Working the Limits of “Giving Voice” to Children: A Critical Conceptual Review

Danica Facca¹, Brenda Gladstone², and Gail Teachman³

Abstract
Although claims to “give voice” to children through qualitative inquiry seem morally just and have been largely framed by good intentions, critical scholarship has called for reflexive reconsiderations of such claims. Re/presentations of voice permeate published accounts of qualitative research with children; similarly, voice is a term invoked frequently in qualitative research with informants of all ages. In this article, we follow Spyrou’s notion of “troubling” to review, critique, and synthesize key works by critical child-focused scholars who have reflexively queried and worked with the epistemological and methodological limits of “giving voice” to children through qualitative inquiry. Building on the reviewed literature, as well as poststructural approaches to framing voice in research more generally, we briefly discuss how we have built on these critiques in our own research. In so doing, we join ongoing dialogues aimed at generating alternative approaches to theorizing and re/presenting children’s perspectives in qualitative inquiry more justly.

Keywords
child voice, critical conceptual review, poststructuralism, qualitative methodology, qualitative research

Introduction
This article contributes a critical conceptual review and synthesis of literature where scholars have explicitly troubled conventional constructions of child voice¹ in qualitative inquiry. Our interest in constructions of child voice is informed by our work as critical qualitative health researchers who do research with children. We are committed to exploring the ways in which the notion of child voice has been problematized through critical qualitative scholarship. In tracing this work, we aim to provoke reflexive discussions among qualitative and childhood researchers about what is at stake when notions of “giving voice” to children are taken at face value. For this reason, our review of selected works is oriented by Spyrou’s (2016b) notion of “troubling” as a means “to unsettle . . . destabilize . . . rethink . . . and . . . look beyond . . . the all-too-easy and unproblematized desire to render children and their worlds comprehensible . . . through a surface reading of their utterances” (p. 106).

Claims of “giving voice” to children within qualitative inquiry have become increasingly prevalent in response to explicit shifts toward doing research with rather than on children to recognize their agency and right to have their views given due weight on all matters that affect them (Lundy, 2007, p. 927). To this end, researchers adjusted their methods to focus on collecting and documenting children’s views (Alasuutari, 2014). Emphasis was placed on foregrounding data generated with children, usually through spoken words elicited through interviews, but also through other forms of expression, including visual and arts-based methods (Mand, 2012). Aside from some notable exceptions (see, e.g., Christensen, 2004, or Holland et al., 2010), the methodological focus tended to be on how to refine methods to better access child voice and re/present it within the final research text (Spyrou, 2011), rather than on interrogating the very processes by which it was constructed through the research text (Lane et al., 2019). The epistemological stance underpinning these efforts to access child voice regarded it “as something to be ‘found’ by the researcher, conveyed accurately; portrayed as ‘truth’” (Lane et al., 2019,
p. 699), rather than something co/constructed with a researcher in a “socially situated and... political context” (McGarry, 2016, p. 342). Consequently, conventional conceptualizations of child voice espoused the belief that voice was like “buried metal waiting to be unearthed by the [researcher]” (Lane et al., 2019, p. 68), an objective source of knowledge to be taken at face value.

The Emergence of Child Voice in Childhood Studies

Throughout the early 20th century, British and American anthropological traditions were the first to position children as worthy of study in their own right (James, 2007). Anthropologists began doing research on children through means of anthropological qualitative methods, namely participant observation, which turned children’s social worlds into an object of study (James, 2007). In response, European scholars across disciplines within the 1970s advocated for the exploration of “the voices of children as social actors” (James, 2007, p. 263), which led to the development of childhood studies as an interdisciplinary field. Aiming to position children as subjects rather than objects of research, childhood studies focused on “childhood as a sociostructural space and children’s own perspectives as social actors” (James, 2007, p. 264). Spyrou (2016b) notes the very development of childhood studies was intended to highlight a “moral, political, and epistemological imperative to rectify [children’s] lack of voice in studies of childhood” (p. 106) within disciplines that study children such as sociology, anthropology, and developmental psychology (Christensen & James, 2000; Christensen & Prout, 2002; James et al., 1998). In turn, qualitative researchers’ orientation began to shift away from a theoretical focus on research about or on children to research with children (Alanen, 1998, 2001; Hutchby & Moran-Ellis, 1998; Mayall, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002).

Methodological Approach

We conducted a structured critical conceptual review of selected works in order to examine how these extant texts trouble current conceptualizations of child voice to “provide a ‘launch pad’ for a new phase of conceptual development” (Grant & Booth, 2009, p. 93, emphasis in the original). We situated the review within broader poststructural critiques of voice research (MacLure, 2009; Mazzei, 2009; Mazzei & Jackson, 2009, 2012). Due to the interdisciplinary nature of qualitative research in relation to children, the literature we selected for review reflects theorizing from various fields of study, including, for example, childhood, disability, education, and family studies as well as those from the social sciences more broadly.

For purposes of this review, we searched interdisciplinary literatures and selected publications where the authors explicitly troubled the epistemological and/or methodological limits of child voice within qualitative inquiry. In what follows, we have elected to re/present the reviewed works chronologically. However, we wish to clarify that the narrative we present here is not meant to suggest that this is a story of progress of continual improvement of better constructions of child voice within qualitative inquiry; rather, this organization highlights intriguing shifts and tensions in how child voice is or may be conceptualized along with questions of interpretation and practice that remain unsettled (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010). Our review was framed by the following critically oriented questions:

1. What assumptions underpin dominant notions of child voice?
2. Why are these assumptions of child voice problematic?
3. What alternate framings or epistemological positions are forwarded to elaborate upon or stand in lieu of child voice?

Our positioning as authors of this review is closely aligned with Mazzei and Jackson’s (2009) poststructural critiques of “voice research” in general (not only in relation to research with children). The origins of this phrase can be traced back to an “indictment of research that appeals to voice” (Moore & Muller, 1999, in MacLure, 2009, p. 110). Mazzei and Jackson (2009) are critical of assumptions about a “voice [that] can speak the truth of consciousness and experience” (p. 1). Drawing on a poststructural critique of voice, in conjunction with our focus on child voice, we first present our synthesis and analysis of the selected and reviewed literature. Then, we build on this analysis by sharing exemplars from our own research to elaborate on approaches for re/conceptualizing child voice in ways that encourage more critical and reflexive research practices.

Method

In May 2019, an electronic search strategy was developed and implemented (see Table 1). This was supplemented by hand-searching to identify key texts. The search strategy specifically aimed to locate theoretical rather than empirical literature across disciplinary fields. The search covered a period from 2004 to align with advances in childhood research that recognized and advocated for children’s agency and participation in contemporary childhood studies (Christensen, 2004; Grover, 2004). Inclusion criteria consisted of the following: theoretical peer-reviewed articles or book chapters, written in English, and published between 2004 and 2019. The search strategy yielded 2,317 sources. The first author reviewed all abstracts to identify texts that explicitly interrogated conceptions of child voice. Texts, which mentioned child voice but did not elaborate in depth on how it was conceptualized, or appeared to take it at face value, were excluded. Ten peer-reviewed articles and one book chapter met the inclusion criteria. The first author extracted specific critiques and conceptualizations of child voice from the included literature. She then paraphrased, summarized, and arranged the data into a table to inform iterative cycles of team analysis and synthesis. Multiple iterative
Table 1. Search Strategy for Locating Literature Which Troubled Conceptualizations of Child Voice.

| Keywords: construct*, concept*, represent*, rhetoric*, “child’s voice”, “children’s voice”, “children’s voices”, “child’s silence”, “children’s silence”, “children’s silences” |

Electronic databases searched:
1. CINAHL
2. Google Scholar
3. ProQuest Social Sciences
4. PsycINFO
5. PubMed
6. Scopus

Search dates: 2004 to present.
Other limits: book chapter or peer-reviewed article; English

Results: Re/conceptualizations of Child Voice

A summary of the 11 publications selected for review is provided in Table 2. The table summarizes assumptions of child voice interrogated in each work, why these assumptions are problematic, and what alternate framings were put forth. In this section, we set out how each reviewed work theorized child voice and highlight what we view as key contributions toward advancing more critical approaches for constructing and re/presenting children’s accounts in qualitative research. As noted earlier, the reviewed works are presented here in chronological order.

The rhetoric of child voice

James (2007) troubled the assumption that representations of child voice within research texts offered authentic accounts of children’s perspectives. For James (2007), the rhetoric of child voice in rights-based discourse problematically masked the constructed nature of the research text and further veiled children’s diverse socioeconomic and cultural experiences under one unifying voice. To remedy these assumptions, she insisted that re/presentations of child voice in research texts “be recognized as crafted” (James, 2007, p. 265). In other words, for researchers to recognize that written accounts of child voice were not authentic in nature but constructions that have been selected, interpreted, and re/presented as direct quotations to inform a particular argumentative stance. Last, she called for sincere employment by researchers of children as social actors to forward situated perspectives of knowledge that could inform sociological understandings of their worlds.

Child voice as a social construction

Komulainen (2007) looked to fundamental ambiguities in human communication to interrogate the assumption that child voice was an inner and fixed possession of the individual child. In the context of rights-based discourse, she argued notions of child voice are problematic in that they assume child voice exists as an individuated entity separate from the social world in which it is produced. Drawing on Bakhtin’s (1981) dialogism, she thus proposed a re/conceptualization of child voice as relationally and socially constructed between children and adults. This alternative framing followed from her observations of young children with communication difficulties whose nonverbal modes of communication (through actions, nonspeech utterances, gestures, eye-gaze, etc.) were discounted in child welfare practice. By bringing Bakhtin’s (1981) dialogism into her theorization of child voice, Komulainen (2007) noted how even exemplar modes of verbal communication were subject to the same interpretive difficulty as nonverbal modes which made them just as ambivalent.

Space and child voice interrelations

Mannion (2007) considered spatial elements in his nuanced discussion of the relational aspects of child voice regarding children’s participation in research spaces. Mannion (2007) took issue with the notion that child voice was only constructed through dialogical relations between adults and children. For him, this assumption ignored the context of culturally specific spatial practices wherein dialogical relations among adults and children unfold. In turn, he suggested that researchers consider how the intergenerational relations between children and adults, along with spatial contexts, shaped child voice, from which voice was heard and when to what could be spoken about in any given space. Indeed, Mannion’s (2007) work called for widening the focus of a narrow lens on children’s words alone to a broader view that can bring “into center-stage” (p. 406) the relational, social spaces in which child voice is produced.

Evolving meanings through dialogue

Graham and Fitzgerald (2010) drew on Gadamer’s (1979) explication of dialogue to better understand children’s participation in everyday life and the research context. Their work challenged the assumption that child voice was a fixed possession of the individual child by considering how dialogue aims to achieve a level of understanding between speaker and listener where mutual meanings are produced (Gadamer, 1979). In so doing, they envisioned child voice as “evolving in dialogue with adults” (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010, p. 350) and additionally drew on Foucault (1979) to account for the negotiation of power relations between children and adults that further shapes the pursuit of shared meanings in participatory research with children.

Accounting for silences

Lewis’s (2010) work acknowledged the departure child-centered research intended from traditional conceptualizations of children, which positioned them as incompetent and silenced their views (p. 16). However, she took issue with the discussions were held between all authors regarding the textual data and their interpretations within the review.
| Author(s)               | Child Voice Assumption/s Addressed                                                                 | Why Assumption/s of Child Voice Are Problematic                                                                 | Alternative Framing/s Proposed                                                                 |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| James (2007)           | Representations of child voice within the research text are authentic accounts of children's perspectives                       | Rhetoric of child voice ignores the diversity of children's socioeconomic and cultural experiences and masks the constructed nature of child voice within the research text               | Re/presentations of child voice within the research text are constructions and notions about capturing “authentic” accounts are illusions |
| Komulainen (2007)      | Child voice is an inner and fixed possession of the individual child                                                    | Assumes child voice is separate from the social world in which it is produced and ignores the ambiguity of human communication | Child voice is socially and relationally constructed between children and adults               |
| Mannion (2007)         | Child voice is constructed through dialogical relations between children and adults                                         | Ignores the spatial context in which child voice is produced through dialogical relations                          | Child voice is dialogically and spatially constructed and spatial contexts and their sociocultural norms further shape the production of child voice |
| Graham and Fitzgerald (2010) | Child voice is a fixed possession of the individual child, the goal of researcher–participant conversation is to reach understanding by repeating a conversation partner’s meaning, and dialogue is reproductive in nature | Implies the aim of engaging in dialogue is to reach a level of understanding where the adult listener shows comprehension of the child speaker by merely repeating back what the child has said | Child voice evolves in dialogue with adults, the goal of researcher–participant conversation is to reach understanding by producing shared mutual meaning/s, and dialogue is productive in nature |
| Lewis (2010)           | Child voice captures all meaningful contributions made by a child within the research context                               | Child voice only accounts for what is put into words within the research context and discounts children’s silent/s as meaningful or purposeful contributions | Any account of child voice must include an account of silence/what is not said within the research context and why |
| Spyrou (2011)          | Child voice is an inner and fixed possession of the individual child and the use of visual methods result in authentic representations of child voice | Overlooks how specific institutional contexts and their sociocultural norms shape the production of child voice and does not consider how visual methods and the images they produce are also selective re/presentations of reality | Child voice is produced in specific institutional contexts and shaped by sociocultural norms as well as power relations within those contexts and representations of child voice produced through visual methods are no less constructed than through interviews |
| Elden (2012)           | Child voice is singular and uniform and (child) voice comes from a particular location or standpoint                        | Disregard complexity and diversity of child voice and does not consider the social dimensions at play which simultaneously shape the production of child voice | Child voice is multidimensional and (child) voice comes from a process, not a location or standpoint |
| Kay and Tisdall (2012) | Child voice resides within verbal forms of communication and positioning children as “researchers” resolves power imbalances within the adult–child research context | Discounts nonverbal forms of communication which risks excluding disabled children who may communicate differently and having children as “researchers” assumes they are “experts” not only in their own lives but also in the lives of other children | Incorporate diverse methods into research with children like visual arts or multimedia so as not to privilege verbal forms of communication, child voice is an ableist concept, and positioning children as “researchers” risks limiting them to explorations of childhood issues only |
| Maybin (2013)          | Institutional contexts which shape child voice are monolithic                                                          | Presumes child voice is shaped by uniform interactional dynamics irrespective of the institutional context from which it emerges and ignores the specificity of sociocultural expectations and authorial sources within an institution which uniquely shape child voice | Child voice is institutionally shaped, dialogically emergent, and appropriated from various kinds of texts and child voice is indexical |
| Spyrou (2016b)         | Child voice is shaped primarily by human agents in discursive contexts and child voice can be interpreted by researchers in a straightforward manner | Omits the contributions nonhuman agents (material things such as books or toys) make to the production of child voice and does not consider how researchers tend to readily interpret child, regardless of the ethical costs it poses to understanding children’s experiences | Child voice is produced through “intra-actions” between human and nonhuman agents which are both discursive and material and researchers should exercise humility as they acknowledge the interpretive difficulties of voice |
| Spyrou (2016a)         | A child's silence provides a more authentic account of their experience than speech and silence occurs in the adult–child research context just as it would in any other context | Fails to consider how silence is an aspect of voice which renders it performative like all other communication and power relations between adult researcher and child participant add another layer of complexity onto how silence is accounted for within the research context | Silence is performative like all other forms of communication and is therefore not more authentic than speech and attention to “wavering silences” within the adult–child research context can account for affective power relations that further influence silence |
assumption that re/presentations of child voice within child-centered research accounted for all possible meaningful contributions made by a child within the research context. Lewis’s (2010) critique of child-centered research processes pointed out how children might experience pressure from researchers to answer questions that may consequently silence, rather than welcome, their views. For her, this meant child voice only accounted for what was literally said within the research context and discounted children’s silence as meaningful contributions to research. She therefore proposed a methodological account of silence in order to approach child voice from a different epistemological angle. Lewis’s (2010) approach advocated inclusion, for example, of an explicit epistemological statement, which detailed a researcher’s interpretation of silence and a reflexive account of how they responded to such silence. In this work, Lewis (2010) encouraged researchers to go beyond spoken words in research with children by encouraging an attendance to how silences were implicated in the play of power relations.

Child voice as situated in complex power relations
Spyrou (2011) built on previous critiques of child voice forwarded by James (2007) and Komulainen (2007) to further query the assumption that child voice was an inner and fixed possession of the individual child, along with the belief that visual methods promised authentic accounts of child voice. Spyrou’s (2011) engagement with Bakhtin’s (1981) dialogical theorizing led him to highlight how particular institutional contexts such as schools, for example, along with the sociocultural norms which regulate them, mediate and therefore contribute to shaping child voice in research encounters, and by extension, re/presentations of child voice within research texts. Spyrou (2011) advocated for more critically reflexive research practices, which acknowledged that all re/presentations of child voice were situated and informed by the dialogical and power relations of the research context. His critique further addressed how visual methods were not excluded from the messiness and situatedness of voice research just because they did not rely on speech as their primary form of data. In doing so, Spyrou’s (2011) work, too, proposed that a child’s silence might tell researchers more about their perspectives than their words.

The messiness of child voice
Elden (2012) gave Spyrou’s (2011) notion of critically reflexive research practices a try in her work on care with children. In doing so, she troubled the notion that child voice was a singular entity, which came from a particular location or standpoint (of the child). Following Smart’s (2009) analytic approach to drawing data, Elden (2012) observed how the children’s drawings could not be disentangled from the overall research encounter. This led her to conclude that child voice was a messy and multidimensional construction, which resulted from a process of social dimensions at play, rather than a fixed standpoint. In turn, Spyrou’s (2011) reflexive practice offered Elden (2012) an avenue to approach drawing methods with children in a way that discounted claims of authentic child voice in favor of complexity and diversity.

Ableist assumptions and child voice
Kay and Tisdall (2012) examined the implications of voice research on disabled children and raised concerns that conventional conceptualizations of voice, as taken up in childhood studies, privileged comprehensible verbal forms of communication and risked excluding perspectives from children who communicated primarily in ways other than speech. They further considered how the privileging of child voice as comprehensible speech had implications beyond the production of knowledge through research in areas such as policy and law. For example, in cases where a disabled child’s communication was deemed to be inarticulate and therefore invalid, their views were likely to be discounted and outweighed by the value accorded in legal proceedings to opinions proffered by health professionals.

Additionally, they challenged the assumption that having children as researchers resolved the power imbalance between adult and child within the research context, and to this end, was an inevitably good thing. Such assumptions, they argued, implied that children possessed expertise of their own lives as well as the lives of other children which risked child researchers being “ghettoized” with respect to matters of concern to childhood issues only (Kay & Tisdall, 2012, p. 187). In conclusion, they argued child voice was an ableist concept, which, if left unexamined, camouflaged and perpetuated research practices that excluded disabled children. In lieu of relying on child voice that assumes verbal communication solely, they proposed researchers should incorporate a range of diverse methods into research with children, like visual arts or multimedia, to welcome all forms of communication.

Meaning as indexical
Maybin (2013) turned to Bakhtinian theory as well as linguistic anthropology to critique the notion that institutional contexts, which shaped child voice, were monolithic. For her, this presumed child voice was shaped by uniform interactional dynamics irrespective of the context from which it emerged and thus ignored the contextual nature in which meaning was derived. In turn, Maybin (2013) drew on linguistic anthropology and its concept of indexicality to inform her analysis of institutional contexts, like the school setting and peer group, to explore how they were divergent and shaped child voice in unique ways. Indexicality refers to the idea that meanings are only intelligible when they are located in relation to something else. In other words, meaning is indexical: The meaning of voice is contingent on the context in which it is understood and derives its meaning from what the subject or the analyst brings to the encounter and the situation in which it is made. Through her engagement with the concept of indexicality, Maybin (2013) thus proposed an alternative framing of child voice.
which not only recognized it as dialogically emergent but institutionally shaped and indexical in nature.

**Child voice entanglements**

Spyrou (2016b) presented three poststructural analyses of child voice as the following: a discursive and material construction, “undomesticated” (MacLure, 2009), and inclusive of silence. This third analysis is in line with the work reviewed below (Spyrou, 2016a) where he further expanded on silence as an aspect of child voice. Thus, our review here is focused on his first and second analyses. In the first, Spyrou (2016b) considered how child voice is shaped not only through discursive means but through the entanglement of human and nonhuman materialities as well (e.g., material things such as books, classrooms, and toys). Elaborating on Jackson and Mazzei’s (2012) application of posthumanist theory, Spyrou (2016b) contemplated how child voice might be viewed as a performative practice, which derives its discursive meaning from the interactions between human and nonhuman agents in the material world. These performative practices occurred in what he termed the “discursive/material nexus” (p. 108); the intersection of language/culture and material phenomena, which he proposed, “may allow us to bridge the gap between discourse and matter in voice research” (Spyrou, 2016b, p. 166). The second analysis he presented drew on MacLure’s notion of the “undomesticated in voice” (Spyrou, 2016b, p. 109), which is a kind of voice that simultaneously resists, yet begs for, analysis. Spyrou (2016b) insisted that researchers tend to domesticate child voice, that is, “reduce it to something other than what it is in order to make it knowable” (p. 109). He thus encouraged researchers to acknowledge the dangers of interpreting child voice at face value since it risks producing oversimplified interpretations of children’s perspectives and worlds. Instead, he proposed a more ethical stance to researching child voice would be one that welcomed and respected the interpretive difficulties of voice in general.

Last in this series of reviewed works is an additional work by Spyrou (2016a), wherein he deepened his examination of silence in research with children by drawing on the poststructural writings of Mazzei (2003, 2004) to interrogate the assumptions that accounts of silence in research were more authentic than accounts of speech and further that silence occurred in the adult–child research context just as it would in any other context. He considered how silence, like all other forms of communication such as speech, was performative in nature, given it occurred intentionally through “the non-responses, the evasions, the denials, the pauses, the breaths, the sighs, the deflections, and reframings” (Spyrou, 2016a, p. 11) within the interview encounter between adult researcher and child participant. This led Spyrou (2016a) to propose what he termed “wavering silences” (p. 12) which are those that attend to the affective relations of power at play that influence what is not said between adult researcher and child participant. Through this work, Spyrou (2016a) heightened researchers’ attention to silence as “an aspect of voice, neither more nor less, in and of itself, authentic or true than uttered speech” (p. 18) and emphasized that conceptions of child voice must account for the performative nature of all communication.

**Summary**

In summarizing the reviewed literatures, we return to the questions that framed our review. As noted earlier, our review focused on (a) the assumptions of child voice being forwarded, (b) why these assumptions of child voice were problematic to the author/s, and (c) alternative framings of child voice proposed by the author/s. In turn, we wish to forward three key thematic takeaways from this scholarship, which highlight critical understandings of child voice, and voice in qualitative inquiry more generally. First, (child) voice is always already relational. In this regard, voice is always produced out of relations between agents, human or nonhuman, within a specific context. Second, (child) voice has no authentic point of origin, which is to say, it is not an inner possession of an individual, nor traceable to a particular standpoint or location that can be deemed authentic in nature. This means that voice should be treated and accounted for in research practice as a complex construction where meanings are always situated and open to multiple interpretations. Last, within research processes, (child) voice is almost always produced through intergenerational dialogues, which means we cannot readily dismiss factors that mediate those interactions, such as power, for example, from analysis. In most research with children, there is always an adult present somewhere.

**Discussion**

In line with social shifts toward recognizing children as agents of their views as worthy of attention, varying constructions of child voice, whether singular or plural, have been taken up and mobilized in child-focused research to serve a range of purposes. In conjunction with the authors whose works are reviewed here, we are concerned that when left unexamined, re/presentations of child voice are taken at face value, under-theorized, and reified. As these authors show, invoking notions of child voice as a representation of uncomplicated and decontextualized “truth/s” risks oversimplifying children’s views and experiences and fails to acknowledge both the coproduction of research accounts and the potential harms to individual children when their contributions to research are reduced to align with researchers’ focus on singular aspects of that child’s life experiences (e.g., living in poverty or experiencing a particular illness).

Furthermore, such approaches neglect considerations of the power-laden interactions wherein child voice is coproduced (Nybell, 2013) and fails to account for tacit assumptions, such as those discussed in this review, which both shape and constrain children’s contributions. Thus, oversimplified notions of child voice risk reproducing the power differentials that researchers aimed to redress (Lane et al., 2019). To counter these risks, we contend that ongoing critical engagement with
conventional conceptualizations, and by extension, re/presentations of child voice, has the potential to reflexively address issues of power by highlighting the ways in which child voice is mediated by, and constructed within, the research process. Considerations of power should not be conflated with efforts to establish rapport and safety with younger participants. While these efforts are important in the conduct of ethical research, they do not “level the playing field” of adult–child relations. As opposed to aiming for some type of equalizing of power in research relations, child-focused researchers should reflexively and explicitly account for the ways power relations influence what can be expressed, how something is expressed, and what is chosen to re/present children’s accounts in research results. It is of the utmost importance, then, that researchers theorize voice within their work in order to be as transparent and accountable as possible regarding their methodological approach and the qualitative methods used as well as the re/presentation of “children’s voices” being forwarded.

**The Allure of Voice**

Moore and Muller’s (1999) indictment of voice research makes a compelling case for why appeals to voice, that is to say voice discourse, is so alluring. For our purposes, their work offers critical epistemological insight as to why appeals to child voice permeate much of the qualitative literature to date. According to Moore and Muller (1999), voice discourse “operates primarily as a debunking strategy” to reveal “the disguised interests... of the dominant group” (p. 202) behind hegemonic knowledge claims; in our case, adult claims about child’s in/competence. As a result, “voice discourse goes on to establish its positive (inclusive) attributes in terms of the representation of those voices previously silenced or marginalized by the hegemony of the dominant discourse” (Moore & Muller, 1999, p. 202). Given children have been traditionally framed as being incompetent and vulnerable, and consequently, as not having voice, appeals to child voice seem well-intentioned because it is “a means of making present perspectives... otherwise routinely ignored or indefinitely deferred” (L’Anson, 2013, p. 108).

For example, among the early decades of childhood studies, participatory methods came into practice to bring children’s perspectives into research precisely because they were considered by many childhood scholars to be consistently overlooked (Holland et al., 2010). Holland and colleagues (2010) suggest the rise of participatory research with children is due in part to the adoption of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child by a majority of countries outlined here:

1. 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.
2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law (https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx).

In response to Article 12, scholars began incorporating children’s perspectives into research through interviews since it was “the most accessible and convenient means for accumulating... knowledge... directly from children” (Spyrou, 2016b, p. 106). For James (2007), the historical context of the emergence of “child voice” within a research agenda may account for scholars’ lack of critical reflection regarding its re/presentation:

One explanation for the absence of much critical reflection on the use of “children’s voices” in research is surely historical. The desire to portray children as social actors and the attribution of competence rather than incompetence to children has meant that it has been important for children’s voices to speak loudly and boldly within the text... There has been a need simply to raise the research profile of the study of children; by citing their words and views, researchers are able to get a rather different set of concerns about children and childhood onto the research agenda. (p. 265)

Lundy (2007) attributes the rise of voice rhetoric, like “children’s voices,” as well as “pupil voice”, “the voice of the child”, “the right to be heard”, and “the right to participate” (p. 941), to general misunderstandings of Article 12’s intentions. She argues children’s rights discourses undermine the Article’s potential, as the use of such rhetorical terms encourages “a type of ‘chicken soup’ effect—where children’s voice is held out as an unquestionable good to be endorsed by all” (p. 931). For example, she notes, “one of the most... cogent criticisms levelled at Article 12 is that it is easy for adults to comply with the various outward signs of consultation and... ignore children’s views [through] tokenistic or decorative participation” (Lundy, 2007, p. 938). To correct this, she proposes, “the practice of actively involving [children] in decision making should not be portrayed as an option which is in the gift of adults but a legal imperative which is the right of the child” (Lundy, 2007, p. 931). It is important to note her critical work did not dismiss the importance and utility of Article 12 but rather, that it too, troubled a simplistic and rhetorical re/presentation of child voice specifically within the research context. For instance, Lundy and McEvoy (2011) argue for a rights-informed approach that anticipates a relational and intergenerational research process in which the adult researcher is reflexive about the child–adult research relationship, and explicitly accountable to children, to provide information, guide children while their views are “in formation, in order to be assisted in determining and expressing what will then be both a formed and an informed view” (emphasis in the original, p. 140). Turning to broader discussions of voice in qualitative research with persons across the life span, it is apparent that
there is conceptual blurring among notions of voice, participation, and lived experience. For example, poststructural approaches to voice research (MacLure, 2009; Mazzei, 2009; Mazzei & Jackson, 2009, 2012) highlight the metaphysical privileging of voice as presence and acknowledge tendencies in qualitative research to regard the spoken voice of participants as the authoritative and authentic account of their experiences (Mazzei, 2009). Counter to these tendencies, critical scholarship maintains there is no authentic voice that can be captured within the research process, and methodological attempts to interpret “true” meanings and finalize participant accounts are inconsistent with the ethics underlying qualitative inquiry (Frank, 2005; Mazzei & Jackson, 2009; Teachman et al., 2018). Attempts to represent participants’ words exactly as spoken, as if their meanings are transparent, is a move that fails to consider researchers’ role in shaping those words (Eakin, 2016; Eakin & Mykalovskiy, 2003; Mazzei & Jackson, 2012).

Furthermore, as this review shows, there are rich works on silence in the context of child voice (Lewis, 2010; Spyrou, 2011, 2016a, 2016b), which work the limits of voice to consider nonlinguistic phenomena. Indeed, searches for a kind of normative voice, particularly those that privilege oral speech, fall short of conceptualizing voice beyond language within the ambiguous boundaries of linguistic/nonlinguistic phenomena “such as laughter, tears, cries, shouts, gesticulations and silences” (MacLure, 2009, p. 110).

Critical engagement with voice as it relates to participants considered marginalized, like children, can reflexively inform future qualitative practice. For instance, in research with disabled youth who had little or no speech and use augmentative and alternative communication, Teachman and colleagues (Teachman & Gibson, 2018; Teachman et al., 2018) drew on Bakhtin’s dialogism, as well as several of the works reviewed in this article, to help theorize communication impairment. To overcome concerns about the authenticity and validity of data generated with young people whose communication is mediated by technologies and in some cases, human communication partners, they forwarded a critical dialogical methodology that, like Kay and Tisdall (2012), highlighted the ways that tacit assumptions about capturing a person’s “own voice” undermine opportunities for disabled young people to participate in research. A critical dialogical approach asserts that all communication is “interdependent and a mediated co-production between persons and, in some instances, technologies” (Teachman et al., 2018, p. 38). While this approach was used in research with disabled youth, this theorization of voice as a situated, shared coproduction has the potential to inform research with a range of persons, of all ages, whose communication is judged as somehow lacking and therefore not “valid.” Indeed, as opposed to presenting limitations for researchers, we suggest doing research with persons who communicate differently offers opportunities to explicitly query deeply ingrained assumptions about voice.

Another example of critical scholarship comes from Gladstone and colleagues’ (2014, 2015, 2017) body of research using drawing and digital storytelling as modes of expression in participatory mental health research with young people. Similar to Elden (2012), they observe the research encounter as an entanglement between the human and more-than-human actor; the technical and material, visual, oral, and linguistic dimensions that work together to produce a voice that is complicated by social and relational processes; and intergenerational dialogue across different contexts. For instance, Gladstone and Stasiulis (2017) show how a claim to represent “ordinary” (and authentic) voices in digital storytelling that are otherwise suppressed by institutionalized media (including academic research) actually produces a voice that is multiply constructed by human and institutional actors that shape the story. Voice in digital storytelling is not fixed but mobile. As stories move beyond the workshop setting in which they are first produced, voices are “re/presented, re-contextualized, and re-mediated” (p. 12), in order to share stories with others, who are meant to listen to stories as part of a democratizing process to ensure marginalized voices are heard. Their reflexive work analyzes how digital stories are a complex construction where meanings are always situated and open to multiple interpretations by different actors and as stories (and voices) travel and interact with those outside the research setting.

The reviewed literature appears to converge on relationality, that is, the extent to which relational encounters between adults or other human actors (Elden, 2012; Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010; Mannion, 2007; Maybin, 2013; Spyrou, 2011, 2016a) as well as nonhuman actors (Gladsone & Stasiulis, 2017; Spyrou 2016b; Teachman et al., 2018) construct what we have termed child voice within the research context. A focus on “relational encounters and the emerging entanglements of children with the world at large” (Spyrou, 2017, p. 433) allows for a multitude of more nuanced ways to conceptualize child voice and calls for reflexivity and new methodological approaches for analyzing and representing children’s contributions to knowledge production.

Critical reflection on child voice, and voice more broadly in qualitative inquiry, may benefit from engagement with new materialism theory, which directly considers relational encounters between materialities. As Fox and Allerd (2017) note,

“new materialism” has become a collective term…to denote a range of perspectives…from biophysics to quantum physics to queer and feminist theories [that all have] a concern with the material workings of power, and…focus firmly upon social production. (p. 2)

A new materialist approach to voice in qualitative inquiry, then, may provide new perspective to the ways in which nonhuman materialities contribute to the construction of voice. For example, in more-than-human worlds, digital technologies such as smartphones, tablets, and social media apps are providing researchers who work with children new methodological avenues to collect data about their experiences. Children’s dynamic interactions with digital technologies produce digital
data which, as Lupton and Williamson (2017) argue, raise ethical concerns regarding how it is used to represent and understand children’s experiences; that is to say, how it is used to speak on children’s behalf. As Willson (2019) notes, it is crucial to recognize that children’s interactions with any given digital technology iteratively shapes the technology’s responses. Digital data are only made possible through a user’s entanglement with the digital technology at hand.

From this perspective, digital data do not objectively represent children’s experiences, or any user’s experiences for that matter, since its production is always already shaped by the technology’s “pre-established circuits of discourse and meaning” (Lupton, 2014, p. 610). Thus, as opposed to any resemblance to voice, digital data merely represent a user’s interaction with a given technology located in a particular time, place, and fixed system of codes and algorithms. Scholars who are interested in using digital technologies in qualitative research with children could therefore benefit from new materialist perspectives as these acknowledge the relational aspect of knowledge production between materialities and do not reduce the complexity of a user’s experience through the “technological mouthpieces of data” (Lupton & Williamson, 2017, p. 790).

Conclusion

Our aim in this work has not been to suggest that there is a “right” way to conceptualize child voice. Nor do we wish to argue that researchers refrain altogether from using terms such as “child voice” in their work. Instead, we intend to highlight the need to theorize “voice” in research with children. Theorizing voice includes acknowledging voice as always already relational, that voice has no authentic or fixed point of origin, which means that voice should be treated and accounted for, as it is in critical qualitative research practices, as a complex construction where meanings are always situated and open to multiple interpretations. And finally, as this review shows, child voice in particular is almost always produced through intergenerational dialogue that includes members of other age categories, including adults, and that we cannot readily dismiss factors that mediate child–adult interactions and relations such as power. This call to theorize child voice necessarily requires that researchers explicitly and reflexively attend to the methodological implications of their approach to voice, and its influence on how data are generated and analyzed and children’s contributions to the research are represented.

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ORCID iD

Danica Facca  https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3150-4805
Brenda Gladstone  https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7295-6296
Gail Teachman  https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1892-5792

Note

1. Throughout this article, we use the phrase child voice to denote dominant re/presentations of children’s voices in singular and pluralized form within qualitative inquiry (i.e., child voice/child’s voice/children’s voice/children’s voices).

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