

Enhancing children's participation in research: A review of 'the limits of giving voice'

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In 2020, a special collection of articles was published in the *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* (IJQM) under the title *Constructions of "Children's Voices" in Qualitative Research*. The collection was timely as, with the onset of the global pandemic, the ways that children have been involved in data collection have highlighted the varied vulnerabilities and ethical dilemmas that some groups of children can face when participating in research. However, the need for child-centred research approaches is not new. 'Giving a voice' to vulnerable and excluded children has long been accepted as an important basis for a more accurate and nuanced understanding of children's experiences, and for a less 'top down' approach to protection, welfare policies and programmes.

The special collection, by giving emphasis to the voice of the child, exposes the varied facets of children's competencies, perspectives and self-determination when they are participating in research. It does so by going beyond simplistic claims of giving voice to children to questioning how we ask, listen and interpret what they tell us. Consisting of eleven papers, the journal draws from a range of disciplines such as education, health and child welfare. The seminal paper that sets the scene for the issue is a literature assessment by Facca, Gladstone and Teachman (2020) entitled "Working the limits of 'giving voice' to children: a critical conceptual review", which is the main focus of this short review. As the concept of 'the child's voice' in qualitative research has not been particularly well defined or theorised, Facca et al.'s article thus explores how constructions of children's voice have been problematised through critical qualitative scholarship, and more often than not portrayed as 'the truth'. Importantly, it views somewhat cynically some of the shifts and progress of the use of children's voice within qualitative inquiry.

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An initial search strategy of 2,317 sources published between 2004 and 2019 found a total of eleven peer-reviewed papers which met the inclusion criteria of unpacking the conceptions and epistemological positions of ‘the child voice’ in research. The authors’ review then aimed to identify and critique the assumptions underpinning the dominant notions of child voice and to expose alternative framings. Key themes were individually identified in each of the reviewed papers, ranging from the ambiguities around the child voice, through evolving meanings, to the more concrete relational aspects of children’s participation in research. Running through the reviewed papers was the ambiguity of power relations and the messiness of adult assumptions, the relevance of context and the inevitable ‘entanglements’ of human and non-human agents. The themes were summarised in three ways: (i) the child’s voice is always relational to a specific context; (ii) voice has ‘no authentic point of origin’, meaning the complex constructions can be open to multiple interpretations; and (iii) intergenerational dialogues mean that factors such as power influence these interactions.

The discussion around these findings culminates in the view that “invoking notions of child voice as a representation of uncomplicated and decontextualized ‘truth/s’ risks oversimplifying children’s views and experiences”; there is concern over potential harm to individual children with the interference of power influences. The adult-child relationship, it is contended, requires serious reflexivity on the part of the researcher, which needs to be reflected through transparent and accountable methodologies. This, it is suggested, needs to counterbalance the haste towards the promotion of Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the rhetoric that has emerged around ‘the voice of the child’, ‘the right to be heard’ and ‘the right to participate’. Whilst the review makes reference to the ethics underlying such qualitative research, it does not delve deeply into what those concerns are or how ill-thought-through children’s participation can do more harm than good. For many of us who have been involved with the practice of children’s participation in social science inquiry, it is apparent how these challenges have manifested themselves. Children’s consultations and research have too easily resulted in tokenistic participation, skewed representation, methodological flaws and damaging short cuts; more often than not, this is as a result of messy power dynamics from child-rights actors who have insufficient resources to best support meaningful children’s participation.

Other articles in the special issue do look critically and reflexively at methodological approaches. Wary of adult frames of reference for shaping the analysis of the children’s voices, different articles look at youth engagement in participatory research processes in different settings. For example, Morris, Humphreys and Hegarty (2020) use a dialogical analytical framework to understand children’s experiences of safety and resilience in the context of domestic violence. Spencer, Fairbrother and

Thompson (2020) directly criticise the rush to child participation and the privileging of certain voices. Going beyond simply 'giving voice', Woodgate, Tennent and Barriagge (2020) look at creating safe spaces for youth-centred research that affirm capabilities rather than reinforcing marginalisation. Nevertheless, because adults still have power over the concept of 'voice' and participation, there is an ugly truth about much child participation in research that doesn't get much traction in the special collection as a whole — the problem of 'bad' research and the limited accountability of many of those leading research with children.

Apart from these apparent methodological weaknesses, there is often an — albeit understandable — assumption in the field of qualitative research that the values of respect, accountability and transparency are paramount for child-rights scholars, and that the core principle of the best interests of the child (Article 3 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child) is the governing consideration in research with children, ensuring that mitigation strategies to protect children's right to participate (Article 12) are in place and scrupulously followed (Capaldi 2021). However, the so-called 'halo effect' or universal moral compass and legitimacy that child rights advocates are assumed to have can mean that their credibility and motives are not questioned. At best, ethical values and judgements are often personal and open to different interpretations; at worst, researchers may employ questionable ethical practices to reach their goals. Levels of external accountability are mixed, with NGO and independent researchers not always taking advantage of third-party reviews as a safeguarding step. Whilst academic research generally goes through an Independent Review Board (IRB), the boards' ability to catch complex ethical issues in research protocols can be limited due to the lack of gender, ethnicity and disciplinary expertise of the reviewers; IRB processes are often further plagued by overly bureaucratic and time-heavy administrative processes.

In fairness, Facca et al.'s critical review is less about the mechanics of meaningful and ethical children's participation and more about the need to theorise the use of 'voice' in research with children. They have shown through their review that children's voices within critical qualitative research clearly need to be open to multiple interpretations. However, intergenerational dialogue and child-adult interactions and relations — such as those around power — require more than just reflexivity and attention to methodology, as it is just as much about researcher capacity, accountability and ethics as it is about trusting the interpretation of children's voices.

Read in its entirety, the IJQM's special collection of papers on constructions of children's voices certainly covers the spectrum of cutting-edge theoretical and methodological approaches. Its importance and indeed uniqueness are in its call for more critically reflexive approaches to research with children and a more truthful interpretation of children's voices and

lived experiences. Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the complexity of ensuring fair and representative children's participation in social research, vulnerabilities extend beyond individual affected children to the vulnerabilities created by researchers who represent and interpret the views of children.

References

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