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Early childhood studies as vocal studies: Examining the social practices of ‘giving voice to children’s voices’ in a crèche

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Abstract
The article suggests reconceptualizing the role of ‘children’s voices’ in childhood studies. By taking an institutional setting of early (or rather, earliest) childhood education and care as a test case, it argues for and empirically demonstrates a double shift in research perspectives. First, the principle of ‘giving voice to children’s voices’ is turned from an overarching research objective into a central object of research. Second, the metaphorical and the non-metaphorical meaning of ‘voice’ are clearly separated in order to relate them anew. Voices are observed and taken into account with respect to their sonic phenomennality before any abstract notions of ‘children’s voices’ come into play. By taking into account that even children with little or no speech mostly do have a voice, the paradoxical formula of ‘giving voice to children’s voices’ gains a renewed sensitizing function in research practice. Analyses of field notes delineate a range of observable vocal phenomena and respective social practices of ‘giving voice’ in a crèche and detect both various strategies of verbalization as well as strategies of practically dealing with children’s hearable voices.

Keywords
Childcare organizations, children’s voices, early childhood, ethnography, vocal sound

The notion of voice is itself polysemic: it ranges between various metaphorical meanings on the one hand and various aspects of the body part that produces vocal sounds (used for speaking, singing, etc.) on the other. As a metaphor, ‘voice’ proved to be capable of merging a whole array of issues and discourses that map the terrain of the social childhood studies, and at the same time it is supposed to address the major practical challenges for

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several ‘child-centred’ and critical pedagogies: children’s rights and participation; social inequality and difference; speech and multilingualism; perspectives, standpoints and representation. Both childhood ethnographers and critical pedagogues conceive of their main tasks in terms of ‘giving voice’ or ‘listening’, respectively, to ‘children’s voices’.

This field of issues and challenges has been much disputed in the last years, especially in *Childhood* (for a synthesizing position see Spyrou, 2011). The present article aims at pushing the discussion a few steps further. It argues for and empirically demonstrates – by taking an institutional setting of early (or rather, earliest) childhood education and care as a test case – a *double shift* in research perspectives. First, the principle of ‘giving voice to children’s voices’ is turned from an overarching research objective into a central *object of research*. Second, the metaphorical and the non-metaphorical meaning of ‘voice’ are clearly separated in order to relate them anew. In connection with this second shift, a specific extension of ethnographic research methods is proposed and applied: voices are observed and taken into account with respect to their sonic phenomenality before any abstract notions of ‘children’s voices’ come into play. Thus, the approach prefers to further exhaust the potentials of ‘listening’ in the literal sense instead of switching to special data collection techniques that are supposed to be suitable for children. Listened in this way, voices are particularly revealed as the sources of children’s most noticeable pre-linguistic utterances and of sounds ranging between speech and non-speech forms of articulation and complex interrelations between the two. Thereby, the approach also highlights specific urgent problems that organizational forms of childcare pose to professional practices and that so far have not been dealt with in much detail in organizational ethnographic research (e.g. Ben-Ari, 1996). By taking into account that even children with little or no speech mostly do have a voice, the paradoxical formula of ‘giving voice to children’s voices’ gains a renewed sensitizing function in research practice. The approach of following the various hearable voices instead of trying to ‘elicit’ presupposed ‘voices’ of children allows, not least, reconstructing the *making* of relationally opposed adult and child perspectives (or ‘voices’) in everyday institutional life.

The methodological part of the article provides a conceptual argumentation leading towards a vocal ethnographical approach in early childhood studies: first, the recent discussion on ‘voice research’ in childhood studies is summarized. The research interest is then specified, with respect to earliest childhood settings. An outline of a current research project on Luxembourgian early childcare institutions1 together with a brief description of the crèche where I conducted ethnographic fieldwork, some remarks on the ‘auditive’ ethnographic methodology approach and on the selection criteria for the analysed field-notes complete this section.

The following empirical part of the article is not just an illustration of the conceptual discussion, but serves to resolve some of the discussed dilemmas in an empirical manner and to demonstrate how the relationality of voices can be grasped in ongoing social practices. It is, however, a first explorative study that is to be extended in further research. The analyses of field notes delineate a range of observable vocal phenomena in the crèche and show how they are related to social and pedagogical practices of ‘giving voice’.

The conclusion again takes up the methodological questions in light of the empirical sections and answers them by suggesting a reconceptualization of the role of ‘children’s voices’ in childhood studies.
‘Listening to children’s voices’: Reflexivity and self-critique in childhood studies

The view on children as agents and citizens who (should) have a say did not only influence research on childhood, but was applied in many different participatory projects and policy matters (Hallett and Prout, 2003) as well as in daily practices of childcare services (e.g. Kjørholt, 2005) and in task areas of different professions (Davie et al., 1996). Meanwhile (and with a lag of time), childhood research is critically ‘drawing on the lessons anthropology has learned about representation’ (James, 2007: 263; see also Moss et al., 2005: 9). Ironically, it is the term ‘listening’ – initially opposed to ‘gaze’ and ‘observation’ in the ‘writing culture’ debate in the 1980s (Clifford, 1986) – that now stands in the crossfire of critiques and is even judged to be ‘dangerous’ in several ways (Moss et al., 2005: 9). Childhood researchers who investigated the potentials of listening to children’s voices in various practice and policy contexts have found that ‘kind-hearted attempts … run the risk of transforming into subtle instruments of social control, of promoting rather than playing down inequalities’ (James, 2007: iv). Moreover, ‘claims to children’s participation are … marked by the mixed motives of the adults involved’ (Prout and Hallett, 2003: 2). This discrepancy seems to keep the debate on ‘children’s voices’ going.

I will refer to just some of the recent critiques that seem to me particularly clarifying. An important issue is the critique of the ‘authenticity’ of the child’s voice. Two different directions of argumentation can be discerned. First, ethnographers and their writing are criticized for illusions of being able to convey authentic voices by directly quoting what children say (James, 2007: 264–266). Referring to Geertz’s warning against the attempt to position oneself perfectly on the side or even in the place of the studied subjects, Allison James recommends being aware that ‘the author inevitably glosses the voices of children as part of the interpretive process’ (James, 2007: 265). Second, the notion of the child’s ‘voice’ itself is scrutinized and detected as a ‘relatively straightforward mental, verbal and rational property of the individual’, and replaced by a Bakhtinian view on voices as a ‘multidimensional social construction, which is subject to change’ (Komulainen, 2007: 13). At the same time, as Sirkka Komulainen has shown, the rejected notion of ‘voice’ nonetheless can be ethnographically observed as operating in childcare practices, such as in choice-making activities mediated by picture cards, arguing ‘that practices like this constitute the child’s voice as an object that can be possessed, retrieved and verbalized’ (Komulainen, 2007: 23). ‘Voices’ which seem to be only ‘elicited’ are, in fact, constructed in these practices. The treating of children, for example, as individuals with competencies to choose and make decisions on their daily life is itself a social practice and not divisible from the children’s dealing with this treatment and the resulting mutual influencing and adopting of ‘voices’ or ‘perspectives’ (cf. Honig et al., 1999).2

This social-constructivist view of ‘children’s voices’ leads to a specific lesson to be learned from the anthropological debate: the danger of ‘othering’ children – a danger which lies not so much in ‘grasping’ the other, but in treating the other as essentially strange and not fully understandable. Just like the practices under study, childhood studies themselves ‘might have also inadvertently distanced children’s voices by making them stand out from the voices of adults’ (Spyrou, 2011: 160).
When focusing research on these practices of ‘giving voice’, it is still possible to investigate the mechanisms of how some groups of children or individual children are listened to more than some others who are rather silenced (cf. the studies of Palludan, 2007; Warming, 2011). However, the question is whether researchers do not give away the potentials of their position if they try, on their part, to compensate the misrepresentation of single children or groups.

The challenge of early childhood: Pre-linguistic voices

Allison James states: ‘It is, of course, when children are talking that we hear their voices’ (James, 2007: 268). However, the prevalence of speech does not hold for the youngest children. In nurseries and similar institutions, a lack of speech competencies is rather the normal case for most of the children. The missing speech of infants seems an obvious reason, among others, why the major part of research on children’s voices and participation has dealt with older children, often teenagers (Moss et al., 2005: 4; Warming, 2011: 40).

Nonetheless, and even more, voices pervade the everyday life of early childhood settings. The term ‘vocalization’ is commonly used for all sorts of verbal or non-verbal vocal utterances of both adults and children. When listening to various forms of vocalizing in early childhood contexts, the physical and aesthetic qualities of the voice quickly come to the fore. Not only have the youngest children a voice in the literal sense, but their articulation often seems to be, in fact, a ‘pure’ bodily expression of the metaphorical meaning of ‘voice’, an expressivity that is, for example, characterized by the pressure and loudness of a ‘raised’ voice, of ‘making one’s voice heard’. It is this perceptive or productive bodily experience which is ‘elaborated’ in the metaphorical concept (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), not as in any form of oral speech like, for example, whispering. But also adults, whether parents, professionals, or any other persons, speak in a different manner and frequently raise their voice when addressing young children.

Complementary to the fact that the ‘pre-linguistic phase of life, even pre-birth childhood, has generally been factored out by childhood studies’ (Honig, 2009: 74), this life phase has been the object of a huge amount of medical research and writings which always had social and educational implications (e.g. Kelle, 2010). Especially the voices of very young children and their various modes of expression have provoked historically and culturally varying attempts of interpretation. At present, there is a strong emphasis on the acquisition of language. This focus builds upon a nearly 200-year-old tradition of research on the role of ‘babbling’ and other vocalizations in speech development (Ollier, 2000). More recently, even the crying sound of newborn infants is measured and proved speech relevant, even differing according to the native language (Mampe et al., 2009). Even the hearing sense of the foetus has already been claimed relevant to several aspects of development, e.g. with respect to the recognition of certain personal voices and speech melodies (Tomatis, 1972). The conception of early vocalization as language acquisition can be gauged attractive for the challenge of ‘listening’ and ‘giving voice’ to young children’s voices because it allows to identify children with learning and, therefore, with a childlike activity.

Another favoured conception can be found in the conjunction of children’s physical voices with attachment theory, which is also an example of the subtle shifts to metaphorical meanings. ‘Although most infants do not learn to talk until their second year, their
“voices” are there for us to hear from birth’ (Pugh and Selleck, 1996: 123). With reference to Bowlby and Ainsworth, then, a transformation to a kind of ‘voice’ that can be listened to is supposed to be done in intimate mother–infant interactions like breastfeeding: ‘In other words the baby’s voice (the rate and frequency of sucking) ensures just the right amount of milk’ (Pugh and Selleck, 1996: 124).

Also in the social childhood studies there are increasing efforts to involve the youngest children with little speech in research projects. These approaches do not overly consider the acoustic voice, but rather alter methods and data collection strategies in order to represent those children who are either unable or unwilling to articulate themselves verbally or prefer interactions that they initiate themselves (Warming, 2011). Insofar as these studies take mutual interactions of adult ‘voice-givers’ and children into their scope of observation, they reveal at the same time the pitfalls in actual professional practices and the strong inclination to limit children’s voices to verbal utterances (Komulainen, 2007: 23ff.). A broader concept of ‘voice’ in the sense of participation, agency and the like seems difficult to realize in the ongoing interactions of institutional childcare.

So, the main questions of research can be specified: How do practitioners manage to ‘give voice to children’s voices’ in the stream of daily educational and caregiving practices? And by what means can acoustic expressions be turned into linguistic utterances that are suitable to be recognized as ‘children’s voices’?

The research project: Setting, methodology and data selection

The empirical work presented in this article stems from an ongoing research project that investigates a recently (in 2005) established type of childcare centre in Luxembourg, the so-called Maison Relais pour Enfants (MRE). The particular MRE where I collected the data presented below is a crèche (children aged from 12 weeks to 4 years) with two group rooms, about 40 enrolled children (dependent on the division of weekly enrolment times), eight educators/carers, some temporary workers and one director.

Maisons Relais are characterized by extended opening hours and flexible enrolment periods for children. At the same time, they are meant to provide high educational quality. With this array of tasks, practical difficulties seem likely to arise, such as in planning activities, synchronizing time schedules, or fostering group life. Consequently, the initial research interest of the project was to find out how educational quality is practically accomplished under the highly deregulated organizational conditions. This is, in short, realized by investigating the practical ways of giving pedagogical meaning to the institutional daily life. Hence, the researchers do not know a priori how certain pedagogical concepts should manifest in daily life and how social and educational practices should work. A prerequisite for this kind of research is to adopt an epistemological attitude that constantly tries to suspend the taken-for-granted and to ‘bestrange’ the familiar.

There are several strategies to achieve this attitude, one being to highlight the audible instead of the verbal and discursive dimension of social life. Moreover, vocal phenomena turned out to be both a necessity and an opportunity for the creation and application of pedagogical knowledge. The following analyses are in line with an ethnography of the senses which makes considerable efforts to investigate the non-metaphorical aspect
of hearing in more specific ways. ‘Hearing cultures’ means more than ‘a metaphorical understanding of ethnography as being in need for more dialogue’; instead, this approach aims at understanding the ‘ways in which people relate to each other through the sense of hearing’ (Erlmann, 2004: 3). Moreover, auditive studies are on a ‘long way toward allowing the ear “an unromanticized place alongside the eye”’ (Erlmann, 2004: 5). The study presented below may also be read as a childhood studies’ contribution to this endeavour by investigating the specific ways people relate to each other through voices and hearing in early childhood education and care.

The chosen field notes and conversation protocols I will analyze in the following three sections describe practices that are roughly centred around children of different age groups: babies (or infants), then toddlers and, finally, young children with considerable abilities in conversation. These categories are not meant as developmental stages, as will become clear, but as conditions for the emergence of specific forms of vocal articulation and related social and pedagogical practices of ‘giving voice’.

Crying and screaming sounds: The organization of voices

Due to the fact that the crèche had just been founded, the constitution and change of practical ‘knowing how’ to ‘give voice’ had been very close to the surface during the first research period: the staff regularly discussed unexpected problems and, at times, rigorous discrepancies between ideal conceptions of the pedagogical work and arising disenchantments.

(1)

One day, after a few weeks’ break from being present in the day care institution, I return to it for another phase of ethnographic fieldwork. At the end of my stay, I go to the office/meeting room to say goodbye to Nathalie, the head of the institution. She stops talking with a colleague and asks me: ‘Has something changed since you were here the last time? Because, if one is here every day, one doesn’t notice that much that … everything has changed.’ I answer her by speaking about my impressions, such as that daily activities seem quite dominated by permanent organizing and mutual coordinating, like informing each other about which children are sleeping and for how long. I then ask in return: ‘What do you think has changed in particular?’ Nathalie answers: ‘This stress! This … noise!’ She starts reporting on two not yet one-year-old infants that are crying nearly all the time: ‘If there are two of these crying babies, the whole system breaks down.’ Her colleague Monika agrees with her: ‘Then two out of four caregivers are completely occupied.’

Monika further comments that the sustaining cries of the most disturbing child make ‘a real imposition for all the other children!’ Some of them would even hold their ears shut. Moreover, one could no longer hear what the other children say.

Nathalie further describes the infant that is most difficult to handle, explaining ‘He doesn’t like the ambience in the group rooms. He rather likes to be with Monika alone in the kitchen.’ Monika continues: ‘We hope that he has no pedophobia. Such a thing exists! It’s good to know that. One has to keep that at the back of one’s mind.’ In the course of our talk, she brings up a second possible explanation: ‘There is a kind of partial autism in early childhood; I don’t remember what it’s called …’

After describing these problems in detail, the head finally bewails: ‘If they only could talk and say what doesn’t suit them, we could do something about it.’
What the two professionals make clear is that the voices of children, at least the non-speaking, crying and screaming ones, are first and foremost a severe problem that has to be dealt with. Coping with the physical power and disharmonious ‘melody’ of crying presupposes giving a specific meaning to it representatively (‘If they only could talk and say what doesn’t suit them …’) or at least finding a cause for it. Generally, the explicit knowledge used or created for this purpose of interpreting pre-linguistic crying remains always vague and hardly verifiable. Thus, crying can quite easily be put into different contexts or paradigms of knowledge and used for different interests. Pedagogical interpretations which link crying and screaming to some kind of learning or socialization might not always work, particularly when the vocal behaviour does not change over a longer time. Then, other knowledge resources like medical and psychological diagnoses seem likely to come into play (‘pedophobia’, ‘partial autism’).

As the causes for persistent crying are searched for beyond daily institutional life (e.g. in the babies’ psychic constitution), these explanations also have legitimizing functions. Because the problem of cumulating unpleasant noise due to lots of crying children occurs, at least in part, as a consequence of the normal conditions and efforts in a crèche, it seems to raise the question whether the crèche is an appropriate place to stay for the children.

Thus, it is not surprising that one type of commenting on the noise is to bring forward the argument of the well-being of children – but not necessarily the well-being of the ones who articulate themselves, but, for example, the ones who might not be heard acoustically and, moreover, would even be forced to hold their ears shut. These children (and not the stress of the adults) also serve as a reason for putting babies aside or in another room instead of soothing them all the time: to give voice to children can practically mean to suppress particular voices (e.g. crying or screaming) in order to ‘give voice’ to other children. In other words, besides ‘listening’ to children, the concrete materiality of voices in a day care centre needs to be organized (and one could list a whole range of techniques of stopping or minimizing loudness). In situations of lacking personnel for calming down screaming babies, the screaming is – as I observed – commented on publicly and sometimes in a pedagogical way. For example, a baby that is considered to be ‘used to’ breast-feeding every two hours and currently ‘adapting’ to the day care, ‘must learn to be patient’ or ‘learn that there is not always enough time’.

Shouting and calling sounds: Rising peer culture, evoked child autonomy

Back in the time a few weeks after the start of the centre when the number of enrolled children was slowly rising, my attention as a participant observer was more frequently drawn to single acoustic events. I made the following notes during breakfast. The nurse Bonnie, about eight children and myself were sitting around two small tables.

(2)

Tina (4 months old) is lying in a babybed near the climbing frame and makes cooing and croaking noises that are becoming louder over time. Bonnie encourages her by asking: ‘Are you
doing fine? Are you feeling well?’ Then she turns to me, saying ‘Tina always sings with us together at the children’s conference’, presumably announcing to me what is expected to be heard after breakfast time. Then Bonnie stands up from the table, picks up the babybed and places it near to her and the other children at the table. There, she looks at Tina, smiles, and imitates twice or three times her noises. After a while, Jorge begins with a similar noise, not perfectly reproduced, but in the same rhythmic and melodic form, thus clearly a citation of Bonnie’s former croaking sounds. Fernando and Boris make their entrances shortly after. What they do now seems to be somewhere between shouting and calling. For one or two minutes, the three boys, sitting in a semicircle together, perform a loud ‘concert’. It is a sharp contrast to the quietness I noticed right before breakfast.

Here, the noises the baby produces are not perceived as disturbing but, on the contrary, as pleasant and welcome. Bonnie’s perception of this ‘singing’ may be intensified by the possibility of taking it as a sign of well-being and by the opportunity to communicate this interpretation to the social environment. As her accompanying commentaries indicate, her repetition of the cooing and croaking is more than initiating a quasi-dyadic interaction in the course of which the baby is encouraged to communicate with its adult counterpart according to its vocalizing abilities. It is rather part of a ‘translation’ of the child’s articulation, which is interpreted and framed as joyful uttering and positive commenting. Moreover, this emotive and communicative framing seems to be taken up and driven further by some other children who are sitting at the same place. The sounds that were ‘communicated’ by Bonnie now serve as an aesthetic resource for the three boys to start their rhythmic vocal performance.

To use their own vocal abilities and capacities is one of the main channels (if not the main channel) for young children, especially around toddler age, to come to participate in and contribute to the social and institutional life. To produce various sounds at high volumes (more or less intentionally) is a possibility to establish contacts immediately and situatedly. Regularly throughout daily life in the crèche, I could observe how vocality was at the heart of the youngest children’s activities. These are often the roots of peer cultural routines in the sense of William Corsaro (1985). Children ‘give voice’ to each other; adults rather join in from time to time. Yet the emergence of collective ways of acting is often not clearly localized in either the children’s worlds or the adults’ structuring of activities, especially in day care settings with very young children. It is also in this sense that the peer culture is ‘rising’, it is not necessarily a distinct part of the social reality, but first ‘demerging’ from a less specific network of communicative relations among adults and children.

However, those daily pedagogical practices that were obviously intended to support ‘children’s voices’ (in the sense of notions mentioned above, especially fixed in the centre’s pedagogical concept) only in part referred to these emerging forms of collective action and reproduction. To a large extent, they were concerned with eliciting the voices of single children with respect to very specific choosing tasks and other communicative frameworks. Returning to the setting of the breakfast table on another day, I noted:

Lisa (3 years old) is asked by the nurse Christine (who is sitting left of Lisa) what she wanted to eat. She looks in the direction of the jam, the cheese and the cold cuts, but doesn’t answer. Bonnie (opposite to Lisa) looks at her firmly and calls loudly, ‘Li – sa!’, in a tone like to someone who
Childhood does not listen and must be addressed repeatedly in order to get through to him or her. In French (the language Lisa understands best), Bonnie says to Lisa: ‘If you don’t say what you want, we can’t give you anything.’

According to scenes like this, children who remain quiet pose a regular problem in daily pedagogical practices as well. Lisa’s wait-and-see-tendency is particularly strong when she is directly addressed by the nurses. In the observed interaction, it is not really her attention that would have to be attained; apparently, she is not absent from the situation, but listening to what she is asked. The intervention of the nurse is rather to ‘remind’ Lisa of ‘where she is’ in terms of a specific generational order and to align her with the specific communicative routine that is supposed to be shared: adults ask children for their preference (within a defined range of items or activities to choose from) and children answer this question (by naming or pointing to something from this range). The underlying construction of the child, which is at the same time presupposed to be real and demanded from the children to be realized, is the following: children have a will concerning the things that are supposed to be relevant to them, and they are able and willing to make according decisions and announce these decisions to adults. The sharp and urgent articulation of the vocative (‘Li – sa!’), which actually indicates a big distance (in terms of space or consciousness) between the calling person and the addressed person, serves as a technique of e-voking the will or, respectively, the ‘voice’ that is needed to regard the child as successfully participating in the institutional practices. In other words, the calling practice is evocative of the ways how voices sound appropriately childlike (in the double sense of generating and recalling these ways) in order to be conceived of as ‘children’s voices’ in this organizational childcare setting.

Cheering and claiming sounds: Collective action in the children’s conference

According to the pedagogical concept of the MRE, the promotion of child participation and decision-making should happen in particular during the daily ‘children’s conference’. This conference is usually carried out with the older, speaking children and consists of a set of performances and conversations. It always starts with the singing of a particular song with the melody of Frère Jacques/Brother John but with different lyrics. These are sung in Luxemburgish and may be translated approximately (each line repeated): ‘Where are the children? / There they are! / Welcome. / Good morning.’ This version is varied, then, by naming single children and asking where they were, e.g. ‘Where is Lisa?’ – ‘There she is!’ and so on. It is accompanied by a complex performative and gestural play, for example gazing around as if looking for a person and pointing to the person as if having found him or her. Hence, this initial part of the conference – to put it briefly for my purposes here – first addresses the whole group of children and then turns to individual children, their names and physical presence.

Another part – the core element of every children’s conference – is the proposal of one or more special activities for the morning time and the choosing of an activity by the children. Here, I cite one of several conferences I recorded (video and/or audio) that is suited to analyse the two abovementioned elements – the welcome song and activity choosing – and some further interesting processes in more detail.
The caregiver Martha and seven children are sitting in a circle on the carpet. The usual opening song is finished by cheering ‘Super!’ and clapping hands. This time, the welcoming of every single child is done afterwards without the song: Martha points to a child and asks for example: ‘Who is this here?’ The children’s loud answers (the respective names), again, are a kind of cheering and celebrating (the intonation starts very high and then slowly descends). This is affirmed by the caregiver who repeats the right answers in a similar tone. All in all, an atmosphere of acclamation and agreement is established.

Then the caregiver marks a break by addressing the children as an audience: ‘Now, children. Okay. Today, I want to play games with you upstairs in the gym.’ One child raises her arms and responds immediately: ‘Yeah, gym!’ Martha reacts: ‘Yes.’ She continues: ‘Okay. Today, we won’t be running in the gym, okay? We won’t be running, and we also won’t do exercises. We will …’ – she takes the balloon that was lying beside her and holds it in front of her – ‘… play with balloons. We do a few games with balloons.’ Some children quietly say ‘Yes.’ While asking the following question, Martha slowly turns to her side and reaches for a babyphone that is standing behind her, broadcasting the crying sounds of a baby from the sleeping room (she probably turns the volume down): ‘Who of you wants to participate?’

Most of the children shout loudly and impulsively: ‘Me!’ – ‘Me, too!’ Martha turns back to the circle and marks another break: ‘So.’ She looks at the first child right next to her and points to him: ‘Julian wants to participate, okay?’ Julian nods his head. The nurse turns to the next child in the row: ‘Catherine? Do you want to participate, too?’

While the programme proceeds from the welcome song to the ‘proposal’ of the activity, it is striking that the former logic, the ‘atmosphere of acclamation and agreement’, spills over to the next part so that the proposal of the nurse Martha (it is actually a declared intention: ‘I want …’) to go to the gym is immediately accepted by some children. After that, the special activity is in fact determined by Martha. Moreover, she determines – by instruction – activities that must not be done. In doing so, the generational order is re-enacted through the communicative mode of instruction and ratification.

After having clarified this restriction and communicative framing of the choosing, the so-called ‘decision’ is to be made by the children. For this purpose, the caregiver now applies a subtle strategy: she addresses the whole group of children, but asks for individual answers, more precisely, for the pro-votes (‘Who of you wants to participate?’). Simultaneously, she withdraws her bodily attention from the circle of children and turns to a different object, suggesting that it is hard to get through to her at this moment. This strategy is successful as it provokes an obvious decision ‘of one voice’. In this spontaneous but complex intervention of the adult, a professional ‘knowing-in-action’ (Schön, 1983) comes to light which allows making immediate decisions about what actions to take without reflecting on them.

The children’s acclaiming response by ‘overcalling’ each other is still a collective way of acting, but the raised question already bore the possibility of exclusion for individuals. Accordingly, this is the point of transition to addressing individual children. Thus, the overall second part of the conference (the proposal and choosing of an activity) follows the same interactional structure as the first one; it proceeds from collective voices to individual voices.
Underneath the staging of a ‘decision-making’ procedure, the conference practices are revealed as an accomplishment of addressability of children (as children), as training in (pedagogical) addressing and responding routines. These generationally ordered routines combine collective and individual addressing and responding and transitions between the two. It is also striking that the different interactional ‘genres’ in field notes (2) and (3) which I analysed in the previous section seem to flow together in the conference setting (4): both the peers’ orientation towards acting and interacting vocally and the orientation of the professionals to establish individual conversation routines are allowed to converge here. Altogether, different institutional problems and goals like children’s active participation, the organization of voices and the conducting of decision-making procedures are handled simultaneously in these practices. They may fail in really fostering autonomous decision-making, but connect to the collective voice activities of the children as their preferred participatory means.

Conclusion: From ‘giving voice’ as research practice to research on the practices of ‘giving voice’

If ‘giving voice’ to children has been a raison d’être of the social childhood studies (Alanen, 2011; Qvortrup et al., 2009; Spyrou, 2011), can it still be a sustainable principle? If so, in what way? After having rendered a synopsis of recent critiques in Childhood and having pointed to central challenges for childhood research, Spyrou stresses that this heightened reflexivity in child voice matters should not paralyse research (2011: 162). I would agree with this conclusion, but still think the exact position of childhood studies in order to effectively avoid such paralysing has not yet been found. Only when it is made conceptually certain that the ‘limits of voice’ are not the limits of childhood studies, but one of their main starting points, then research is freed from notions of critique and reflexivity as a sort of demanding, yet never fully attainable ideal. Thus, I would suggest a solution by turning the topoi of ‘listening’ and ‘giving voice’ into the very objects of research. By accepting that social practices of ‘giving voice’ are always somewhere between eliciting from someone and forcing upon someone a voice, or between taking and refusing a voice, respectively, these mixed practices can be empirically investigated instead of being just evaluated. As an effective means of achieving this, I’d like to promote recultivating ‘listening’ as a research technique that follows more intensely the audible side of practices in childhood settings.

By taking vocal sound into consideration, the empirical examples have shown, throughout, various strategies of verbalization as well as strategies of practically and organizationally dealing with children’s hearable voices. As long as voices are pre-linguistic (and not least a source of hardly controllable noise), they may be interpreted representatively (as childlike), but they must also be handled and organized in more or less provisional ways during daily activities. As soon as children begin to speak, they are swiftly engaged in the construction processes of ‘children’s voices’. These are particularly constructed by addressing children and making them addressable as children by adults’ voices, for example by frequently using vocatives, or by connecting to their collective vocal activities. Nonetheless, adults’ strategies stay dependent on children’s collaboration.
With these results, the presented approach can be further generalized: it does not try to elicit ‘voices’ by specialized methods or arranged research situations, but expects ‘voices’ to emerge and change in the relations, interactions and performances among and between children and adults. It is especially interested, in fact, in educational practices of adult professionals because it is exactly here that the processes of interest are mostly initiated; but the approach does not neglect the agency of children and their part in ‘giving voice’ to themselves. ‘Reflexivity’ is not ‘an academic virtue and source of privileged knowledge’ (Lynch, 2000), but is located in the very construction processes of ‘voices’, i.e. in the recursive operating of pedagogical concepts, practitioners’ tacit knowledge and children’s agentic interpretation and participation that make children’s contributions to social life accountable (Garfinkel, 1967: 1) as ‘children’s voices’. Accordingly, the alternative to research on children seems to me only in some aspects research with children (recently: Mason and Danby, 2011); more generally, it is research on/with children and adults. By trying to catch the relationality of perspectives, also the aforementioned risk of ‘othering’ children is evaded. Hence, this research perspective contributes to investigating ‘the microsocial practices of children’s production and self-expression as children, as well as the question of what children and adults have in common’ (Honig, 2009: 74). It deals not least with the question of how voices of children are turned into childlike (and not adultlike) voices – as an empirical task resulting from the argument that ‘the child’ and ‘the adult’ are differentially related categories (Alanen, 2009). Applying this perspective includes, finally, observing how these processes work under usual organizational circumstances of childcare institutions.

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**Notes**

1. The research project was designed and started by Michael-Sebastian Honig and Sascha Neumann at the University of Luxembourg (Unité de Recherche INSIDE, department ‘Early Childhood: Education and Care’) in the summer of 2009 and runs until the end of 2012. Its title is ‘Realities of Education and Care: The Pedagogics of the Maison Relais pour Enfants’.
2. This view connects to conversation analytic studies in discursive psychology where ‘the focus is on how children are treated as possessing or lacking perspectives and competences’ (Hepburn and Wiggins, 2007: 26; see also for an overview).
3. The conversation in field note (1) was not audiorecorded, but written down immediately afterwards.
4. All names are pseudonyms.
5. Cf. Gustafson et al. (2000) for a critique of scientific attempts to distinguish acoustic ‘cry types’ in relation to infants’ different needs.
6. The interactional structure of this singing and performing game may be easily recognized as an elaborated version of the widespread *Peek-a-boo* or *Coo-coo*.
7. The record allowed detailed sequential analyses that are condensed here for the purpose of presentation.
References


