

polyglot
theatre is child's play ~~~

Voice Lab



"Voice Lab is the best thing I have ever done, it made me feel like I was being heard."

~~~ Child

# About Us

**Polyglot Theatre is a world-renowned contemporary theatre company based in Melbourne/Naarm making exceptional arts experiences for children and families.**

Our unique brand of theatre encompasses a wide variety of forms and is shared with audiences everywhere, from the world's most prestigious theatres to the football grounds of regional Australia. Our artistic and philosophical approach of child-centred practice has earned us a strong reputation at home and abroad as a leader in the theatre for young audiences (TYA) sector, celebrated for creating distinctive, participatory and inclusive works that are playful and conceptually rigorous. Access is central to our work at Polyglot, driven by the right of all children to experience growth and resilience through creative play.



## Our Vision

A world where all children are empowered: artistically, socially and culturally.

## Our Mission

To make transformational, playful arts experiences for children everywhere. Through immersive participation, our work gives children the agency to be in control, to communicate their ideas and imagination, and experience joy and connection.

*Polyglot acknowledges that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we live and work, and we pay our deep respect to Elders past and present.*

*For more than 65,000 years children and families have created and played on these lands and continue to do so. We are grateful to be able to make our art on this country too. Always was, always will be.*



## Our Values

- ~ **Children are central** - as participants, agents, creators and collaborators.
- ~ **Play** - the basis for our creative exploration and vital for children's development, health and wellbeing.
- ~ **Sustainability** - we make decisions holistically to ensure an environmentally, creatively and economically sustainable future.
- ~ **Equity** - we respect all people and strive for equitable engagement. Access and inclusion are prioritised in everything we do.
- ~ **Leadership** - we lead change with courage, conviction and care.
- ~ **Innovation** - we approach our art and work with curiosity, rigour and daring.

# About Voice Lab

**Voice Lab embodies Polyglot’s vision to empower children. Its purpose is to listen to children’s voices and use the information they provide to make meaningful changes that can improve their lives.**

Voice Lab is a creative installation module for listening to the thoughts and opinions of children. It encourages reflective thinking and the articulation of opinions and feelings.

Children are often overlooked when it comes to life’s big questions, and if they are asked for their true opinions, they generally give the answers they think adults want to hear. Voice Lab challenges this learned experience, providing children with an unmediated space in which to express themselves without inhibition.

Voice Lab’s questions can be completely tailored to explore children’s world views or to gather feedback on their experience of the arts, at school or in their community.

Voice Lab operates in two modes: the original physical mode and an online mode. In both, children have a conversation with Voice Lab – a voice driven by a concealed live performer that asks questions, encourages opinion and regards the child as the expert.

## Physical

With the physical mode, the child will be greeted by a friendly Polyglot facilitator, who will explain what is going to happen, and ensure the child is happy to proceed. They then invite the child to enter a beautifully designed, serene dome. Through a small entrance, they crawl, by themselves, into a soft, comforting space filled with warm fluctuating light. On the floor, at the end of a long cord connected to the roof of the dome, is a set of headphones. Through these they hear a voice – it is Voice Lab.

The structure consists of a dome within a larger dome. The child enters the smaller dome. Hidden in the space between the two is Voice Lab’s operator, and from this control centre, they trigger pre-recorded questions for the child to answer. The operator can also interact with them directly through a microphone.

Voice Lab conversations always begin with introductory questions to make the child feel comfortable and build rapport.

- ~ What is your name?
- ~ How old are you?
- ~ What is your favourite colour?

The lighting then changes to the child’s favourite colour. This ensures the child knows that Voice Lab is listening to them, and that they are in control of the conversation. As they are unaware of the concealed operator, it appears as though the space itself is speaking to them, asking them questions and interacting with them in a magical, one-of-a-kind experience.



## Online

In the online mode, Voice Lab operates over Zoom. It can be offered as an experience that children participate in from their own homes and devices, or in a centralised location, like a school or community centre.

For partners using the online mode, a lightweight, pop-up inflatable space can be easily couriered from Polyglot's headquarters in Melbourne, VIC. It is quick and easy to set up – you simply unroll it, plug it in, and put a laptop inside. It has been designed to imbue the online experience with the otherworldliness and magic that the original dome offers. Children enter the pop-up space one at a time, and their conversation with Voice Lab takes place via Zoom through the laptop.

When the participant arrives in their online Voice Lab session - the Zoom meeting – they are greeted by a friendly Polyglot facilitator. The facilitator checks that the participant's technology is working correctly and encourages the use of headphones if available. They explain what is going to happen in the session and ensure the child feels comfortable and ready to proceed.

**Voice Lab shows children that no matter where they are, their voices can be heard and shared to make a difference.**

**"I would like to say thank you. I feel like I actually have a chance to express what I feel about school because normally I don't like talking about things."**

~ Child, age 12



The facilitator then turns off their own audio and video and the screen fills with colour and Voice Lab welcomes the participant to the space. The digital interface is a colourful screen that slowly changes colour throughout the session. At the centre of the screen is a glowing circle that reacts to voice and gently pulses as the conversation unfolds.

The online mode has the capacity to reach thousands of children who might previously have been unable to engage due to geographical remoteness, or other access barriers.



**"I enjoyed being here. It's calming and it's led me to express my feelings and really be able to say what I really think about in a private place."**

~ Child, age 10

# Why Voice Lab?

**Children operate at a different pace and intention to adults. When they enter a very special, beautiful space, they are instantly more open emotionally.**

The theatrical premise of Voice Lab brings something unique to the way a child interacts; it provides a sense of ritual and focus, enabling their imagination to fly because they are removed from the everyday world.

Voice Lab offers privacy, attention, time and design. It allows children agency and ability to give their own opinions without interruption, mediation or interpretation by adults or peers.



## For children

- ~ **Privacy:** Voice Lab is entirely your own while you are inside. No one can intrude. Your thoughts and actions are your own. You are not seeking anyone else's approval.
- ~ **Attention:** You are being listened to and being heard. Your voice is interesting and valued. You are the sole focus.
- ~ **Time:** Voice Lab travels at your speed. There is no hurry. There is time to think, to imagine, to expand. You can allow your thoughts to unfold in detail.
- ~ **Design:** This space has been made for you to enjoy with all your senses. You can sit or lie down, you can close your eyes or look around.

**"Without special attention to the opinions of children – as expressed at home and in schools, in local communities and even in governments – children's views go unheard on the many important issues that affect them now or will affect them in the future."**

~ 'Child rights and why they matter', UNICEF, 2024



**"You are super nice, I like talking to you. Can I come another time please?"**

~ Child, age 6

# Why children's voices?

"The right of children and young people to participate in decisions that affect them is one of the four guiding principles in the Convention on the Rights of the Child... Having a genuine voice and being heard is fundamental to claiming all other rights, with participation being both protective and empowering for children and young people."

~ 'Keeping Kids Safe and Well – your voices', Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021

Eliciting and capturing children's opinions and experience in matters concerning them is difficult to effect authentically and with clarity of purpose. Throughout the development of Voice Lab, we have been influenced by others' explorations into empowerment of children, participation of children in structural, social or systematic re-design, and children at the heart of consultation.

The act of listening to children and allowing them time and attention – hearing what they have to say – means that children are considered as valuable in our society as contributors. Research shows that once children are valued, their safety increases.



## Voice Lab can be used for:

- ~ Workshops, festivals, forums, conferences and events
- ~ Community consultation and strategic planning
- ~ Policy review and policy development
- ~ Evaluating projects, programs, services and products
- ~ Engaging the community

## Children's responses can contribute to:

- ~ Programs for young people, co-designed by them
- ~ Strategic plans
- ~ Practice guides for children's professionals
- ~ Performances and other cultural experiences
- ~ Policies

"Children's participation is more than asking them for their ideas and views. It's about listening to them, taking them seriously and turning their ideas and suggestions into reality."

~ Aileen Ashford, Tasmanian Commissioner for Children, 2011–2013



"This is a really amazing experience that almost feels like it's come to me in my dreams. It's really cool and I think this is really important for more kids to do."

~ Child, age 12

## As a result of participating in Voice Lab, children will:

- Express their inner thoughts, challenges, ideas, solutions and aspirations
- Develop communication skills: articulating opinions and ideas, self-reflection and self-awareness
- Develop an understanding that their ideas matter and are respected
- Gain awareness of their agency and influence; and
- Contribute to programs in their local community that affect their lives.

## As a result of using Voice Lab, partners will:

- Better understand the value of child-centred practice and the empowerment of children
- Use these insights to inform the development of programs that support children within their local community or organisation;
- Extend partnerships and programs that support children experiencing disadvantage; and
- Build the skills, confidence and cognisance of childhood professionals to support improved outcomes for children.

## Partners who have used Voice Lab:

### Local government

- City of Booroondara
- City of Darebin
- City of Greater Dandenong
- City of Melbourne
- City of Port Phillip & RedRoad Consulting
- Wyndham City Council
- City of Yarra

### Schools

- Mahogany Rise Primary School, Frankston North
- St Joseph's Primary School, Collingwood
- Victorian College for the Deaf, Melbourne
- Warringa Park Specialist School, Hoppers Crossing

### Organisations

- Abbotsford Convent
- Melbourne Fringe
- Satellite Foundation

### Social services

- Connie Benn Centre
- Anglicare Victoria – Communities for Children Frankston & Gandel Philanthropy
- The Smith Family – Communities for Children Bankstown
- Mission Australia – Communities for Children Dandenong
- Mission Australia – Communities for Children, Inala to Ipswich

“The material we now have because of [Voice Lab] is proving invaluable in how we now shape the workshop program and demonstrate what we do... Questionnaires and surveys do not adequately capture the essence of their experiences as they don't put children at ease. In fact, the opposite occurs and they can feel tested, examined, scrutinised... It has strongly reinforced the limitations of written feedback...”

Rose Cuff, Executive Director, Satellite Foundation



# Impact

**Voice Lab is unlike other consultation or evaluation methodologies.**

- It gives children space to think, away from peers, teachers and parents, where they are free to speak their minds. Voice Lab is a unique way of listening to children in a noisy world.

**Voice Lab is an effective tool for gathering authentic feedback from children.**

- It offers quiet, safety, comfort and confidence, allowing children to sit with their thoughts and understand that their opinions have value.

**Voice Lab is an immensely rewarding experience.**

- Children have a lot to say and greatly appreciate the opportunity to express themselves. For many children, opportunities to talk openly about their feelings does not exist in their day-to-day life.



“RedRoad does a great deal of consultation with children and young people and Voice Lab is one of the standout methods we’ve seen in engaging children in rich, thoughtful and clever conversations about their lives. The format is intimate and comforting and it seems to support children to engage imaginatively with the questions posed by Voice Lab – so many responses were so disarmingly honest!”

Andrea Cook, Director, RedRoad Consulting



“Thank you for letting me tell you my feelings because I don’t really have much space to do that in the classroom. I get bullied inside the classroom as well as in the playground so thank you for letting me tell you my feelings.”

Child, age 10

“I wish I could live here because it’s very comfy, it’s very warm and Voice Lab is something I can always trust and talk to.”

Child, age 12



# FAQs & Ethics

## What kind of space/equipment do I need to use Voice Lab?

The physical mode needs to be set up inside, in a cool, quiet space. It contains technical elements that cannot get wet. The inside of the dome can get very hot in direct sun and/or warm weather, and external noise can impact the quality of the recordings.

If the online mode is being used to speak with children remotely, participants require a device – a computer, tablet or smartphone – that is connected to the internet. Using headphones is optimal, and a quiet space away from other people is ideal.

If the online mode is being used on-site in conjunction with the inflatable pop-up space, this needs to be set up in a cool, quiet, indoor area. A device – a computer, tablet or smartphone – that is connected to the internet and is plugged into a power source is also required.

## What is the ideal age range of Voice Lab participants?

Children aged 4–12 years.

## How long is each Voice Lab conversation?

This depends on the number of questions being asked, and how the child responds. Not all participants will answer all of the questions. Conversations can range from 2-12 minutes. Generally, children spend around six minutes speaking to Voice Lab.

## What kinds of questions can Voice Lab ask?

They can be completely tailored to explore children's worldviews and/or gather insight and feedback on their experiences: at school, at home, in the community, in healthcare settings, in the arts. Polyglot will work with you to understand the kind of information you are seeking, and ensure your questions are specific and age-appropriate.

## What is the ideal number of questions?

Between 20-30.

## How many children can Voice Lab speak to in a day?

This varies, according to how it is being used and the number of questions being asked. Generally, about eight children per hour can speak with Voice Lab, and the operator needs a break every 90 minutes.

In education contexts, with school hours and breaks, Voice Lab can speak with approximately 25 children. In an all-day festival environment, Voice Lab can speak with up to 60 children.

## What happens if a child is afraid to enter the Voice Lab dome/pop-up space?

Occasionally, children are wary of entering Voice Lab by themselves. In these instances, the facilitator, teacher or parent can sit in with them until the child feels comfortable to continue on their own. In some environments, it's possible to run 'tour groups' to Voice Lab where up to five children at a time can enter the dome/pop-up space with their teacher or other responsible adult and listen to the music coming from the crown. This usually empowers the kids to experience their individual session without fear.



**"Thank you for giving me this opportunity. I will remember this for the rest of my life."**

~ Child, age 11

## How does Polyglot seek permission for children to participate?

Written consent is obtained from the child and their parent/guardian before participating, and consent is specifically obtained for future use of the child's de-identified words. Consent is additionally sought at two stages during the Voice Lab conversation: once at the beginning, *"Are you happy to stay to answer some questions?"* And once at the end, *"Are you happy for Voice Lab to share your thoughts and opinions with others?"* Participants can choose to leave Voice Lab, and/or withdraw their consent, at any stage of the engagement.

## Is it ethical to collect information from children if they do not know there is a real person listening to them?

All participants and their parents/guardians must complete a consent form which states that the child's voice will be recorded, and that if they say anything of concern to Voice Lab, the parent/guardian/educator/other responsible adult will be informed. Even though children are not aware that Voice Lab is a real person, they are aware that their words will be heard outside of their conversation. Having a live operator allows Voice Lab to be responsive.



## What is the risk management process if a child says something of concern?

Polyglot is a Child Safe Organisation. All employees hold current Working with Children Checks, and adhere to Polyglot Theatre's Code of Conduct and Child Safe Policy. If a child says something of concern during their conversation, the Voice Lab Operator will inform the facilitator, who will follow up with a representative from the hosting partner. Organisational protocols will then be followed. A report will also be made to Polyglot's Child Safety Officer who will ensure the report goes to the relevant body.



**"The most valuable part of the Voice Lab experience for students was that they as individuals could express their hopes and fears in a comfortable space. The delivery of Voice Lab is conversational. It encourages and promotes a spontaneous and therefore an authentic response from the individual student. Voice Lab is not a person or a face. There is no judgement. Every answer is the correct answer. The responses are in effect the students' most sincere truth."**

~ Keery Gibson, Community Engagement, Frankston North Schools Consortia

## Contact

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