Book Review

Seen and Not Heard: Why Children's Voices Matter.

Jana Mohr Lone
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Review by Richard Morehouse

One reading of *Seen and Not Heard: Why Children's Voices Matter* may be that it is a plea for epistemic justice. According to Jana Mohr Lone, epistemic justice allows someone to be heard and capable of imparting knowledge to others. Epistemic justice for children is one of many themes explored throughout the book; each chapter will highlight one or more themes to entice potential readers to read this *Seen and Not Heard* closely. *Seen and Not Heard* is organized into an introduction and seven chapters (*Not heard, Childhood, Friendship, Political voices, Happiness, Death,* and *Listening*[1]). Epistemic justice, or its lack, is just one of the themes that I think the reader will internalize as they read Lone's work of praxis. The reader will also appreciate the breadth and depth of Jana Mohr Lone's reading. It is inspiring without being intimidating.

Seen and Not Heard begins by inviting the reader to imagine the benefits of widely recognizing children as independent thinkers capable of seeing clearly and contributing to our understanding of the world. Instead of listening to and learning from children, all too often, we "love youthfulness, but we demean children. We minimize their thoughts and feelings as fleeting or trivial or amusing, and we fail to appreciate the deeper ideas behind what they say" (p. 11). The devaluing of what children say with such statements as "Oh, that's so adorable" provide an example of what has become known in philosophy as epistemic injustice. Classroom discussions about topics of importance and interest may be a way to allow space for children to talk to each other; if we allow ourselves to hear what children say to each other, opportunities for us to learn from them become available. To evaluate children by what they say, rather than by how old they are, is to obtain understanding. The child deserves a chance to grapple honestly with different ideas and concepts in the same way that we would value adults who also struggle to understand their world and their experiences. To deny a child of such opportunities is the definition of epistemic injustice.

Hearing children is one step. Understanding them is another story. In a section called "Understanding children," Lone recites one story of children who enacted a play that "took the part of the woodland animals" (p. 17). The adult audience showed their appreciation for the children's effort

[1] When referring to a chapter heading, *italics* will always be used.

by laughing at the children's representations of their animals. One of the children explained that they did not think their representation was funny. I have myself been guilty of the same inability to recognize what the children were trying to convey. Thankfully I have images seared in my mind of professional actors representing cats and lions, giraffes, and hyenas[2] on stage to know how some little sense of these young actors and cats better understand why the adult response might be very (unintentionally) hurtful. Hearing sometimes means taking the perspective of the other.

To hear a young person means that one is willing to consult with her: to accept her voice as the author of her thoughts. It means to listen to a child's voice as one would listen to the voice of an equal, that is, as an authorial and thoughtful peer. Listening to them requires that we are willing to relinquish our adult presumptions regarding our superior knowledge and experience. The recognition that a child has his own unique expertise and experience allows the adult to hear another speaker, a child's voice. We might approach an exchange with a child's awareness that we might have something to learn from them (p. 28).

The uniqueness of children's voices discussed above led to a look at several questions from a child called Kayla. Kayla asked her classmates, "What is a child? When do you become an adult?" Four children offer their answers to that query. Jana Mohr Lone reflects on the questions and the initial students' responses by turning to Saint Augustine's reflection on time. I will leave it to the reader to delve into Lone's ruminations. Instead, I wish to highlight one of Lone's habits of mind or thinking patterns, as John Dewey might say. One of the first habits is to take a child's question as non-trivial, not quickly and definitively answered, and deeply philosophical. The more difficult habit (at least as I experienced it repeatedly during this work) is the ability to stay in the moment of the child's question and the children's responses while reflecting or perhaps seeing/hearing the question/discussion as richly philosophical. These habits/patterns of thinking are one of the treats gained from *Seen and Not Heard*. As with all well-written books, one of the pleasures for this reviewer is the privilege of observing the author think aloud.

Another example of Lone's ability to think with the child and philosophically is in the section called "A time of its own." The focus of the excerpt is, to quote Jason, "People think adults are more trustworthy than kids." Lone first presents the student's (Ashely) comments [children offer genuine opinions and children can keep secrets] about what might make children more trustworthy. Next, Lone turns to Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* to illustrate the depth of Ashley's comments that others might think are childish responses. To aid the reader in understanding the depth of Ashley's remark, Lone counterposes two questions raised by Arendt. These are questions that are often conflated: "what we are" [our age, for example] and "who we are" [our unique personal identity]. By providing the reader with this conceptual bridge, the reader can understand the depth of Ashley's thinking (pp. 32-34).

This chapter also explores imagination in counter distinction with knowledge. It draws examples from political theory, science fiction, and developmental psychology to deepen our understanding of children's thoughts on the value of imagination (pp. 42-47).

[2] Anyone who has seem one of the life theatre productions of **Cats** or **The Lion King** will not see children's representation of animals in the same light.

Friendship

Close attention to the "deeper ideas behind what they say" is the hallmark of this work and many of her other books.[3] This chapter begins with "Children's conceptions of friendship," which explains how children define the word for themselves. Lone skillfully introduces Jean Piaget's quote about play being "the child's work," observing that a part of the work of play is negotiating the ups and downs and the ins and outs of friendships. A series of subsections ("The obligations of friendship," "Reciprocity in friendship," "Popularity and self-image," and "Loneliness and solitude") Lone explores some of the ways that children intuitively and sometimes articulately understand and connect with the friends that they have.

Chloe's comment explores what is in part of the connection between the influence of others in shaping who one is.

> Chloe: But it is hard to think you're cool if there's no one to hang out with you because it's hard to think you're cool if it's just you. You still can be cool, but you kind of have to be more involved with other people to feel cool (p. 75).

Lone sights Sherry Turkle's *Alone together* (2011) and her comments on self and others. Turkle argues that the ability to be alone enables the possibility of solitude. Solitude is 'being alone with one thought, with oneself. Solitude makes space "so that you can reach out to other people and form real attachments" (p. 80). The student in this chapter shows some of the complex and interrelated components of friendship.

Political Voices

Given the timbre of the political conversation in today's often anonymous yet public discourse, I entered this chapter with some hesitation. I was pleasantly surprised and much informed by what I read. The first subheading, "Fairness," also surprised me in two ways: 1) fairness was a richer vein of discussion than I expected, and 2) fairness provided a broad and diverse menu for deep and searching conversations on a variety of topics ranging for "political participation" to talking about gender and race.

In a particularly riveting multi-paged discussion about race, the students respond to a provocative statement made by one of the students, Josh. Josh suggests dividing the world into two halves. One side for white people and one side for black people. This recommendation to solve the race problem initiated silence and looked to the facilitator for an answer. The facilitator and author of this work writes, "Aware that this might be treacherous ground, I reminded myself of my intention to trust the children as much as possible, I continue the discussion" (p. 197).

> Jenna: *That's a pretty dramatic suggestion. What do you all think about this idea?*" (p. 198).

[3] *The Philosophical Child*, 2015; *Philosophy and education* Lone & Burrough, 2015: *Plato was wrong: footnote in doing philosophy with children*, 2012: *Philosophy and Education* Lone and Israeloff, 2012.

The simple invitation to the class to take up a potentially provocative question illustrates the facilitator's faith in the style, and skill, of not judging or dismissing the suggestion by a student. Jena's response provides a new and deeper understanding of the idea of a "teachable moment." The entire chapter may be read as a commentary on the saying "All politics is local" if we are aware of the complexity of that simple statement. This statement ought to be understood in a context that implies that politics is pervasive, ubiquitous, omnipresent.

Happiness

Moving from *Race* to *Happiness* may appear as a jump from the serious to the trivial, but the depth of discussion is substantial. One of the charms of this chapter (and the entire book) is that it conjures up thoughts, memories, conjectures, and speculations brought about by the confluence of selected authors and classroom examples—two moments of happiness for me were reading two remarkably different quotes in this chapter. The first is a quote from Virginia Wolfe.

> Happiness is in the quiet, ordinary things. A table, a chair, a
> book with a paper-knife stuck between the pages.
> And the pedal following from the rose,
> and the light flickering as we sit silent.
> -from *The waves* (Lone, 2021, p. 111).

The second quote comes from John Stuart Mill—"it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied" (p. 119). These quotes "tickled" different veins of happiness. Wolfe made me smile seeing a Bloomsbury intellectual sitting quietly as she enjoyed her surroundings and anticipating cutting open the next page in an unread book. Mills' quote made me chuckle at the implied image of the pig. The children's discussions were as diverse and insightful as those of Wolfe and Mill. They were an extraordinary joy to read. I will not spoil the pleasure for the reader.

Death

"In my experience, given the opportunity, children are eager to broach the subject [Death] and to participate in the conversation about it" (p. 138). "In my experience" is a leitmotif for this work. It speaks humbly and quietly of the author's generous spirit. It is on full display in this chapter on *Death*. In a class of 11- and 12-year-olds, Isabel, says:

> I think Death doesn't make life meaningless. I think Death is actually what makes life meaningful. It's Death that makes one want to cherish life. If we lived forever, there would be a 100 percent chance that eventually you would do everything you can do in life, and life wouldn't have any meaning (p. 148).

As a person who turned 80 this year, this rings true. However, so far, the future seems endlessly open to new experiences while at the same time I cherish Scheffler's "temporal scarcity" (p. 143). As Lone writes, "Mortality imparts intensity and poignancy on our days, sharing all our endeavors and projects" (p. 149). The insight of the children and the reflections on their comments will enrich the readers and

inspire teachers to engage their students in this discussion or, at a minimum, not to discourage students who bring up the topic of Death.

Lone writes about children's conversations and the stories they tell, the narratives of their lives, which includes stories of death and dying. "The stories we tell ourselves and others, the stories others tell us, expand our understanding of others, and the stories others tell us, expanding understanding in the world and each other" (p. 155). Stories we tell ourselves, especially those we tell in the company of others, encourage deep discussion like the ones presented in this book and help create the communities that shape us.

Listening

The subtitles of Chapter Seven ("What does it mean to listen?" "Listening to Children, "Curiosity," "Openheartedness and Receptivity," and "Silence, and the "Ethics of Listening" can be seen as the bullet points on a PowerPoint presentation on how to listen. "Curiosity" is the bullet point for listening that I point to here. We need to be curious about what everyone has to say if we wish to hear them truly. Curiosity is an attitude, an orientation toward leaning into a conversation. Reading Lone's presentation of curiosity, I am reminded of the times I exhibited curiosity at small meetings in conversation with people I came specifically to learn from what they had to say. How intently I listened, sometimes taking careful notes. I also remember times when I all but ignored what others had to say. Like the quote of Winnie the Pooh cited at the beginning of *Listening*, "It may simply be that (I had) a small piece of fluff in (my) ear" (p. 157). Taking that fluff out of one's ears requires an effort to listen, a willingness to learn, and placing oneself in an equal position. Curiosity is a learned attitude that requires practice and is a prerequisite to listening.

At the beginning of the last chapter (*Listening*), Lone observes the relationship between writing about listening. "But it wasn't until I started writing that I recognized that the children's words would determine the course of the book, and at the focal point, all along the way would be listening to what they had to say" (p. 157). A qualitative study of children thinking aloud might be another way of capturing Lone's statement about *Seen and Not Heard*. I end the review with this observation to encourage other collectors of children's stories to think about them as qualitative studies. Lone even describes a methodology for conducting a qualitative inquiry.

> Reading, rereading, listening to the recordings, transcripts, and notes of my conversations with children illuminated the fundamental idea grounding my work over the past two decades; the importance and joy of listening to children. I began wondering about what it really means to listen and what is involved in genuinely listening to other people in general, and to children in particular (p. 158).

Seen and Not Heard: Why Children's Voices Matter is required reading for all of us who work in education at whatever level. Additionally, it is also an exciting read.

Address Correspondences to:
Richard Morehouse, Emeritus Professor of Psychology, Viterbo University (La Crosse, WI).
Email: remorehouse@viterbo.edu