



Kaakkois-Suomen  
ammattikorkeakoulu



South-Eastern Finland  
University of Applied Sciences

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**HUOM! TÄMÄ ON RINNAKKAISTALLENNE**

Rinnakkaistallennettu versio voi erota alkuperäisestä julkaisusta sivunumeroiltaan ja ilmeeltään.

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## **CHILD'S VOICE**

The notion of the child's 'voice' is a central concern in child welfare discourses and practices as well as in social scientific Childhood Studies. A significant landmark for the emergence of the child's 'voice' in public and scholarly discourses has been the 'UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989' (UNCRC). This entry is concerned with the subsequent definitions, purposes and uses of the child's 'voice' and changes in approaches over time with an emphasis on social science. Certain turning points may be observed in how the concept has been developed and treated from the 1990s until 2010s, including continuities as well as criticisms. The conceptual keywords associated with the 'voice' in this entry are the child's rights; self-expression; agency; methodological reflexivity; diversity; human communication; and social change.

### **Child's 'voice' in child welfare discourses**

In the UNCRC, Article 12 stated the right of the child to express an opinion and to have that opinion taken into account. Article 13 introduced the child's right to information and to freedom of expression. Subsequently, organisations including charities, governmental and voluntary bodies, service providers and scholars have developed voice-based approaches for child consultation, participation, and active citizenship.

In governmental and charitable accounts, the child's 'voice' is typically understood as something that children naturally possess. Such accounts often suggest that contrary to previous eras in human history where children were silenced and their thoughts belittled, the civilized world of today seeks to consult children instead. Consulting children about issues that matter to them is considered as a key responsibility of professionals and adults who work with them.

The proponents of the 'voice' typically define the 'child' as being a key informant and expert on his/her own life. 'Voices' will thus consist of meanings that the child will construct and express, including not only verbal but also other modes of expression, such as drawing or singing, for example. The job for the adult working with children will be that of allowing children to express themselves; to do this in a child-appropriate,

respectful and ethical manner; and in this way share power with children. The same principles can be found in current social scientific research with children.

### **Child's 'voice' in social sciences**

Childhood Studies – especially the paradigm known as the ‘new social studies of childhood studies’ - has taken a particular focus on children’s voices as subject of empirical studies. Within this interdisciplinary paradigm it has been argued that historically, children (in western societies) have been seen as objects of concern rather than as persons with ‘voice’. The argument is familiar from critical social studies concerned with power inequalities. Drawing on feminist studies, for instance, it has been argued that children – like women - have for long been silenced and marginalised not only in everyday life but also in conventional disciplinary research.

As in the UN Convention, Childhood Studies have typically treated the child’s voice as a rights issue. The ‘voice’ is one of several typical commitments of the field of Childhood Studies, including the idea that children are worthy of study in their own right; that childhood is a socially constructed notion; that children are not passive but active agents; and that participatory methods should be used in research with children.

This so-called ‘voice research’ field has often involved critical approaches addressing professional power over children in services such as Education, Health and Social Services. Critical views have been expressed toward theories by developmental psychology, medicine and allied professions. Challenging the hegemony of developmental approaches (such as the tradition of Jean Piaget, the pioneering child psychologist), childhood sociologists have promoted an alternative perspective to children’s competencies in expressing their ‘voices’. They have argued that children are too often denied ‘agency’ in society because they are seen as vulnerable and incompetent. Instead, sociological views have suggested that children are not only shaped by society but also shape it in their own ways. Children might do this individually, with their peers and reciprocally with adults.

Childhood ethnographers and critical pedagogues have for several decades aimed at ‘giving voice’ or ‘listening to children’s voices’ both from rights and needs perspectives. Discussions about the child’s ‘voice’ have

typically revolved around whether adult professionals are willing to listen to children, and how listening can be done successfully. They have drawn on complex debates having to do with children's age and maturity, and the credibility of their statements, also assessing whether children's voices can be taken seriously, and at what age this might be possible. In the last twenty years or so, researchers – as well as child welfare professionals more widely - have aimed at improving methods to hear children's views better.

### **Defining and accessing the child's 'voice'**

Contemporary scholarly literature indicates that the notion of the child's 'voice' has multiple meanings. Within Childhood Studies, it may have both physical and metaphorical meanings that often go together. In social studies of childhood, it is meant to address major practical challenges for several child-centred and critical pedagogies: children's rights and participation; social inequality and difference; speech and multilingualism; perspectives, standpoints, representation and research ethics. More generally, child's 'voice' may refer to an individual's political or legal right as a matter of self-expression, identity, agency and personal choice; or as a matter of interpersonal communication where adults ought to listen to children better. 'Voices' have often been, implicitly or explicitly, equated with agency, sometimes involving children as co-researchers, or peer culture studies.

However, from early on in these studies it has been noted that capturing the voices of children is not necessarily a straightforward task. At one level, there may be children who do not wish to take part in research, or children who are intentionally excluded from research by adult gatekeepers because of their vulnerability, young age or lack of speech, for example. At another level, a challenge has been recognised in getting children to freely express themselves and accurately understand what they mean. There may also be children – in the same way as with adult respondents/research subjects - who are shy or do not feel comfortable communicating with researchers. Further, a question may arise as to how far the child's 'voice' is the same as a 'view'.

Attempts have been made to overcome such problems. Alternatives to, for example, interviews have been suggested to hear children better as the interaction with the interviewer in itself may be problematic. Alternative methods may involve scenarios, vignettes and sentence completion tasks or methods which use

computing technology. The goal has been to find methods with which children are familiar and comfortable. Researchers have also used creative alternatives such as role play and drama, or the use of digital and new media technologies.

### **Critiques of the ‘voice research’**

The so-called ‘voice research’ has faced increasing criticism in relation to discussions on rights. One major problem has been identified with the UNCRC that has tended to set children’s rights in opposition to adults. This may have led researchers to side with whom they consider as marginalised overlooking the perspectives of adults in the settings where research is conducted. The critics argue that distinguishing children too sharply from adults may ignore qualities and characteristics they may share with adults and how these same characteristics may intersect. This represents a challenge to the idea that childhood and children’s ‘voices’ can be studied in their own right.

Similar kinds of arguments have further stressed that the ‘voice research’ has often positioned children as independent rights holders, overlooking their social, economic and cultural contexts. Certain dualisms that have been applied in other theoretical frameworks (such as critical feminist, race or disability studies) may not directly apply to children in the same way. Seeing children dichotomously as active/passive, autonomous/dependent or empowered/ oppressed may not be realistic descriptions of children’s circumstances. A related criticism is to do with *diversity*. It has increasingly been argued that child participatory research concerned with ‘voice’ is only gradually reflecting the diverse life circumstances of children, such as those of sick children, children with disabilities, children in humanitarian crisis situations, or the Majority World children living in the Global South. There are increasingly criticisms of the UNCRC as being primarily informed by western liberal assumptions and, for example, lacking communitarian philosophy.

From the end of 1990s, critical accounts have emerged suggesting that the promotion of ‘child voice’ generally in public discourses had become a moral crusade, overlooking the potential if not obvious problems involved. Research-wise there have been increasing demands for transparency about what is reasonable and feasible concerning ‘child voice’. The demands have had to do with the nature of the ‘voice’ itself as well as what is

involved in listening. It has been argued that care had to be taken to distinguish rhetoric from practice. Listening to children is not necessarily 'good' but at worst intrusive and the cause of further distress: more listening may not inevitably mean more hearing. The recommendation follows that researchers should think about when and how to conduct research with children so that it is as ethical as they claim it to be. Further, children may indeed have views to express but it is not evident that such views would always be clear or consistent at the time of the research encounters. The same argument would equally apply to adult research subjects.

In the 2000s, certain scholarly discourses began to pinpoint that the observation that children can exercise agency – as manifested in 'voice' - should be a point of analytical embarkation and not a terminus. It is possible that children can be, at the same time, vulnerable and competent; however, their positioning in this respect tends to be in the hands of adults. There are increasing demands that childhood researchers reflect critically on their role in the process of representing children's 'voices' through their work. Such reflection would involve considerations of adult responsibilities towards children in terms of research validity, credibility and ethics.

### **A move towards reflexive research practices**

In the 2010s, newer perspectives have made a move away from individualistic rights issues toward interdependency between children's 'voice' and their socio-cultural environments. Neither the 'voice' nor an agency may not be a property of an individual but relational in character. Alternatively, it has been suggested that if children's rights are to be addressed, research could instead focus on child's right to dignified and decent life.

Recommendations for childhood researchers increasingly stress the need to become more aware of how children's voices are constantly constrained and shaped by multiple factors. These may be the researchers' assumptions about children; the use of language; the institutional contexts in which research takes place; and the overall ideological and discursive climates surrounding children. Instead of relying on authenticity, researchers ought to consider epistemologies and power relations in data generation, and thereby more productive ways for representation.

There are at least two major problems reflexive research practices may aim to overcome. First, reflexivity is to do with the dichotomy between realism and anti-realism. There is a contradiction present if the researcher uses modern, realist methods and then gives post-modern, constructionist accounts of the data. The problem thus is that one cannot selectively regard certain things (such as children communicating about their wishes) as real and others as constructed (such as the concepts of ‘childhood’). Second, reflexivity is also related to the ambiguity of the researcher’s role as an actor in childhood settings. There will always be power imbalances as children do not initiate or fund formal or scholarly research projects themselves.

How, then, to work with children and study children’s lives without rejecting the notion of ‘voice’? Suggestions have been proposed in scholarly literature. In practice, reflexivity in research may involve, for instance, paying attention not only on the verbal and audible outputs of children but also on silences and the non-verbal. The act of listening may be re-defined. It may be possible to accept the messiness, ambiguity, polyvocality, non-factuality and multi-layered nature of meaning in children’s stories without erasing the notion of the ‘voice’. For scholarly research especially, tight connections between practical research and (social) theory have been recommended to ensure good quality outcomes.

### **‘Voices’ and other possible models for human interconnection**

Within the UNCRC-derived discourses and the so-called ‘voice research’, a particular model of the child’s voice has first been constructed and subsequently increasingly deconstructed. It is a model where the ‘voice’ is an innate possession of a child for the adults to retrieve. Contemporary critiques of this model suggest, however, that there have always been and will be other models that those working together with children could use and develop. For example, in the 2010s, child welfare literature still involves relatively little discussion on the pragmatics of communicative acts. In terms of both metaphorical and audible ‘voices’, it could be asked as to whether communication is a medium for exchanging messages, or should it be the focus of research itself.

One issue related to both children’s metaphorical voices and agencies is to do with the primacy of the ‘mind’ in western societies. Thinking of human interaction as a unidirectional process of transfer from one person to another is sometimes called the ‘conduit’ model of communication. The conduit model is monological: the

language use is viewed from the perspective of the speaker. The view that the 'mind' is the site, origin and definition of purposive human action shapes cognitivist approaches to communication. It has been argued that this so-called conduit metaphor of communication is so much part and parcel of the broadly western understanding that it is often difficult to see what is problematic about it. The 'voice research' paradigm (with some exceptions) has been criticized for resting on this kind of Cartesian, fairly mechanistic definition of the 'voice'.

There are numerous social and other theories on human communication. One of them is sociocultural theory concerned with communicative acts and dialogue. 'Understanding', in such a view, is to do with A and B who speak and listen, the utterance and the 'world'. It implies connecting the utterance with a context where it is embedded. The contexts involve the concrete setting, knowledges and attributes of people involved, their beliefs, experiences and expectations, the institutional or other framework for action, relevances and what is known of all of these factors. In this respect, understanding is related to 'responding' in that one (may) take time in thinking how to react or what stance to take. The sociocultural approach suggests that there will never be complete understanding in terms of 'absolute match'.

An immediate question might follow: if there is no 'absolute match', how do we then know that we have really communicated? One response is that of course adults can and do gain understandings of children's lives. The difference to a mechanistic view is that from a sociocultural perspective the 'voice' is seen as social and co-constructed instead of being monological, individual, fixed, straightforward, linear or clear. Such a model suggests that the 'voices' of children, rather than being autonomous expressions of their authentic individual being, or of their distinctive cultures, may often consist of the mimicking, re-using and learning of adult talk. Understanding the 'voice' also leads to understanding the 'social child' as an actor, which may be the same or different from what is understood as an 'agent'. In this case, alternatives to Cartesian conceptions of rational 'voice' may include concepts such as reciprocity, interaction, interdependence and transparency.

### **'Voices' and social change**



Child welfare and scholarly research discourses and practices take place in real life contexts where they tend to implement and at least reflect the political and other currents of their time. In terms of the marginalised groups in societies, ‘emancipation’ – and the ‘voice’ - have for long been seen as vehicles for social change and advancing human rights. In the spirit of children’s rights, much progress may be observed in the western world regarding protecting children from harm and maximising their well-being. At the same time, there is generally a consensus that advancements are not equally distributed across the world.

Contemporary child welfare and research literature suggests that there are at several possibilities for the future regarding global child welfare and social research. To understand social change and ‘voices’ – and vice versa - historical as well as spatial and contextual approaches may be needed simultaneously. First, a macro-level question may be asked as to whose ‘voices’ count and with what kind of impact on children’s lived lives. Second, theoretical studies may look into how far children’s ‘voices’ – in whichever form they take – can be taken as ‘views’ or indeed if there were alternatives to the ‘voice research’. Third, micro-level studies with children may detail and analyse children’s lives and communication in transparent ways that nevertheless are informed by consistent (social) theory. Such directions for research also involve considerations on who conducts it, and the on-going issues about power, structure and agency across the world.

**Author:** Ms Sirkka Komulainen, PhD

Research Manager

XAMK - The South-Eastern Finnish University of Applied Sciences (Youth research and development unit)

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