Exploring children's perspectives: Multiple ways of seeing and knowing the child

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Abstract

This article focuses on human development in the early years, and the challenges for teachers and researchers in seeking to explore young children's perspectives. The current interest in listening to children's voices sits within competing developmental discourses about infants, toddlers and young children, which emphasise both their capability and confidence as well as their immaturity, especially with regard to oral language. Their "voice" can be heard and seen differently by teachers, researchers and families, who filter it according to their own perspectives and their image of the child. Drawing on a range of contemporary New Zealand studies, we discuss some key issues such as whether children need speech to have a voice? And in what ways can we gather children's perspectives in research and education? To explore children's perspectives and hear their voices requires skilled and flexible researchers and teachers, who watch and listen carefully whilst being mindful of their filtering/interpretive gazes. This takes time and patience and requires multiple ways of gathering data in order that the child is heard authentically.

Keywords

Young children, early children education, children's voices, perspectives, rights.

Introduction

Hearing (and seeing) children's voices in order to explore their perspectives requires skilled and flexible researchers and teachers. This article draws on our participatory research with teachers to discuss some of the challenges involved in gaining children's perspectives. Hill (2006) noted the increasing overlap between the ways in which teachers and researchers communicate with children: "practitioners have developed innovative ways of interacting with children, while more have become expert in the use of methods that were previously mainly restricted to researchers" (p. 72). Thus the two

groups have much to learn from each other, and increasingly, the roles have merged, with teachers conducting their own research.

There is a growing body of literature both in New Zealand and internationally that discusses the importance of children's perspectives in education, and in research designed to improve education (Clark, 2007; Dockett, Einarsdottir, & Perry, 2009; Makin & Whiteman, 2006; Pascal & Bertram, 2009; Stephenson, 2009; Te One, 2007). The current foregrounding of children's voices has been linked to a paradigm shift in the way children are viewed generally, and in early childhood education specifically. This paradigm shift in thinking towards more inclusive and participatory practice is linked to several political, social and research agendas, namely: children's rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989); the sociology of childhood (James & Prout, 1997); a deepening understanding of socio-cultural theory in practice; increasing awareness and appreciation of the education approach in Reggio Emilia centres in Italy (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998); and work that investigates the power relations between adults and children.

Many authors note that this reconceptualised image of the child has been emerging slowly over the past two decades, since the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), although there are some brief examples of children's perspectives in research prior to this. For example, Renwick (1984) included children's views alongside those of teachers and parents in her research on starting school, and Hughes (1988) noted:

> The most obvious advantage of interviewing a child is that the child is the expert (the only expert) on his [*sic*] feelings, perceptions and thoughts…. If an adult wants to know what or how the child is feeling or thinks, the adult must ask the child. (cited in Gollop, 2000, p. 18)

Nevertheless, in recent years there has been a greater recognition of children's opinions and perspectives, and support for their participation in research. For example, an Australian government department publication (Commission for Children and Young People, 2005) suggested that the principles underpinning participatory research with children should include

- children are the most knowledgeable about their lives;
- power is shared through collaboration between adults and children;
- research processes adapt to, and are respectful of, children's communication styles; and
- research processes are flexible and easy to understand. (pp. 9–11)

Research that involves children always contains assumptions about the child and childhood in general (Fasoli, 2001), and therefore understandings drawn from human development regarding the ways in which ideas about children and childhood are constructed become central to the research endeavour. Rather than children being seen as objects or subjects to be studied, they are increasingly being viewed as citizens or agents within social settings such as early childhood education. This has important implications for pedagogy too.

As adults attempt to hear and understand children, new and exciting insights are being gained into children's views, their capabilities, and how they make sense of the world. This work is not without its challenges. Several authors provide examples of

unsuccessful interviews where children are not interested in the researcher's focus, or are unwilling to talk (Carr, 2000; Hatch, 1990; Ledger, 2000; Nicholls & Thorkildsen, 1997). In this article we outline some of the strategies that a range of researchers and teachers have employed in their efforts to hear the views of young children in their work, and discuss some of the issues involved in gaining children's perspectives in both research and education.

Interviewing children

Initial work in this field tended to focus on interviewing children. Useful strategies may include having something to talk about, implying that the adult needs help and guidance, and ceding control over the topic (Gollop, 2000; Carr, 2000). In situations where the child is unlikely to believe that the adult requires help, toys, puppets, or younger children may be used as an "audience" for the child's assistance. For example, Young-Loveridge, Carr, and Peters (1995) used a toy rabbit and toy dog to gain insights into children's understandings of number by asking the child to show Dog and Rabbit how to solve various problems. Schoolchildren in Peters (2004) were asked what they would tell four-year-olds about starting school. Other interviewing techniques include hypothetical questions like "suppose I was a little kid…" and third person questions about "what kids do" rather than "what you do" (Graue & Walsh, 1998).

Carr (1997) used a storybook with an incomplete ending to check out four-year-olds' interpretations about their goals and their responses to difficulty. Ghaye and Pascal (1988) used an album of photographs to elicit children's thoughts about transition to school. In both cases these seemed to overcome some of the difficulties inherent in interviewing young children by providing something to talk about. Burgess (1994) invited children to draw a picture about teachers and what teachers do, and the drawings both stimulated conversation and provided insights into the children's thinking. More recently, researchers such as Dockett and Perry (2003a, 2003b) and Einarsdottir (2005) asked groups of children to take photographs of things they considered were important. However, Einarsdottir (2005) cautioned that the children's pictures by themselves only tell a partial story. The children's reality came into view as they explained things concerning the pictures that were not evident without their elucidations.

Multiple ways of seeing and know the child

When working with very young children Clark and Moss (2001) augmented interviews with other methods to develop a range of practices generally known as the "Mosaic approach" (Clark & Moss, 2001; Clark, 2005, 2007). This approach has been designed as "a framework for listening and responding to young children's perspectives" (Clark, 2007, p. 76).

> [It] combines the traditional adult directed research tools of observation and interviews of family members, practitioners, and children, with participatory tools of children, including the use of cameras, bookmaking, tours, and map-making.... The name Mosaic refers to drawing together pieces from different sources to create a complete picture of children's perspectives. (Clark, 2007, p. 77)

Clark (2005) describes Mosaic approach projects where data were gathered (Phase One) and followed by a concentrated period of reflection and review where the material was discussed (Phase Two). In this type of research, children's views are not only gathered, but also bought into the reflection phase(s). Where a study is to lead to action, a third phase may be added where decisions are made regarding continuity and change.

According to Pascal and Bertram (2009), the Mosaic approach is increasingly being used in a number of early childhood settings in England. It is also informing research in New Zealand in terms of methodology and methods. For example, both Stephenson (2009) and Te One (2007) described using a range of methods including digital cameras, audio and video recording devices alongside other strategies designed to foster children's active participation, such as a picture questionnaire and unfinished story books in the former and conversational interviews, a persona doll, a book and posters made from a book in the latter project. A range of participatory methods allowed the data to be triangulated and provided opportunities for researchers to co-construct meaning with young children.

Speaking for children

Although our focus in this article is on gathering children's views, it is relevant to note that parents and teachers may be asked by researchers to provide insights into children's lives. There are opportunities in the Mosaic approach, described above, for interviewing adults regarding their understandings of children's views in the first stage and also including them in the review process (Clark, 2005). Other approaches may rely solely on adult accounts of children's perspectives. This can provide a rich source of evidence about children's experiences, although there is a danger that it overlooks the value of gaining perspectives from the children themselves.

The second author of this article, Kelly (in press) asked teachers to document children's responses to a series of 10 children's picture books about same gender relationships and same gender parented families. The research question being investigated was: What effects do ECE teachers report that these books have on children (their language, conversations, interactions and play) in the ECE setting? Data collection involved the teachers acting as co-researchers. They were asked to read the selection of books to children during usual formal and informal story reading times at the kindergarten and to keep an informal log of their reading and children's responses to the books. These logs were analysed by the researcher along with transcripts from semi-structured interviews held with the teachers following the month-long period of book reading and data gathering.

The rationale for expecting teachers to interpret what they saw/heard children doing and saying related to a range of mitigating circumstances, including limited time and funds for what potentially could be seen as a pilot for a larger study. It may also have derived from my [Kelly's] implicit, and previously unexplored, view of children's abilities to be active participants rather than subjects in this research. The researcher and co-researchers could all be seen to have filtered children's voices according to our own perspectives and images of the child. It is also likely that the interpretive lenses brought to bear on children's responses will have been affected by our individual subjectivities as well as our sexual identities (Kelly, in press).

Filtering and shaping children's voices

Even when the child is spoken to directly, the adults may filter their responses through their own lenses. In a collaborative project designed to explore children's working theories that the first author was part of (Davis & Peters, 2010a, 2010b; Davis, Peters, & Duff, 2010; Peters & Davis, 2011) the early childhood practitioners involved became very conscious of the ways in which, when attempting to understand children's perspectives, adults, however well-meaning, tend to interpret the child's voice. Early examples included initially overlooking the complexity of a child's interest in volcanoes and whether they have conscious will regarding when they erupt; and initially seeing a child's focus on Harry Potter as an interest in wizards, when it later became apparent that the interest was in exploring ideas around good and evil. Taking time to revisit and review tape-recorded interactions and other documentation revealed how adults may pick up on one small aspect of a child's interest but misinterpret the primary focus. This is an important aspect of pedagogy for teachers, as well as a strategy for researchers. It is a reminder to avoid "inappropriate certainty", and be open to new lines of thinking (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 267). In future research encounters the practitioners became more alert to trying to achieve intersubjectivity in their interactions with children (Rogoff, 1990), which Trevarthen (1998) described as the consciousness and intentionality of two individuals (subjectivities) adapting and fitting to each other.

Worryingly, rather than seeking to understand the child's meaning, there were a number of examples in the data where adults prioritised their own traditional discourses (Peters & Davis, 2011). This drew attention to the way dominant discourses might shape data collection or pedagogy, and raises questions about the messages these in turn impart to the child participants. Sometimes children changed their views to fit with the traditional discourse, as in the example below where Phoebe allowed her complex puzzling about how bees make honey to be disrupted and moved to the adult's agenda regarding the number of bees and imagined (nuclear) family structure:

> J   "Yes! How many bees live in the hive?"
>
> P   "Ah, maybe two."
>
> J   "Two bees?"
>
> P   "Yeah (emphatically). One is the Dad, one is the Mum."
>
> J   "How many babies do they have?"
>
> P   was thoughtful for a while then slowly raised three fingers.

At other times children resisted this approach, as illustrated by four-year old Sarah-Kate:

> Sarah-Kate, who has a passion for animals, announced her possible future plans: "So Saturday, Sunday and Monday I can be like Bindi and then the rest of the time I'll be a Palaeontologist."
>
> An intrigued adult asked: "Might you have a husband as well?"
>
> With a bit of consideration Sarah-Kate responded: "I would but I would be very busy, so have to be away a lot. He would have to understand"

and then she added "Plus the time I would be doing my swimming".
(Davis & Peters, 2009)

Given some of the challenges involved in obtaining children's views in the first place, examples like these draw into question the ways in which they are filtered and shaped, not only during analysis and reporting but also in the moment-to-moment interactions with children.

Do children need speech to have a voice?

So far we have looked at the challenges involved in gathering children's spoken voices. In this section we explore two issues of interest, firstly working with pre-verbal children and secondly, understanding the views of verbal children who may choose not to speak, or not to speak about the research topic.

With respect to infants, Pascal and Bertram (2009) note that in many early childhood settings, and in research with young children, "the rights of children are not yet evident in practice … and children's continued lack of voice and power persists" (p. 253). They argue that this lack of power relates particularly to very young children who can remain "silenced" by adults acting on their behalf because they are seen as "too young" to express their rights and voice. The image of children being too young or immature sits alongside competing discourses that highlight the capability and confidence of very young children. Several studies have aimed to explore the ideas of infants and toddlers "as powerful, competent individuals who are well able to express preferences and make informed choices" (Pascal & Bertram, 2009, p. 254). We have briefly summarised ideas from three New Zealand projects that take this approach.

The Greerton Centre of Innovation project included research questions such as:

- What kinds of questions babies ask and what kinds of working theories they develop?
- How can teachers better respond to babies in their research endeavours?
- Does the image of the child as "researcher" enhance their ability to shape knowledge and act as planners of their learning? (Ministry of Education, 2010)

The notion of babies' questions was clearly demonstrated in video footage of children's interests and inquiry along with observations, recorded as Learning Stories, which include narrative descriptions of learning, often accompanied by photographs (see Carr, McChesney, Cowie, Miles-Kingston, & Sands, 2010 for a description of Learning Stories). Sands and Weston (2010) describe how a thread of inquiry that emerged from the research findings "centred on 'growing intelligence' through an image of infants and toddlers as researchers, curious to find out about the people, places and things in their world" (p. 14). As a consequence of this inquiry the teachers' image and expectations of very young children changed as they attempted to actively "listen" (in multiple ways) to children's interests. This altered thinking and caused these teacher/researchers to "slow down" (p. 9) and reprioritise the "relationships, time, resources and energy" (p. 14) to support complex and authentic learning. Within this, providing children with time and space to explore their interests was seen as crucial.

Slowing down, observing and revisiting also helped adults in Davis, Peters and Duff (2010) to consider the perspectives of infants. One mother's notebook revealed the way her view of her baby son Connor began to shift:

> … I have talked to Connor more and waited for him to show me he is ready before I pick him up etc. I have been amazed at how quickly he has responded to this. He obviously understands what I mean when I go to pick him up because he often reaches up. If I ask him to lift up his legs to change his nappy he responds. I can't believe it! Even though he is my third child I still have so much to learn!

Over a year later, this mother shared with the research team how the focus on working theories had changed the way she saw Connor as a learner.

> Exploring Connor's working theories has allowed me to gain an insight into the world through his eyes. I now try to be fully tuned in to what he is telling me with his actions. I feel like I was missing so much before! Connor is very clear in his communication with me if I just slow down and listen properly. This seems so simple but I think amidst the business of family life and Playcentre sessions it is the most challenging to implement.

These two studies have used simple observation techniques and yet have had powerful results in terms of transforming adult views about the potential for infants to have a "voice". In contrast, White (2011) devised a sophisticated split-screen polyphonic video technique which involved a great deal of time videotaping and analysing video footage of Zoe, a toddler aged 18 months at the start of the study, over a four-month period. The polyphonic video involved the collation and timed synchronisation of video footage focusing on the toddler in the everyday centre context and taken from the multiple vantage points of a teacher, the toddler herself, and the researcher, with both toddler and teacher wearing small hat-cameras (attached to a hat or headband) and the researcher holding a third camera. The three images were later presented on a split screen and offered to the participants for analysis (White, 2011). Zoe, her teacher and Zoe's parents all worked alongside White, the primary researcher, to investigate and interpret Zoe's visual acts, using Bakhtinian dialogic methodology (White, 2011).

White (2011) argues that Zoe's acts involve both the toddler's perceived intentions, and the meanings that adults bestow on them. This approach opened up reflection on the mediating role played by adults and potentially "avoids the dangers of ventriloquising or overpopulating children's voices with our own" (White & Nuttall, 2007, p. 25). White also argues that unless we problematise the concept of "child's voice" and interrogate it from places of reflexivity, speculation, and uncertainty, "teachers or researchers can promote, ignore or even silence the very young child— rendering them either powerful subjects or voiceless objects in both pedagogy and research activity" (White, 2011). This author reminds us that judgments are constantly being made throughout the research process, and that such judgments need to be reported alongside the results. We contend that these considerations regarding methodology apply even when children can speak.

The challenges of hearing "non-verbal" voices also applies to work with older children, because it is not always easy for children to express their ideas verbally. For example, children may remain silent about the confusing aspects of school, although their confusion could be expressed through silent or disruptive behaviour (Blenkin, 1992) or they may simply ignore a researcher's questions (Fasoli, 2001). Alternatively, children may simply resist sharing their views on the adult's topic of interest. In her

research on children's perspectives, Ledger (2000) concluded that "it was difficult to access exactly how the children perceived the transition [to school] from what they told me, as they showed a preference to talk about events and activities they enjoyed more than school" (p. 278). In the end she extended the focus of her research to incorporate topics that children did want to discuss.

Ledger's (2000) experience is one other researchers may be familiar with. Fasoli (2001) discussed how pivotal points occur in research where the power is negotiated between researcher and participant, for example, when children show a lack of interest or ignore the researcher's focus. Reflecting on her experiences with children at an art gallery, where one of the five-year-old participants was reluctant to move from a computer showing images of items to be found in the gallery, Fasoli (2001) commented:

> I hear in my voice, a researcher becoming impatient to do her research and using (or at least attempting to use) her position to push the proceedings forward. While Jake [five-year-old] was engaged with the computer he was totally fascinated. Instead of registering this and his right to do this, I wanted him to pay attention to what I had imagined would be our focus, the contemplation of artwork in the gallery. I was somehow unaware that I was doing this at the time, although it is clearly the case when I reflect on the transcript. (p. 10)

Although this is a story from research, many teachers will recognise similar instances in their practice. This reminds us that children are social actors and not passive participants in their interactions with others. It raises challenges for both researchers and teachers when shared interest in a topic proves difficult to establish.

Time to establish relationships: Data collection in a culture of fear

There is evidence to suggest that it takes time and skill to develop the kinds of relationships where children's voices can be meaningfully gathered. For example, Stephenson (2009) believed that the length and depth of the relationship with a child or children is likely to affect how a researcher understands what children are saying or meaning. She visited the centre where her research took place 50 times in a five-month period.

> The use of photographs, and photography, the prolonged period of data collection and the intellectual process of "stepping back" from the data to listen for other possible meanings were all found to contribute significantly to hearing unanticipated and more nuanced aspects of children's responses. (Stephenson, 2009, p. 131)

Prolonged data collection and knowing the children well was also an asset in Mangere Bridge's Centre of Innovation project where kindergarten teachers regularly interviewed children, voice recording directly onto their laptops. The children appeared to enjoy the novelty of sitting with a familiar teacher and having their ideas recorded onto the computer (Hartley, Rogers, Smith, Peters, & Carr, 2009).

In reflecting on these findings, we have considered how the current "culture of fear" that Furedi (2002) identified as a feature of many Western societies in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries may influence our research approaches. Guldberg

(2009) describes how current discourses may position any unfamiliar adult as a threat so that exchanges between children and strangers are uncommon. This may help to explain why more time is needed to establish relationships and trust with children before embarking on research, in contrast to my (Peters') early research experiences in the 1990s, where three- and four-year-old children in kindergartens eagerly approached me, an unfamiliar researcher, to "have a turn" at being interviewed or wear a microphone during an observation session.

Conclusion

In the words of Pascal and Bertram (2009), "it is clear that supporting and catching children's voices is complex, challenging and multi-layered involving a profound paradigm shift in the values, actions and thinking of researchers and practitioners" (p. 260). This work is shaped by the ways in which children and childhood are viewed and understood. In this article, the glimpses provided of research carried out in New Zealand, alongside references to a range of international literature, reinforce our view that exploring children's perspectives and hearing (and seeing) their voices requires skilled and flexible researchers and teachers. Watching and listening carefully whilst being mindful of our filtering/interpretive gazes takes time and patience, especially when children are very young. It also requires a commitment to honouring children's right to actively participate alongside multiple, and innovative, ways of gathering data in order that the child is heard as authentically as possible.

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