooms, MacLure et al (2010) describe children's refusal to speak as a site where questions, emotions and ideas proliferate, as adults' "rage for explanation" (p.494). When a child does not speak, an adult can be left confused, vulnerable or embarrassed.

Valuing and respecting the silences of children can be how we listen. It is important not to misread silences, or jump to conclusions. Silences can emerge as a way of changing the direction of an interaction. They can be a resistance to answering questions or complying with agendas set out by others. Using words can sometimes be confusing. The right word for a feeling may not exist; this is where silence can be important. Silence can be a meditative, contemplative practice. It can create connection and community. Silence can make space for meaning making through other modes, such as bodily movement. Or it can be a way for children to soak up an experience, feel their body in a place, to listen fully to human or nonhuman others. Whilst there are many ways silence is more than disobedience or lack, it is also important to respect and make space for silences even when they do not seem to have a rational purpose.

Children have the right to silence, as either an action or a non-action. There can be a kind of benign violence in compelling children to speak according to adult agendas or questions. This kind of compulsion should not be confused with ‘listening to children’ or ‘giving children a voice’. Silence is laced with power dynamics, it can be (but is not always) an act of resistance or a way to reassert/regain some control. Grown-ups almost always hold power over children; that is why asserting children’s right to silence is important.

### 3. The Right to be Listened to



Figure 5.3 The Right to be Listened to

When adults demand children’s transparent, easily-understood talk, it is often framed benignly as a desire to listen to children. We agree that children should have the right to be listened to, but argue that for this to truly be enacted, listening cannot operate within narrow parameters of what adults are prepared to hear or are able to understand.

*How might we listen to a child’s silence?*

*To a language with which we are not familiar?*

*To their body, their mood and their energy?*

*How do we listen without judging?*

We agree with Yoon and Templeton (2019) who describe “the complexities of listening to children within politically constrained spaces of classrooms and research contexts.” (p.57). In school spaces, but also in nursery classrooms, playgroups, family centres, museums and green spaces, to a greater or lesser extent, certain kinds of responses are anticipated, valued and validated above others. In particular, adults often want to understand the child through their language; this leap to quickly interpret, to render the child rational and understandable (and so to align them with ‘normative’ ways of being), can get in the way of listening to children. Certain aspects of what children have to say are seen as more worthy of being listened to than others.

When we make judgements about which aspects of language are most useful, relevant or understandable (and certainly when we assess language according to these characteristics), we are determining what language is. Children have a right for adults to *keep* listening, even when it is challenging, confusing, inconvenient or seemingly uninterpretable for the adult. As Yoon and Templeton put it, the challenge when listening to children is in “hearing children out.” (p.55), that is, it is not necessarily about understanding everything straight away, but about continuing to listen without judgement or closing things down.

#### **4. The Right to Choose How**



Figure 5.4 The Right to Choose How



A dominant discourse in educational policy is that there is a right and a wrong way to use language. “Standard” English is prescribed, and specific forms of talk are demanded for specific purposes. This marginalises many children and families, including those from plurilingual households and households who use non-standard forms of English. Children might be quiet or silent because they find themselves in an unfamiliar environment and they may need the time and the space to acculturate, perhaps engaging only through their actions and not through words. Neurodivergent children may have ways of communicating that are often not regarded as “appropriate”. As we described above, silence or hesitancy to speak is often regarded with suspicion.

Across each of these evaluations of children’s language sits a hierarchy of preferred ways for *how* children should talk. Medium volume is preferred to silence, whispering or shouting too loud. Clear annunciation is appreciated. Predictable or logical responses that answer questions or seem to have a rational basis are preferred to unexpected or seemingly unconnected comments, or to playful babbling and invented words. Sentences and phrases should occur in the correct time and place. Clear pronunciation and “full sentences” are the requirement of OfSted.

As grown ups, we need to make spaces where children can choose *how* to communicate. Children have the right to choose how to communicate. This is the only way to enable children to access the full repertoire of languages and varieties that are available to them. Insisting on limiting children’s communication choices erases their existing knowledge and diverse cultural identities, affecting their confidence and sense of belonging to their community.

## **5. The right to move(ment) and gaze**



Figure 5.5 The Right to move(ment) and gaze

Bodies jiggle and spin, arms and hands stretch and sweep, breath must be thrust through throats and vocal chords in order for vocalizations of any sort to emerge. Lips and tongues move and flex to make words that might be understood by adults. The connection between children's moving bodies and talking, vocalising, creating and communicating is well evidenced, both by research and by practice.

Often words or vocalisations are about more than the meaning they want to convey. They are wrapped up in joy, excitement and how sounds feel on the lips and in bodies. A gesture, a vocalization, a word, a nod, a full-body-run across the space, are all modes of meaning-making where children use their bodies and their voices. All these modes involve children's bodies sounding and moving in places. Looking at what kinds of sounds and movements a place seems to encourage or invite, and how children respond to that invitation, is a lens for thinking about how environments might enable talkers.

We affirm children's right to movement and to direct their own gaze. In education and clinical practice, often bodies are forced to be still in order to tame the mind. In schools,

children do ‘active listening,’ with crossed legs and straight backs so they can ‘pay attention’ (and if they’re fiddling with their shoes, or blu tac, or somebody’s hair, or not looking at the teacher then they are deemed not to be listening). In clinical practice, such as speech and language therapy, children are taught to regulate their stimming, flapping, and shuffling, and to maintain (or fake) ‘appropriate’ eye contact.

Movement (of many different kinds) is essential to language. It can be easy to forget that language starts in the body, with movement and sound. Because of this, it is important to pay attention to movements and vocalisations that have a meaning, as well as to those times when meanings are difficult to identify, yet movements are filled with energy and connection.

## **6. The right to (not) express oneself**



Figure 5.6 The Right to (not) Express Oneself

Something we frequently read in Early Years literature is that children need language in order to express themselves. In this context, ‘express themselves’ often has a specific meaning – it

imagines children telling grown ups their practical or emotional needs, in a way that is legible and makes instant sense to the grown ups.

We invite the reader to think about expression in a broader way. If expression is about communicating feelings and ideas, these feelings and ideas can be more or less easy for another person to grasp. Expression can occur through all sorts of bodily, (non)linguistic or artistic modes. It often emerges during encounters with specific materials, movements, animals or environments that amplify the sensations happening in the body. Within this broader definition, expression does not always need to make sense, or have a single meaning!

Children might become engaged with things and stuff. They have the right to express this engagement without being asked what it means, or ‘why’ they are making sounds / moving / gesturing or verbalising in this way. Children may invite you to play alongside, or to join in. Grown ups might respond to this invitation by listening to bodily expressions taking place and responding in similar ways. This approach to expression and connection is much more fun than asking neat questions and receiving predictable responses.

As Glissant’s (1997) writing teaches us, no one is fully ‘transparent’ to another – there is always another layer of complexity. In affirming children’s rights *not* to express themselves we are affirming that children, like all of us, are complex beings. Sometimes, like us, they do not know what they think or mean, or they are still working things out. Sometimes, like us, they mean more than one thing at once. Sometimes, like us, they do not want to put the thing they think or feel out into the world at this moment.

### **Concluding comments; Language is world making**

In our manifesto, we clamour for the most generous, inclusive, experimental, caring and respectful definition of ‘being a talker.....’ that we can imagine.

The challenge is not for children to ‘reign it in’ or conform to ‘appropriate’ modes of expression, but for grown ups to;

- create space for worldly encounters to be expressed in all different kinds of ways (including stillness)

- to become comfortable with the unexpected or incoherent and
- to let go of trying to interpret or make sense of what a child expresses *before* we value it.

Communication is not only about the exchange of information, it is about establishing, reinforcing and remaking relations. When we let go of narrow expectations or hierarchical lists of preferred ways for how children communicate, it makes space to ask the question; *What kind of relations?*



Figure 5.7 Language is World Making

Children's language  
 whatever the temporal rhythm  
 silent or loud  
 when we listen to it  
 in all and every one of its forms  
 entwined with movement and gaze  
 and (not) expressing as much as it does  
 is absolutely, always, already valid for each child in each moment, whether we grown ups  
 understand it or not.

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