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The voice of the child in early childhood education research in Australia and New Zealand: A systematic review

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Introduction

The concept of the voice of the child in research originated from Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which provides that: ‘States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child’ (UN, 1989). After more than two decades, the assumption has prevailed in social studies that children were competent research participants whose views deserved to be taken seriously (Hunleth, 2011) and that even children with little or no speech had a voice (Schnoor, 2012).

Researchers have adopted different approaches to ‘listening to’ the child, one being the Mosaic approach developed by Clark and Moss (2001). The Mosaic approach was characteristic of the use of multiple methods to research children’s perceptions and views, as Greenfield (2011) understood, ‘[i]t is about piecing together multiple types of data to help understand children’s views’ (p. 110). The approach involved the use of a range of tools, such as observations, photography, bookmaking, tours, map-making and interviews. It sought to bring together different pieces of information to create the whole picture from the child’s viewpoint (Clark & Moss, 2001). In particular, largely due to the limited speech ability among most preschool children, visual methods, including drawing and photo-elicitation, had been found to be effective in capturing the child’s voice (Eldén, 2012; Hunleth, 2011).

However, issues have arisen in research practice. Some researchers assumed that voice research with children was by definition good, valuable, or of high quality (Spyrou, 2011) and they tended to ‘quickly analyse by extracting quotes from children to illustrate their findings … [which might] end up caricaturing children’ (Spyrou, 2011, p. 157). According to Komulainen (2007), ‘listening to children is not necessarily “good” but may be, in fact, intrusive and the cause of further distress: more listening may not inevitably mean more hearing’ (p. 25). Komulainen questioned whether ‘listening to children’ in social research is only ‘a rhetorical device’ (p. 26). Addressing the limitation of oral accounts which disadvantaged children with limited language, Warming (2011) observed: ‘Inclusive strategies designed to cater to children’s different preferences and abilities still risk favouring verbally inclined children, and thus reproducing symbolic violence towards less verbal children’ (p. 50). Another issue is whether and to what extent researchers should pursue authenticity of the voice of the child. Eldén (2012) contended that the drawing methods ‘do not aim to uncover “authentic” voices of the participating children, but rather, are crucial in allowing...’
the complexities of children’s narratives on care to emerge’ (p. 67). Spyrou (2011) believed that researchers ‘need to move beyond claims of authenticity and account for the complexity behind children’s voices by exploring their messy, multi-layered and non-normative character’ (p. 151). These unresolved issues call for a shift of our attention from rhetoric to practice, from the why to the how. This systematic review of the studies was aimed ‘to distinguish rhetoric from practice’ (Komulainen, 2007, p. 24) by mapping the status quo of the research practice with regard to the enactment of a child’s right to have a voice in research.

**Methods**

The methodology of this study was a systematic review. Systematic reviews use ‘explicit and rigorous criteria to identify, critically evaluate and synthesise all the literature on a particular topic’ (Cronin, Ryan & Coughlan, 2008, p. 39) and are ‘valuable summaries of the research evidence base and as such play a key role in evidence-informed decision-making’ (Stewart, 2014, p. 588).

‘ECE research in Australia and New Zealand’ was defined in this study as primary research in ECE conducted and reported in Australia and New Zealand. In this study, ‘primary research’ involved original primary data collected by the researcher. Given academic journals are the predominant vehicle for reporting primary research, adopting Cronin and colleagues’ (2008) criterion of currency for inclusion of articles in a literature review (i.e. at most, the last 10 years), the scope of this review was confined to the relevant academic journals in Australia and New Zealand between 2005 and 2014.

A two-stage selection process was completed prior to analysis—‘selection of journals’ and ‘selection of articles’ from the selected journals.

**Stage 1. Selection of journals**

Since publication of ECE research was not limited to journals specialising in ECE, journals relevant to both early education and education in general were considered. The Australian Education Index (AEI) database was searched, which resulted in a list of 42 journals published in Australia in early education as well as education in general. A list of 25 journals published in New Zealand in both early education and education in general was obtained from the National Library of New Zealand. Further screening of journals was performed by eliminating specialised journals that were apparently not relevant to the research topic (e.g. library, adult, higher education), which reduced the number of the Australian journals to 25 and that of New Zealand journals to 16.

**Stage 2. Selection of articles**

Utilising major electronic databases (e.g. A+ Education, ProQuest, EBSCO), content pages and all article abstracts of each selected journal were examined for relevant articles. For an article to be selected, all four relevance criteria had to be met: (1) The article was peer-reviewed; (2) The article was reporting primary research that involved independent data collection; (3) The article was reporting primary research that was conducted in Australia or New Zealand; and (4) The article was reporting primary research in the early education area (from birth to five years). The majority of selected journals and their full-text articles were available on an electronic database with only a few exceptions where academic libraries were used. Consequently, 381 articles (219 Australia, 162 New Zealand) from 21 journals (14 Australia, seven New Zealand) were selected.

### Table 1. Classification of the journal articles reporting ECE research in Australia and New Zealand

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Feature Feature</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Category 1</td>
<td>Child-related data exempted</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>47.5% The article was focused on a topic that was not significantly affecting the child (e.g. professional development, leadership, placement etc.), or it disclaimed that the child’s perspective was not included by, for example, including relevant words in the title of the article (e.g. ‘teachers’ perspective on …’, ‘parents’ perception of …’).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category 2</td>
<td>Child-related data absent</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>9.4% The article failed to include child-related data without making a disclaimer or giving a reason.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category 3</td>
<td>Child-related data present for assessment of the child</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>8.4% The article included child-related data for the purpose of assessing learning and development of the child rather than obtaining the child’s perspective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category 4</td>
<td>Child-related data present for the voice of the child</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>34.6% The articles included child-related data for the purpose of obtaining the child’s perspective.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Preliminary analysis

A preliminary analysis was conducted to assess each article on: (1) Inclusion of the child-related data; and (2) Link between the child-related data and the voice of the child. As a result, the articles were classified into four categories, as shown in Table 1 on page 98.

Table 2 provides a breakdown of individual journals’ contribution to each of the four categories of the articles.

Further analysis and findings

A more focused analysis was performed to determine the nature of the linkage between the child-related data and the voice of the child. As shown in Table 1, the Category 1 and 2 articles did not include any child-related data and therefore were excluded from further analysis. The details of data collection in each of the Category 3 and 4 articles were examined against the findings of the research to determine how the voice of the child was engendered. Four generic types of the voice of the child were formulated from the analysis: pseudo voice (engendered by assessing the child), inferred voice (engendered by inferring the child’s perspective), surveyed voice (engendered by surveying the child) and co-constructed voice (engendered by co-constructing the lived experience and understanding of the child).

Type 1. Pseudo voice—assessing the child

The Category 3 articles included child-related data which was collected on the child rather than with the child. This type of child-related data was only used for assessment results and had little to do with the voice of the child as a researcher. The main form of assessments reported in the Category 3 articles were standardised or norm-referenced assessments (e.g. Colmar, 2011; Gould, 2012; Oakley, Howitt, Garwood & Durack, 2013; Reynolds, Kidd & Stagnitti, 2011; Van Bysterveldt, Gillon & Moran, 2006; Young, 2009). The standardised assessments served a range of purposes, including physical (Lucas & Schofield, 2010), physiological (Callcott, 2012; Sims, Guilfoyle & Parry, 2006), psychometric (Piek, Bradbury, Elsley & Tate, 2008) and academic (Hong & Kemp, 2007; McDonough & Sullivan, 2011).
Many Category 3 articles included informal ‘authentic assessments’ that were ‘recordings of developmental observations over time by familiar and knowledgeable caregivers about the naturally occurring competencies of young children in daily routines’ (Bagnato, 2007, p. 27). Examples of authentic assessment from the Category 3 articles included: naturalistic observations (Ulloa, Evans & Parke, 2010), non-participant observation of children’s play and interactions (Mawson, 2010; Meade, 2012), videotaping of children’s interactions with caregivers (Douglas & Stirling, 2012), families with a focus on children (Fleer & Hammer, 2014) and toddlers’ actions and interactions (Lee, 2012). Similar to standardised assessments, authentic assessments reported in the Category 3 articles were conducted to ‘assess’ the child rather than ‘listen to’ the child.

As reported in some Category 3 articles, some traditionally voice-engendering modes of data collection functioned as an assessment that engendered no voice. For example, the Piagetian clinical interview with children aged five to eight years in Warren, Cooper and Miller’s (2012) study was conducted to assess the children’s mathematical ability and the interviews consisting of mathematical tasks conducted by Warren and Miller (2010) were in effect assessments. The visual methods considered to be a preferred way of listening to the child (Eidén, 2012; Hunleth, 2011) were used as assessments. For example, in Wills’ (2012) study, photographs, video and a digital diary were used to create a record of the child’s learning capabilities.

Type 2. Inferred voice—infering the child’s perspective

In many Category 4 articles, researchers deduced or inferred the child’s view on the matter being researched by observing the child’s behaviours and interpreting the child’s previously created work samples. The observations engendered by this type of voice were ‘unobtrusive’ and ‘non-participatory’ (Howitt, Lewis & Upson, 2011). However, since the purpose of the non-participatory observations here was not to ‘assess’ the child but to ‘figure out’ what the child was thinking about in regard to the subject matter, they were distinct from the non-participatory observations engendering the pseudo voice (Type 1) as described above. It should be emphasised that the child’s work samples (e.g. drawing, photo, portfolio etc.) selected for analysis and interpretation were not purposefully ‘created’ as part of the research process, as is the case with the participant-elicited documentation engendering the co-constructed voice (Type 4) to be discussed below. The selected work samples were part of the pedagogical documentation based on which the researchers made inferences about the child’s perspective. In the Category 4 articles, examples of such documentation included: written artefacts (McDonald, 2005), spontaneous drawings (Lambert, 2005), portfolios (Mawson, 2011a), learning stories (Archard, 2013; Wilson-Tukaki & Davis, 2011), photo narratives (Goodfellow, 2012), drawings, observational diaries (Vaealiki & Mackey, 2008) and the phenomenological approach (Lewis, Mansfield & Baudains, 2010).

Type 3. Surveyed voice—surveying the child

In some Category 4 articles, verbal language was the principal vehicle for the researchers to survey the child’s voice on the subject matter of the research. McDonald and Howell (2012) used a survey that was presented to the child in simple language and was read aloud to them, to obtain the child’s opinions. A predominant proportion of the surveys described in the Category 4 articles took the form of interviews. Since interviews were also used as assessment occasionally, as mentioned above, ‘surveying the child’ instead of ‘interviewing the child’ was chosen to be part of the title of the Type 3 voice. The articles used a wide range of terms to refer to the interviews that were aimed to survey the child: informal conversations (Grant, 2013; Smith, 2012), informal discussions (Gibbons, 2005), conversations (Vaealiki & Mackey, 2008), talking (Barker, 2010), interviews (Deans, Frydenberg & Tsurutani, 2010; Haggerty, Simonsen, Blake & Mitchell, 2007; Hedges, 2011; Wainman et al., 2012), interviews and conversations (Clarkin-Phillips, Paki, Fruean, Armstrong & Crowe, 2012), conversational interviews (Te One, 2010a) and semi-structured interviews (Briggs, 2007; Hesterman, 2011; Mirkhil, 2010; Prince, 2012).

Some researchers surveyed the children in groups. Again, different terms were used for such non-individual interviews: focus group interviews (Drummond, 2012), focus group discussions (O’Neill, Urlichs, Fleer, Agbenyega & Ozanne-Smith, 2013), guided group discussions (Nyland, Deans, Acker & Ferris, 2013), group discussions (Blaise, 2010), group interviews (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2011), focus-groups and semi-structured interviews (Peters, Hartley, Rogers, Smith & Carr, 2009). It should be noted that, when significant ‘interference’ or ‘intrusiveness’ by the researcher occurred, the group interviews would involve co-construction and engender the Type 4 voice (as described below).

Type 4. Co-constructed voice—co-constructing the lived experience and understanding of the child

Unlike the unobtrusiveness of non-participant observations characterising the child-related data engendering pseudo voice (Type 1) and, depending on the purpose of data collection, inferred voice (Type 2), the observations employed to engender the co-constructed voice (Type 4) were participatory and obtrusive. This form of participatory observation involved not only observation but also co-construction of the child’s lived experience. Co-constructed lived experience, along with shared understanding or intersubjectivity, was a distinctive feature of the child-related
data engendering the Type 4 voice. A typical example of data collection leading to such types of voice was the ethnographic approach featuring participant observation (Due & Riggs, 2011; Hedges, 2008; Hesterman, 2011; Mawson, 2011b; White, 2008). Some methods of the Mosaic approach described in the Category 4 articles provided more examples: photography, photo-book making, child-led tours, map-making and ecocultural child interviews (Baird, 2013); children being asked to produce a drawing of their first day at school and attend focused discussions (MacDonald, 2009); collaborative drawing, discussions on photographs taken with disposable cameras (Greenfield, 2007); children’s photographs and discussions and the researcher’s interactions (Richards, 2009); themed drawing, painting and storytelling (Harris & Manatakis, 2013).

Discussion

The classification of the articles depicted a big picture of the status quo of child-related data in ECE research in Australia and New Zealand. The creation of Category 1 acknowledged the fact that not all early childhood research ought to include the voice of the child. If the research topic was not affecting the child significantly, or if it was stated that the focus of the research was on the adults’ voice only, then the voice of the child could be ‘exempted’. Such a category legitimised silencing of the child’s voice in certain research, which highlighted a natural gap between the voice rhetoric and research practice. In a broad sense, all matters being researched in ECE are ‘matters affecting the child’ (UN, 1989); however, given the priority of a research project at the time, the significance of such ‘affecting’ should be considered.

The typology that evolved from the review of the Category 3 and 4 articles provided a conceptual framework for understanding the ‘quality’ of the voice of the child in current ECE research. The typology excluded adults ‘speaking for children’ as described by Peters and Kelly (2011) because I believed consulting parents and teachers on what the child’s perspective was should be counted as an adult’s voice. Obviously, the pseudo voice (Type 1) should not be counted as the voice of the child at all, although it was certainly valuable for the research in other senses. The other types of voice were conceptually distinct, but in practice, according to the articles reviewed, they were ‘muddled up’ most of the time. It is important to point out that the typology is not a hierarchical structure with one type superseding another. Whether one type of voice is more reliable or valid than the other type depends on many contextual variables which are beyond the scope of this article. By the same token, a question remains whether and to what extent these types of voice are compatible. There was an overall lack of information on how the different types of voices were mediated in the articles.

The inferred voice (Type 2) seemed to have featured the infants who had limited or no speech ability, which echoed Schnoor’s (2012) remark, ‘… even children with little or no speech mostly do have a voice … Analyses of field notes delineate a range of observable vocal phenomena and respective social practices of “giving voice” in a crèche and detect both various strategies of verbalisation as well as strategies of practically dealing with children’s hearable voices’ (p. 458). The articles reviewed confirmed that even infants under the age of two were able to give their voices (Duncan, 2005; Goodfellow, 2012; Podmore & Taouma, with A’oga Fa’a Samoa, 2006; Te One, 2010b). This type of voice should be distinguished from the pseudo voice (Type 1) where observation was to ‘measure’ the child rather than to ‘infer’ what the child would think about the topic. Whether and to what extent the inferred voice is congruent with the real voice depends on a number of variables, including, but not limited to, how well the researcher understands and empathises with the child.

The surveyed voice (Type 3) appeared to be the most straightforward way of listening to the child. The articles reported many three- to five-year-old children being interviewed. Keeping in mind the age appropriateness of the interview questions, I was interested to know how the researchers ‘manoeuvred’ the interviews. There was a lack of information on the details of the interview processes in the articles. Furthermore, the analytical procedures showing how the interview data translated into the voice of the child were either not reported or not sufficiently reported in the articles. Peters and Kelly (2011) discussed occasions of researchers ‘filtering and shaping children’s voices’ (p. 23) even when the child was spoken to directly, which reminded me that some of the voices of the children reported in the articles might have been ‘filtered’ or ‘shaped’ by the adults. I was wondering about the boundary between such ‘filtering and shaping’ and ‘co-constructing’ for the co-constructed voice (Type 4). I was also wondering to what extent the child being interviewed understood the interview questions. Apparently, for some topics, the child did not understand the subject matter (Richards, 2009) and was incapable of providing any voice on the topic (McDonald, 2005). Further, the child might ‘choose not to speak or not to speak about the research topic’ (Peters & Kelly, 2011, p. 24). Such issues remained unaddressed in the majority of the articles.

The socioculturally rooted notion of ‘co-construction’ is currently prevailing in ECE research in both Australia and New Zealand. Despite its profound philosophical connotations, in the research practice where the voice of the child is advocated for, ‘co-constructing’ should be seen as a technique—for example, how do we co-construct? The co-constructed voice (Type 4) was related to many of the methods that allowed the researchers to ‘co-construct’ with the child. In the Category 4 articles, researchers co-constructed the voice of the child through
two avenues: co-constructing the child’s lived experience and co-constructing the child’s understanding of the co-constructed lived experience. Originating from the sociocultural perspective, the currently popular Mosaic approach to ‘listening to’ the child in research was characteristic of co-constructing, although it does include a range of methods.

In order to address the child’s voice, as shown in the reviewed articles, researchers resorted to many methods. However, it appeared to me that the voice of the child claimed in some of the articles was tokenistic. The ‘a-little-bit-of-everything’ tactic of data collection did not seem to work well for capturing the voice of the child. Children’s ‘one hundred languages’ (Spaggiari & Rinaldi, 1996, cited in Hesterman 2011) for pedagogical documentation does not mean 100 data collection methods that are effective in the voice research. It is paramount for the researcher to understand the linkage between the data and the voice. To put it another way: the mechanism of how the child-related data translates into the voice of the child should be explored. The typology that evolved from this literature review provides a scaffold for achieving such understanding.

Limitations and directions for future research

Several limitations should be noted. The 10-year time frame was debatable. It would be beneficial to include articles published before 2005, particularly since 1989 is when the UNCRC was published. By the same token, it was a limitation to exclude articles published in other countries. It was not unusual that the research conducted in Australasian early childhood settings was published elsewhere. Similarly, focusing on the peer-reviewed journal articles could have excluded some important relevant research reports such as doctoral theses, conference presentations and monographs. Another limitation was the absence of ethical considerations from the scope of the review. Due to the different requirements of journals and the writing style of individual researchers, only very few articles covered the ethics, which would have invalidated review of this aspect given the complex nature of the ethics for voice research, for example, obtaining the child’s consent and/or assent (Birbeck & Drummond, 2007; Harwood, 2010). Future research to address these limitations may include expansion of the range of reviewed articles, both chronologically and geographically. In addition, future work may attempt to tackle more in-depth issues relating to the typology of child voice formulated in this study. For example, apart from the ethics issue which should be looked into closely, the likelihood of a link between certain factors (e.g. age of the child, background of the researcher) and certain types of child voice should also be explored.

Concluding notes

Based on the quantitative classification of journal articles reporting the primary research in Australian and New Zealand ECE, the systematic review revealed that the voice of the child was evidential and that a natural gap existed between rhetoric and practice. The typology of the voice of the child that evolved from the review highlighted the heterogeneous nature of the child-related data reported in the reviewed articles. The Type 1 voice (pseudo voice) emanated from studies that included assessment of the child which did not engender the voice of the child as a researcher, although the voice was present in pedagogical senses. The Type 2 voice (inferred voice) substantiated the use of pedagogical documentation for voice generation. The Type 3 voice (surveyed voice) manifested the crucial role of speech in giving a voice. Taking advantage of the sociocultural notion of shared understanding and intersubjectivity, the Type 4 voice (co-constructed voice) legitimised the researcher’s intrusion into the child’s experience and thinking process in research. Each of these four types of voice is conceptually distinct, but in research practice, they were entwined with each other. Understanding the nature of each type of voice contributes to ensuring the quality of collection and analysis of the child-related data. These findings will contribute to mediating the tension between the voice rhetoric and research practice and in particular, curbing tokenism in enactment of the voice of the child in research.

Implications

Enacting the rights of the child is important in rhetoric but difficult in practice. There have not been criteria of reliability and validity for the voice of the child, let alone a formula for capturing reliable and valid child voice. Tokenistic child voice is not only unnecessary but also misleading. Compared to the absence of the voice of the child from a study, misrepresented voice of the child is probably more worrying. It is good practice that the researchers disclaim in the report if the child’s voice has not been sought, which seems to be a good way to bridge the gap between rhetoric and practice. To prevent misrepresented voice of the child, the researcher should take a realistic, honest approach rather than a ‘politically correct’ one. It should be considered to be good practice to acknowledge the difficulty and even failure in listening to the child in a study. Also, the researcher should acknowledge if the child voice has somehow been ‘filtered’ or ‘shaped’ and make the effort to avoid what Spyrou (2011) termed as ‘caricaturing children’ (p. 157). Further, to safeguard the quality of the research involving the voice of the child, it is important to include in the report sufficient information on how the child-related data was collected, how the child was analysed and how this was reflected in the findings.
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