



The limits of children's voices: From authenticity to critical, reflexive representation

Childhood

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Abstract

This article provides a critique of the preoccupation with children's voices in child-centred research by exploring their limits and problematizing their use in research. The article argues that critical, reflexive researchers need to reflect on the processes which produce children's voices in research, the power imbalances that shape them and the ideological contexts which inform their production and reception, or in other words issues of representation. At the same time, critical, reflective 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.

Keywords

authenticity, children's voices, methodology, reflexivity, representation

Introduction

The concept of 'children's voices' perhaps more than any other concept, has come to be associated with the so-called new social studies of childhood. One could argue that the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies has built its very *raison d'être* around the notion of children's voices. By accessing the otherwise silenced voices of children – by giving children a voice – and presenting them to the rest of the world, researchers hope to gain a better understanding of childhood. The disempowered social position of children and the need to attend to children and childhood from a social justice and rights perspective also add a moral imperative to the cause. Yet, this preoccupation with children's voices, which is well deserved both in an ethical and a research sense, has mostly failed to scrutinize itself and to attend critically to issues of representation.

Three recently published pieces of work set the stage for a critical analysis of children's voices and the attending challenges to childhood research. First, James (2007: 265)

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asks why it is that childhood researchers do not reflect critically on their role in the process of representing children's voices through their work. This question has political significance, especially when the research seeks to destabilize power differentials between children and adults by relying on the 'authenticity' of voice while aiming to empower children.

Second, Komulainen (2007) has deconstructed the notion of 'voice' in childhood studies by paying particular attention to the ambiguity of human communication and the modern, liberal notion of a 'speaking subject' (see also Lee, 2001). Komulainen cautions against an uncritical use of the child's voice by critiquing the individualizing tendencies in voice research which attribute autonomy, rationality and intention to the speaking child while simultaneously divorcing the production of the child's voice from its interactional context (Komulainen, 2007: 25). Following Bakhtin's theoretical insights, Komulainen considers voice as social and co-constructed instead of individual, fixed, straightforward, linear or clear (Komulainen, 2007: 18, 23). For Komulainen, we need as researchers to become more aware of how children's voices are constantly constrained and shaped by multiple factors such as our own assumptions about children, our particular use of language, the institutional contexts in which we operate and the overall ideological and discursive climates which prevail. These issues may become particularly salient in research with children who have little or no speech.

Third, in a similar vein, Mazzei and Jackson (2009) remind us about the preoccupation with the modern, metaphysical assumption of a unitary subject with an authentic voice speaking the truth, and invite us to consider how 'polyvocality' in qualitative research does not resolve the problem of representation. It is impossible to grasp voice and represent its essence due to the problem of 'authenticity'. However, our failure to do so rests not on methodological deficits (e.g. the place where an interview is held, whether it is a group or individual interview) but rather on the wrongly held assumption that it is possible to capture that essence through people's words (MacLure, 2009). Instead of relying on authenticity, Mazzei and Jackson urge researchers to consider epistemologies and power relations in data generation, and thereby more productive ways for representation (Mazzei and Jackson, 2009: 3).

In this article I extend and build upon the critiques outlined in the previous paragraphs in an attempt to explore the limits of children's voices by reflecting on the processes which produce them. There is a particular focus on a critical take on the epistemologies that are currently advocated to be used with children. I argue that a critical, reflexive approach to child voice research needs to take into account the actual research contexts in which children's voices are produced and the power imbalances that shape them. However, instead of detracting from the value of voice research, acknowledging and reflecting on the situated character of children's voices and their limits can, potentially, contribute to new, more productive ways of producing and representing children's voices.

From interview methods to visual methods

Much child-focused research has concerned itself with the problems associated with accessing children and/or their voice. At one level, there may be children who prefer not

to take part in research, and children who are intentionally excluded from research by adult gatekeepers because of their perceived vulnerability or incapacity (Powell and Smith, 2009: 126; see also Westcott and Littleton, 2005: 146). At another level, the problem is one of actualizing children's voices: to get children to freely and openly express themselves in such a way that the goal of understanding is served. There may also be children who are shy and do not feel comfortable communicating in an individual or group interview, and other children who might be reserved in a focus group discussion but more open and talkative in a friendship group (Hill, 2006: 78, 79, 81). An interview can, at times, appear in children's eyes to be more of an 'interrogation' or 'investigation'; something which will obviously affect their responses (McWilliam et al., 2009: 70).

Attempts have been made to overcome such problems. As Greene and Hill (2005: 17) argue, the choice of method might influence the kind of answer one receives: similar issues explored through different methods might yield different results. They point to alternative ways of eliciting children's experiences and voices which do not necessarily depend on interaction with an interviewer. Such methods may involve scenarios, vignettes and sentence completion tasks or methods which use computing technology with which children are very familiar and comfortable (Greene and Hill, 2005: 14). Other researchers have suggested creative alternatives such as role play and drama (Christensen and James, 2000; also Veale, 2005), the use of digital spaces where children might feel more comfortable (McWilliam et al., 2009: 73–4), or the use of radio discussions, which might produce different voices than those of the interview (Young and Barrett, 2001: 388).

Indeed, in the so-called voice research there has been a recent turn to the visual (Banks, 2001; Beneker et al., 2010; Cook and Hess, 2007; Pink, 2001; Prosser, 1998; Schratz and Loffler, 1998; Thomson, 2008a; Young and Barrett, 2001) with approaches such as: visual diaries with pictures and drawings of children's worlds (Burke, 2008); photo-voice and participatory photography where children document their lives or explore issues of interest to them by taking pictures of what matters to them and photo-elicitation where children are invited by the researcher to talk about pictures they took or ones presented to them by the researcher (Clark-Ibanez, 2008; Kaplan, 2008); scrapbooks or media diaries completed by children (Bragg and Buckingham, 2008); maps completed by children of their environments (Morrow, 2001); and video produced by young people to explore their perspectives of schooling (Haw, 2008).

There is a range of epistemological justifications for visual methods. Thompson (2008b: 11, 13–14), for example, argues that images may elicit different responses to speech or writing and are more likely to elicit quicker emotional (and not just intellectual) responses. Similarly, children who experience difficulties in expressing themselves verbally or in writing may find that images allow them to express themselves more easily and make their participation in research more pleasurable, especially when they are involved in aesthetic creation. Leitch (2008: 37) shows, for example, how the sensitive use of drawings and collage with children can help them narrate 'the unrecognized, unacknowledged or "unsayable" stories that they hold' while the power differential may be lowered since children are co-creators rather than simply sources of data (Leitch, 2008: 48). The completion of scrapbooks by young people in a project exploring their views on sexual media content provided for an activity that, contrary to the interview, was less structured by the knowledge and assumptions of the researchers. The young people

completed the scrapbooks at their own time and chose how to talk to the researchers about them allowing the latter to access a range of critical, pleasurable and reflexive voices (Bragg and Buckingham, 2008:116–18).

Justifications for visual methods, for instance, seem at first convincing. Yet, as a single method they do not overcome the problems associated with representation and remind us about the limits of children's voices. Whether it is researchers who create images and children are asked to comment on or whether it is children themselves who create them, images are selections produced out of a number of possibilities and, like all other texts, cannot be authentic depictions of social reality. Similarly, all verbal interpretation of images (whether by children or adult researchers) will necessarily be positioned and hence selective representations (Komulainen, 2007).

Participant observation and peer culture research

Power mediates all research production, and child research is no exception. For some time, this has been a much debated concern in childhood studies (e.g. Best, 2007; Christensen, 2004; Freeman and Mathison, 2009; Greene and Hogan, 2005; Thomson, 2008a). Various attempts have been made to reduce adult authority in research settings involving participant observation within the so-called peer culture tradition. Mandell (1988), for instance, coined the term 'least-adult' role whereby the researcher minimizes their adult characteristics (both physical and social) and authority so as to blend in with children's activities more easily. Other researchers (Corsaro, 2003; Fine and Sandstrom, 1988) have adopted the role of a 'friend'. In a similar vein, for example, Thomson and Hall (2008: 153) report that in their research with children's self-portraits, they found that when one of them sat on the floor while the child sat on a chair and both turned their back to the other researcher and the recorder, the children became much more animated and their self-portrait explanations were much more authoritative.

Peer culture research through participant observation – when understood as simply an adult 'blending in' with children – has faced some criticisms. For instance, Thorne (1993) adopted a least-adult role in her work with children, however finding that negotiating a position for herself as a researcher between the children and the other implicated adults was anything but straightforward and required that she, at times, had to switch back to adult roles. Raby (2007: 51) also suggested that when working with older children or adolescents such a role may actually be much more difficult and less desirable because the perceived gulf can appear to be greater and teenagers can see an adult who tries too hard to fit into their peer cultures as an imposter.

Mayall (2000) takes issue with both Mandell (1988) and Thorne (1993), arguing that researchers need to acknowledge the subordinated role of children to adults in the research encounter and illustrates how in her own work she prefers to position herself as an adult who lacks the knowledge that children have about childhood and who wants to learn from them (Mayall, 2000: 122). Lewis (2008: 201–3) has further described how her relationship with children in the three schools where she carried out research differed, and that there is not necessarily one strategy which works well in all cases: her role among children varied between the three settings.

There have been other recent attempts to increase the agentic potential of children in research (e.g. Alderson, 2001; Chin, 2007; Kellett, 2005, 2010; Theis, 2001; Veale, 2005). This trend comes in mainly two varieties: children as co-researchers or collaborators and children as primary researchers. In the former variety, children are offered the opportunity to make some (e.g. whether to be interviewed alone or in a group), but certainly not all, decisions about the research (Freeman and Mathison, 2009: 166–7). In the second variety, children are actively involved in all stages of the research process. They are in charge of identifying research questions, deciding on methods and collecting data and analysing, interpreting, reporting and disseminating the research findings. This kind of research is seen as offering new perspectives on childhood from an ‘insider’ perspective: ‘Children observe with different eyes, ask different questions – they sometimes ask questions that adults do not even think of – have different concerns and immediate access to a peer culture where adults are outsiders. The research agendas children prioritize, the research questions they frame and the way in which they collect data are also quintessentially different from adults’ (Kellett, 2010: 105).

Nevertheless, although the goal is to overcome the power imbalances between children and adult researchers and to neutralize the power dynamics at work in child–child research, this is not always possible. Kellett (2010: 91–2) explains that children are not exempt from power differences that are ascribed to different groups of children (class, age, linguistic skill, physical ability or popularity) and which are likely to shape the research encounter. Despite its notable advantages, we cannot therefore necessarily assume that this approach to research will result in higher quality or more authentic research or that the fundamental problem of representation and the politics associated with it is overcome (James, 2007: 268).

Institutional contexts

Considering how children’s voices are produced within specific institutional contexts further highlights the role of power in association with adult authority. How do particular institutional contexts produce certain voices rather than others? Will, for example, a less adult-controlled social setting like the playground provide for a different understanding of a particular issue than a highly circumscribed, by adult authority, setting like the school (Punch, 2002: 328; see also Westcott and Littleton, 2005: 148)?

Reflecting on my own work on Greek-Cypriot children’s constructions of national identities (Spyrou, 2001a), for example, I found that children drew on their local Cypriot culture and tradition when constructing their identities in the neighbourhood (e.g. in terms of the themes they chose for their games, the language they used and so on) but resorted to a more official, nationalistic voice when expressing their identities at school. The structured and highly controlled space of the school encouraged children to provide the ‘correct answer’ while the more child-controlled neighbourhood playground provided them with significantly more leeway to draw upon alternative discourses which in some cases undermined or contradicted the ones they drew on at school.

What claims could I have made if my research had focused, for instance, exclusively on the school? Recognizing how institutional contexts are constitutive of the processes

which produce children's voices goes a long way in understanding their situated and variable character. It is within these institutional contexts and the cultural and social norms that regulate social relations within them that children's voices take shape as the respective characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity, race and ability, to name the most obvious ones), interests and agendas of the researcher meet with those of the child to produce particular voices (Freeman and Mathison, 2009: 55).

Hence, though instructive about the possibilities for minimizing adult authority in our research encounters with children, it is also increasingly evident from studies that an adult can never become a 'native' in children's worlds, not just because of the difference in physical size but also because of the privileged status that one's identity as an adult, and an adult researcher as such, comes with. Recognizing how our adult status impacts the whole research process and by extension the production of children's voices requires a reflexive self-awareness. Leonard (2007), for example, illustrates how adult gatekeepers such as parents or teachers often use their power to control children's access to research. Reflecting on her own researcher role, she also shows us how an otherwise well intentioned researcher can inadvertently act as a gatekeeper of children's voices when being a speaker or interpreter of these voices.

Rapport, layers of meaning and the problem of time

In an effort to lessen the inherent power imbalances between children and adults in the research encounter, researchers try to build close, trusting relations with children. That is why social research with children is, if done well, a time-consuming enterprise. Though few would argue otherwise, in practice pressures of time in research often prevent researchers from truly building rapport with children and in this way accessing deeper layers of children's voices. These deeper layers are not necessarily more authentic or true; they might, however, present different (and sometimes more complex) understandings of children's views which might, on occasion even contradict their initially articulated voices. Here, I wish to provide another example from the same research with Greek Cypriot children's constructions of national identity that, I think, illustrates this point well (Spyrou, 2002).

In most of my interviews, when it came to discussing what they thought about the Turks and the situation in Cyprus, most children, most of the time, described the Turks as barbarians, evil, invaders and so on. In fact the strength of many children's descriptions left little room for even considering the possibility of the children imagining the Turks as anything but that. However, what I found with time was that the children were not as simplistic and stereotypical in their descriptions of the Turks as they initially appeared to be. In the context of other conversations with them and as a result of the rapport I built with them over time, I gradually discovered that when they described the Turks in these negative terms they meant that only in reference to *some* Turks – those in the government, the politicians, the military – and *not all* the Turks. 'Of course they are not all bad,' they would say 'only some of them are bad and others are good people like us.' Children were not necessarily less authentic at the beginning and more truthful later on; but as a researcher I had to gradually identify this complexity behind their voices and

to evaluate its significance. Had I taken their initial statements to be their true voices I would perhaps be stereotyping them the same way they were stereotyping the Turks (see also Montgomery [2007: 422] for a discussion of how children prostitutes provided journalists with scripted responses but provided the anthropologist with more complex understandings as a result of her long-term fieldwork experience with them).

By recognizing how children's voices are multi-layered we can move beyond the often misguided assumption that voice research with children is by definition good, valuable, or of high quality. The tendency of researchers to jump in and out of children's worlds in order to quickly 'collect data' which they can also quickly analyse by extracting quotes from children to illustrate their findings may end up caricaturing children more than really offering us meaningful insights into their lives (see Bluebond-Langner and Korbin, 2007: 243; James, 2007: 265).

The non-normative and the undomesticated in children's voices

Both the intersubjective nature of voice research and the very characteristics of voice as a mediational tool for accessing children's experiences and perspectives challenge us to acknowledge the limits of children's voices and to think more creatively about the ways we address them. Mazzei, for example, identifies a problem with the tendency of researchers 'to seek that voice which can elucidate, clarify, confirm, and pronounce meaning' (Mazzei, 2009: 46–7). Instead, she argues, researchers need to go beyond the 'voiced' in voices (i.e. that which is verbalized by research participants) and she asks whether voice does not also happen 'when they/we fail to audibly voice an opinion with words and instead voice displeasure, discomfort, or disagreement?' (Mazzei, 2009: 45). This is the undomesticated voice, the non-normative voice, 'the voice in the crack', which calls for attention, precisely because it is hard to reach and interpret and requires that we acknowledge its performative character (Mazzei, 2009: 46, 48, 53). For instance, what the child does not respond to, omits or ignores – the silent and the unsayable – might tell us more about the child's voice and perspective than what she actually verbalizes. For the researcher this is an opportunity to go beyond verbal to examine other than surface meanings.

Another example from my own work with children's constructions of national identities illustrates this point (Spyrou, 2001b). When I asked children to explain to me who Turkish-Cypriots are, the kinds of responses that some children offered at the beginning of my fieldwork suggested that they were simply unaware of, or confused about, the category itself – a category coincidentally which is extremely important in their lives since these are the people who live on the other side of their divided country and with whom they might have to live together if a solution to the political problem of their country is found. Though my initial reaction was to dismiss these responses as revealing of the children's ignorance, I gradually came to appreciate the larger significance of the children's statements. When I started looking more closely at the role of schooling, I realized that the children's inability to make sense of hyphenated identities like Turkish-Cypriots stemmed from the preoccupation of the educational system with pure national

categories like ‘Turks’ and ‘Greeks’ rather than with hyphenated ones. This insight allowed me to understand how nationalist imagination is shaped as a result of powerful authoritative discourses on ‘self’ and ‘other’. Holding onto what does not make sense can provide insights into the worlds of those whose voices are not normative.

Making sense or deciphering non-normative voices requires looking at the reflection of voice in features such as irrelevance and inconsistency and the non-verbal as in actions and noises which might be more revealing of voice than the actual words used (Komulainen, 2007: 24; MacLure, 2009: 97, 106; Rogers et al., 2005: 164; see also Tudge and Hogan, 2005). Thus, to follow up from my earlier example on how children provided me with different evaluations of the Turks at different times – an inconsistency of sorts in many ways – it was because of these inconsistencies that I was able to make sense of their voices and to avoid reifying their identities as something stable and unchanging.

Recognizing the complexity in children’s voices and the difficulty involved in making sense of them might lead researchers to rethink the often too readily idealized notion of empathy and sameness and the ‘too-familiar eating of the other’ which results from our uncomplicated and unproblematized reading of the other’s (i.e. children’s) voices (Lather, 2009: 23), in short, from our inability to recognize the non-normative and undomesticated in their voices. Though this might result in more messy and limited understandings of children, it might also help us overcome the danger of equating children’s voices with their truth.

The interpretation of what children mean

Though children’s voices are occasionally presented as ‘speaking for themselves’, a form of analysis is always undertaken even if that is simply in the form of sorting and presenting quotes from what children said. A reflexive approach to data analysis asks what kind of analytical frameworks and categories the researcher imposes on children’s voices. Does, for example, the overwhelming preoccupation with children’s *agency* guide researchers to focus on the creative, innovative and productive capacities of children (as evidenced through their own voices) at the expense of investigating social and cultural reproduction? Similarly, we could ask whether researchers impose their own meanings on the data they collect from children rather than illuminate other possibilities for interpretation.

Much of child research bypasses – often despite good intentions – the commonly held standards for good ethnographic work which requires intensive and extensive interaction with children so that their worldviews are revealed to the researcher through the passage of time. In research practice, this might mean that researchers are simply falling back on their own (adult) semantic categories to make sense of what the children are telling them rather than having a clear and elaborate understanding of children’s own semantics. Thus, what children say might be taken to mean what the researcher understands rather than what the children mean.

Consider the following example. In a cross-national study of single-parent children’s perspectives of poverty and social exclusion, our research team found that the term ‘family’ had very diverse meanings for children, not only cross-culturally but also within the

same cultural context. These meanings varied across the nuclear-extended family spectrum but also in relation to the term's social significance. Thus, some children classified close family friends as family when asked to explain *who is family*. Similarly, some other children classified pets as family because they were socially and affectively significant in their lives. Though the children used a similar symbol – 'family' – they did not all share the same understanding of what the symbol stood for; there was, in other words, a discrepancy between symbolic form and content (Cohen, 1986: 9). With careful analysis of interviews along the way and further enquiry with the children we were able to outline more clearly the diversity of meanings which the term 'family' entailed for them. This allowed us to make sense of children's references to 'family' in contexts and in relation to issues where analysis would have otherwise fallen back on our own semantic understandings of the term 'family'. In the absence of an in-depth investigation of children's own semantic categories, adult researchers may simply reify children's voices by transposing on them their own, adult, interpretive frameworks. This brings us to the larger issue of how children's voices are fundamentally social and reflective of prevailing discourses even when coloured by each child's particular understanding.

The limits of individual voices

The common use of quotes to highlight children's voices and perspectives can only serve its intended purpose when voices are fully situated in the discursive fields of power which produce them. Drawing on the sociocultural, dialogic take on human communication, Komulainen's (2007) reference to Bakhtin's notion of voice is a productive avenue for exploring the limits and possibilities of voice in child research but needs to be further highlighted and linked to the current preoccupation in child research with voice.

The essence of Bakhtin's argument is that languages (and voices by extension) are social and ideological and therefore represent the interests, assumptions and values of particular groups (Bakhtin, 1981: 272). Thus, when children speak they do so by drawing from the repertoire of their inherited social languages and speech genres which constrain to some extent what they can say. For example, when a six-year-old who has just joined primary school says 'I am big now', her statement reflects certain ideological beliefs and values which cannot be understood but within the larger historical, cultural and sociopolitical contexts in which her voice is situated (Wertsch, 1991: 104–5). Among others, these include discourses of childhood which attach value to the evolving development of a child (e.g. the theoretical assumptions of developmental psychology, cultural beliefs that link education to maturity). Children's experience in other words is mediated by the discourses which they are able to access and this is what we, as researchers, are offered through their words.

During the actual encounter with the adult researcher, the child's utterance (which is only partly hers), relates both to what has preceded it and to what is anticipated to follow it (Bakhtin, 1986: 94, 293–4). These utterances reflect particular social languages, speech genres and voices appropriated by the child at different times, which enter into dialogue with the child's own particular voice and are reformulated accordingly only to once again enter into dialogue with the social languages, speech genres and voices of the adult researcher to create meaning (Wertsch, 1991: 65).

To fully appreciate the social and cultural significance of children's voices, researchers need to become familiar with the discourses that inform children's voices. Only then can they account for children's particular rendering of the ideological, namely, their own perspectives. At the same time, researchers need to become familiar with the discourses that inform their own analyses and interpretations of children's experiences (Mitchell, 2009: 93). This discursive approach to understanding children's voices connects what happens at the level of individuals and the actual context of interaction between the child and the researcher with the larger discursive levels where representations exist and from which both children and researchers draw to make sense of, and create meaning, during their encounter.

Consider a not-so-unlikely scenario in child research where children's voices appear to be too similar to those of adults, where, in other words, we are unable to justify their uniqueness. Do we attribute this to the overpowering influence of the dominant ideological discourses that shape children's worlds or do we consider it to be part of children's standpoint (Lee, 2001: 53)? Given the current preoccupation with children's perspectives and voices we might have also inadvertently distanced children's voices by making them stand out from the voices of adults. As a result, we might have precluded from our analysis children's active (and not so active) role in social and cultural reproduction and downplayed the role of the ideological which shapes children's worldviews as much as it does those of adults. Locating children's voices in the discursive fields of power which produce them allows us to overcome the overly romantic notion of children's voices as unique in a way that neither exoticizes nor ignores children's perspectives (Alldred and Burman, 2005: 181, 192).

Ways for representing children reflexively

The process of analysing data and reporting research findings allows the researcher to literally *re-present* data in a new light: to include, to exclude, to provide data in the form of direct quotes, or to summarize emerging themes. Similarly, though the data are collected from different children at different times (e.g. over a period of several months in some cases), a sense of simultaneity is created as if the data naturally occurred in that particular configuration while in reality they are a newly created outcome of analysis and repositioning.

That all reporting of children's voices, irrespective of the intentions of the researcher, is a situated and hence interested representation, should come as no surprise (see Holland, 2001). Taking, for example, the widely practised habit of inserting children's voices in research reports we may then ask: Are the researcher's questions presented together with children's responses so that the exchange as a whole can be evaluated or are children's words presented as decontextualized quotes which prevent the reader from examining and scrutinizing the researcher's role in their production (e.g. hidden agendas, underlying motivations and interests, biases, assumptions, theoretical influences) (Alldred and Burman, 2005)?

A critical reading of the first draft of a report on a project titled 'Institutionalized children's participation in decision-making' I was involved with revealed that inadvertently during the analysis of the findings quotes from children who were more eloquent

and commented on their lack of participation in decision-making were highlighted much more than those of children who had less to say and appeared to be more content with their level of participation. A revised version tried to create a more balanced presentation of the findings but the lesson learned was instructive about the underlying, often quite unreflective motivations that drive our analyses and presentations of research findings (see also Bragg and Buckingham, 2008: 128).

As Alcoff (2009: 130) argues, it is also important to consider where the voices we report end up and how prevailing constructions of childhood will influence how children's voices are heard (Alldred, 1998). A concern with the discursive effects of research (i.e. with what kinds of discourses a particular research supports) has led some researchers to ask of their research the kinds of questions which might otherwise seem inappropriate for researchers who hold research objectivity as one of the highest aims of any scientific endeavour: 'Does it, in the specific context and debate, serve the interests of children to present them as having a distinct perspective? Or does it serve children better to show that their perspectives are not fundamentally different from adults' or even that differences between them are regarded as significant?' (Alldred and Burman, 2005: 193).

Instead of taking on an uncritical positioning of children as agents, children's particularities as a social group should be continually considered. Despite the currently widespread interest in childhood studies, children probably never initiate research projects, let alone consume the knowledge produced in the same ways as adults would. Children's voices cannot therefore be likened to so-called standpoint research (see Mayall, 2002). Though power differences are present in all research encounters, these differences can be more pronounced in child–adult research where age differences (in addition to all other social differences) are also present, as well as socially sanctioned adult responsibilities towards children that inevitably shape the encounters.

Concluding thoughts: Some parameters for voice research of better quality

The concept of voice can be unravelled but it needs not to be dismissed. A willingness to be reflexive and transparent can help us question dominant ideological and cultural meanings and to de-reify particular interpretations which are often taken for granted when examining children's lives (Alldred and Burman, 2005: 189). The social, political and historical contexts that shape life in general also shape the entire research process from start to finish. What gets researched, when, how and why are all key questions that need to be asked of every piece of produced research by reflexive researchers who seek to challenge the taken-for-granted in the production of knowledge about children and childhood. Moreover, being reflexive about the processes by which knowledge about children is produced can elevate research discussions to a more sophisticated level which is informed by the dynamics of research and its production rather than simply the methods adopted and their use.

Marker (2009: 30) distinguishes between 'the truth that gets told and the truth that gets sold' – researchers do operate within the limits of funding and time. Regardless, representing children requires wisdom and insight on the part of the researcher(s)

throughout the research process from design, data collection and analysis to reporting. No single method can guarantee successful representation in itself. Reflexive research however accepts the messiness, ambiguity, polyvocality, non-factuality and multi-layered nature of meaning in ‘stories’ that research produces. The quick and easy way is not necessarily the most ethical way; the ethical way necessitates time for reflection.

The kind of reflexivity I am practising and advocating in this article is not a paralysing one which simply levels a critique on child voice research but rather a process which can, potentially, help improve research. This approach (see Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2009: 314–18) neither denies the social or material reality of life nor the fundamental assumption that good research should be based on sound empirical data. In that sense, the aim is to increase the rigour and creativity of the research process and to attain higher quality research in the form of better or more creative research questions, concepts and theories and more ethical approaches.

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