

Hearing Voices or Addled by Adulthood?



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While the importance of children's voices, and the need to listen to them in research, has become axiomatic in recent decades, some cast doubt on the possibility of eliciting authentic child voices.

Photos by CESESMA, featuring children and young people promoting and defending their rights in Nicaragua, 2007-2015. All photos taken and reproduced with informed consent of the organisations, children and young people featured.





Allison James (2007)

Giving Voice to Children’s Voices: Practices and Problems, Pitfalls and Potentials

“I argue that the current rhetoric about ‘giving voice to children’, commonplace both inside and outside the academy, poses a threat to the future of childhood research because it masks a number of important conceptual and epistemological problems. In particular, these relate to questions of representation, issues of authenticity, the diversity of children’s experiences, and children’s participation in research”.

(p261. *Emphasis added*)

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Spyros Spyrou (2011)

“The Limits of Children’s Voices”

“I argued for the need to critically reflect on the use of children’s voices in research by attending to issues of representation as well as the need to rethink the putative claims to authenticity in child voice research by acknowledging the limits of children’s voices and their complex, multi-layered and messy nature.”

(p151. *Emphasis added*)





Sirkka Komulainen (2007)

The Ambiguity of the Child's 'Voice' in Social Research

“The currently popular discourse on ‘listening to children’ is beset with practical and ethical ambiguities that result from the ‘socialness’ of human interaction, discourses and practices. In particular, the author argues that the notion of the child’s ‘voice’ is, despite being a powerful rhetorical device, socially constructed.”

(p11. Emphasis added)

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What these questionings have in common is the notion that a child’s voice is different from an adult’s.

The adult voice is considered the standard, and the child voice, due to its owner’s immaturity or lack of capacity, falls short.

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Examples of arguments put forward about children's voices:

James

"Their 'authenticity' must be interrogated, not assumed. Authenticity implies authority, reliability, and trustworthiness". (p265)

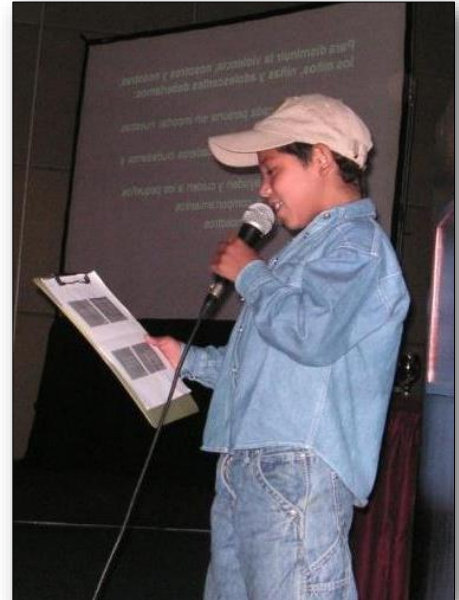
Can we just *assume* the authority, reliability and trustworthiness of adult's voices?

"The very conceptualization of ... 'children's voices' risks glossing over the diversity of children's own lives and experiences". (p262)

Is there no risk of glossing over the diversity of adults' lives and experiences in research?

"Childhood research is not simply about making children's own voices heard in this very literal sense by presenting children's perspectives. It is also about exploring the nature of the 'voice' with which children are attributed". (p266)

Is there no need to explore the nature of adults' voices?



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Spyrou



"Thus, when children speak they do so by drawing from the repertoire of their inherited social languages and speech genres which constrain to some extent what they can say". (p159)

When adults speak do we not draw on inherited social languages and speech genres that affect what we say?

Children's experience ...is mediated by the discourses which they are able to access and this is what we, as researchers, are offered through their words. (p. 159)

Are adults' experiences – as shared with researchers – not mediated by the discourses we are able to access?

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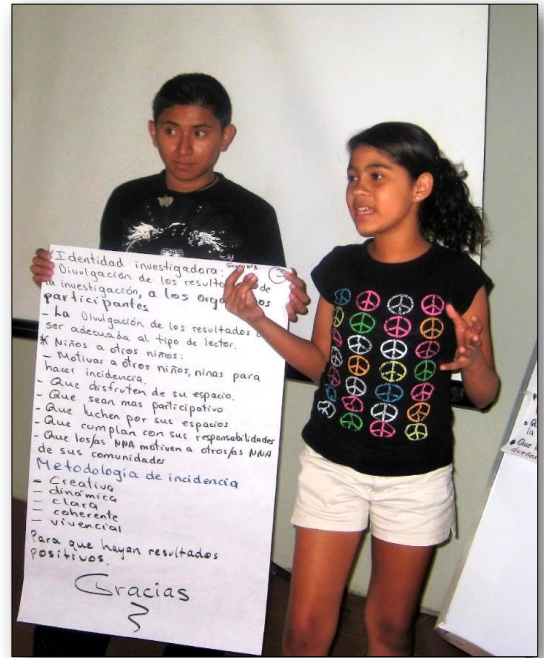
Komulainen

“I argue that the analysis of children’s ‘voices’ must include considerations of the dynamics of human communication and interaction”. (p22)

Is there no need to consider the dynamics of communication in relation to adults’ ‘voices’?

“I suggest that researchers ought not to impose a ‘voice’ on a child, but should instead think critically about what the idea of ‘voice’ may comprise”. (p23)

So is it OK to impose a ‘voice’ on an adult? Is there no need to think critically about adult voices?



Note the way these writers like to put the “voice” of the child in inverted commas, but not the voice of the adult.



The underpinning assumption is that an adult’s voice expresses an authentic personal truth, which they readily share, whether with an interviewer, a focus group, or a wider audience; but a child’s “voice” is different and cannot be trusted.



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I strongly agree with the writers cited earlier that we need to:

- ☒ be reflexive and critical of our voice-eliciting practices:
(Street, 2022; Wall & Robinson, 2022)
- ☒ be mindful of tokenism, discrimination and manipulation;
(Perry-Hazan & Bauml, 2023)
- ☒ acknowledge the way we select and quote children’s words to suit ourselves.
(Spyrou 2016)

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Given the questions raised here, should we consider the problem of adultism?

Adultism:

A belief system based on the idea that the adult human being is in some sense superior to the child [or young person] or of greater worth, and thus the child, by default, inferior or of lesser worth. The term also describes social structures, practices and behaviours based on these beliefs. (Shier, 2012, p. 9)



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Is the problematising of child voice described here any more than an expression of uncritical adultism?

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