The (im-)possibility of using participatory methods to access and represent young children's views

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Abstract: Research which seeks to gain an understanding of the views of children under the age of five is still relatively uncommon. This may be due in part to the assumption that issues of access and representation are more problematic in research with young children than with older children or adults because young children often do not rely on verbal or written forms of communication. One response to this methodological problem has been the development of ethnographic and participatory methods that recognise children’s multi-modal communicative practices. This paper critically examines a number of these methods but does so within a wider debate that addresses notions of competence, children's 'views', representation and reflexivity. During the course of the discussion I make the following propositions. Firstly, whilst I recognise the difficulty of accessing and representing young children’s views, I argue that we should question the assumption that research with young children is intrinsically more problematic than any other research which seeks to include the voice of the ‘Other’. Secondly, I argue that participatory methods may offer the possibility of eliciting young children's situated and diverse perspectives, however such methods are inevitably partial and inferential and therefore researchers should be cautious in their claims to access young children's views. Lastly, I suggest that it is impossible for the researcher to fully represent young children's views and experiences as they are filtered through the author's interpretation and research account. Such a realisation demands that the
researcher reject the idea of an essential, authentic representation of children's views in favour of multi-faceted, reflexive re-presentations.

**Introduction**

The main focus of this paper is to consider the question: *Is it possible to access and represent young children's views?* Until recently, traditional approaches to researching young children emanating from developmentalism and socialisation theories were more interested in producing a universal picture of childhood than in considering the question of how to access children's views. Within this positivist orientation the tendency to conceptualize children as transitional objects *en route* to becoming adults rather than as social beings possessing views and standpoints has meant that adults rarely listen to children (Hendrick, 2000).

By contrast, work in the field of the 'new social studies of childhood' over the last twenty years has enabled us to appreciate that children have specific views on the social world that are worth listening to (Mayall, 1996; James and James, 2001; Alanen, 2001). The conceptualization of children as social agents and as participants in the research process (James and Prout, 1990; Jenks, 1996; James, et al., 1998; Woodhead and Faulkner, 2000) has spawned a mass of studies that have sought to access children's views and allow children a more direct voice in their representation. However, research which seeks to access and represent the views of children aged five and younger is still rare (Hogan, 2005; Waller, 2006; Birbeck and Drummond, 2007). This may be due in part to the assumption that methodological issues of access and representation are more problematic in research with young children than with older children or adults. Are babies, toddlers and young children competent enough to be able to express a view? Is it possible to access the views of young children who may not rely on verbal and written forms of communication? Is it possible for adults to represent young children's views? One response to these methodological questions has been the development of ethnographic and participatory methods in research with young children. This paper critically examines a number of
these methods but does so within a wider debate that addresses notions of competence, children's 'views', representation and reflexivity.

Children's Competence

Children as Incompetent

Perhaps one of the main reasons for why researchers have failed to listen to the views of children under the age of five has been due to the adult assumption that young children are not competent enough to express an opinion. Traditionally research about children has tended to focus on individual development as a natural progress towards adulthood. The hegemony of developmental psychology and theories of socialization have viewed children as passive objects of social, biological and psychological processes and structures rather than as active agents (James and Prout, 1990). 'Ages and stages' models of childhood, such as Piaget's (1932) theory of cognitive development, have presented a linear pathway to maturity with infant sensory-motor intelligence at the lowest end and adult formal operative intelligence at the higher end. Whilst Piaget had a deep respect for children's ways of thinking, the implied hierarchical progression suggests that child thought has less value than that of the mature adult. Likewise, within traditional theories of socialisation, an emphasis upon children as 'not-yet-social' has meant that children's present day views have been disregarded as legitimate subjects of study (Jenks 1996; Corsaro, 1997, James and Prout, 1997; Prout, 2005). Notions of incompetence, immaturity and dependency have led to the assumption that young children are unreliable witnesses in their own lives (Qvortrup et al., 1994). As a result significant adult carers, such as parents, teachers, and social workers have tended to speak for children (Ridge, 2002).

Children as Competent

Over the last two decades scholars from the field of the 'new social studies of childhood' have criticised this approach arguing that children should be reconceptualized as competent agents in the everyday social world 'contributing to its events and thereby also to its reproduction and transformation' (Alanen,
Children are viewed as experts in their own lives and there is recognition that children may see different issues to adults and see issues differently. Consequently children's views, everyday experiences and knowledges should be researched directly and first-hand (James and Prout, 1990). Children's competence arises through a combination of experience and relationships, and should not necessarily be seen as age- or stage-related (Christensen and Prout, 2002; Morrow, 2005). Indeed, Morrow and Richards assert that respect for children's competencies 'needs to become a methodological technique in itself' (1996: 100).

Socio-cultural psychologists have also questioned the dominance of traditional developmental approaches to researching children. They assert that children appear less competent when they are subjected to clinical interviews, tests and surveys in experimental settings than when observed in their everyday social environments (Vygotsky, 1978; Donaldson, 1978; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hogan, 2005). Therefore, research concerned with understanding children's views and experiences needs a methodological approach that shows and enables children's competencies within their everyday social settings (Alderson, 2004; Kellett and Ding, 2004). For this reason ethnography and the adoption of participatory methods which borrow from Freirian pedagogy, participatory rural appraisal (PRA) (for example, Chambers, 1997) and participatory action research (for example, Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005) have been employed as a means of accessing the views of children and young people about a variety of issues, although this has occurred to a lesser extent with children under the age of five (Waller, 2006).

Roberts (2000) and Davis and colleagues (2000) argue that children who have dependencies such as those with impairments and the very young have largely been excluded from research within these new approaches to the study of childhood. One of the reasons for this may be that, whilst these approaches have challenged the idea of children as incompetent and incomplete by arguing that children have agency, Lee (1998; 2001) suggests that they have failed to recognise the existence of dependencies and immaturity within children's agentic action or 'competence'. Lee does not conceptualise agency as the
essential possession of individuals as some scholars from the ‘new social studies’ might, but as the emergent property of networks of dependency. Children and adults are all incomplete and dependent upon each other. From this perspective a young child’s ability to participate in research or to communicate her views centres not upon the pre-existence of competence or lack of it within each individual but rather upon the interdependent social networks available to her. Thus agency is something that is dependent on mediation and supplementation, through context, cultural tools and collaborative relationships. For example, drawing upon Actor Network Theory (Latour 1987; 1988; Law 1998) Lee (2001) argues that in legal proceedings the child witness becomes more agentic as more supplementations or ‘actors’ are added to their ‘network’. Cultural tools such as video cameras, videotape, and television screens, alongside the assistance of police and social workers, increase children’s agency to participate as independent witnesses. If, as Lee (1998) suggests, children and adults can be moved in and out of competence, then the methodological challenge for researchers seeking to ascertain young children’s views is to consider how competence can be nurtured through the research process.

**Competent-Incompetent Participants**

Instead of grappling with issues of whether babies and young children are either incompetent or competent to be able to communicate their views researchers might resist such dichotomous constructions and tolerate this ambiguity. Since neither adults nor children have an individualised agentive existence (Lee, 1998; 2001; Prout, 2005) we are mutually dependent upon one another in social and research processes. Therefore, if we are to open up the possibility of accessing young children’s views then we need to conduct research with children in their everyday social environments, employ cultural tools and methods in the sense that they act as supplementations to enable a process of knowledge co-construction, and acknowledge that both children and adults are competent-incompetent participants in the research process. Having considered the issue of competence I now turn to the notion of ‘children’s views’.
Children's Views

Some authors argue that accessing children's views is a 'difficult enterprise' (Sharp, 2002: 21; Woods, 2000) that poses methodological challenges for the researcher 'who has most likely been trained to conduct research among adults' (Downe, 2001:166). Indeed, in research with young children who may not rely on verbal or written forms of communication, children's views may not be immediately accessible or apparent. This might lead some researchers to assume that research with young children is intrinsically more problematic than research with older children or adults. Alderson (2008) identifies a number of reasons for why adults may find accessing young children's views problematic: lack of time, lack of confidence, lack of skill in talking with children, fear of losing control, anxiety about children's distress, and prejudice that it is not worthwhile to listen to young children's views. However, each of these problems equally could be applied to research with other groups of people. Exploring people's views therefore presupposes that people, including those with little or no speech, have something to say and that as researchers we become skilful in accessing those views. However, before we address the complex issue of how we might access young children's views, which is a matter of method, we need to examine what we mean by the child's 'view' or 'voice', which is a wider issue of epistemology and axiology.

Conceptual Issues

Casteneda (2001) argues that because the child has been viewed as the adult’s ontological origin by researchers from a modernist, scientific perspective, the adult can claim to know him/her by way of method or academic discipline. However, academics working from a social constructionist position argue that it is impossible to claim to fully know, understand or access children's views. The focus shifts from an essentialist understanding of 'childhood' and 'voice', the truth of which can be discovered through science, to an understanding that these concepts are socially constructed and subject to change. Children's views are not 'out there' waiting to be extracted; rather they are understood to be social, contextual, contingent and ambiguous. Consequently, the notion of 'voice' is understood not as an individual property but as a product of social
interaction (Komulainen, 2007). Thus the process of accessing young children's views becomes one that focuses on meaning making rather than truth finding (Dahlberg et al., 1999). Listening to children's views is 'not about making preformed ideas visible but more about, hearing, interpreting and making meaning' (Ebrahim and Muthukrishna, 2004: 85; Tolfree and Woodhead, 1999). It involves a process of co-construction between the research participant and the researcher. Furthermore the process of meaning-making involves more than the communication of verbal or textual articulations. Samulsson (2004) argues that meaning making by pre-verbal toddlers becomes visible when one focuses on how they communicate with their bodies and produce actions. Thus children's views are both embodied and produced within social interactions.

**Ethical Issues**

Foregrounding meaning making rather than seeking to directly capture the child's 'true' voice acknowledges values such as interpretation, contextuality, subjectivity, uncertainty and provisionality (Dahlberg et al., 1999). Researchers working from a social constructionist position are therefore cautious in their claims to be able to access children's views, recognising that their attempts to understand children's meaning making are inferential and subject to practices of translation, interpretation and mediation (James, 2007). Moss (2005) argues that this approach carries an ethical responsibility which addresses the issue of how we relate to the Other when seeking to access their views and experiences. Drawing upon Levinas' (1989) notion of 'the ethics of an encounter' Moss posits that our research interactions with children should be based on a respect for the alterity and unknowability of the Other. Taking responsibility means not seeking to totalise or grasp the views of the Other. It involves 'trying to listen to the Other from his or her own position and experience and not treating the Other as the same' (Moss, 2005:12). For example, James (2007) warns that we need to be aware of the danger of homogenising children's views or of seeking children's views simply to confirm our own established prejudices. From this perspective research which seeks to access the views of young children involves relating to the Other in a responsive and mutually dependent way that recognises commonality but honours difference.
Whilst Levinas' 'ethics of an encounter' helps to provide a broad framework of how we might approach accessing young children's views, a large array of ethical dilemmas remain. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address ethical considerations such as the issue of power, consent, confidentiality and protection, however, several authors suggest that participatory approaches to research with children are a means of conferring respect and contributing to ethical practice (Thomas and O'Kane, 1998; Alderson, 2001). Alderson argues, 'To involve children more directly in research can rescue them from silence and exclusion, and from being represented, by default, as passive objects' (2001: 142). For this reason, research which seeks to access young children's perspectives is increasingly making use of participatory methods.

**Methods of Accessing Young Children's Views**

Perhaps one of the most well-known approaches to accessing the views of children under the age of five is the 'Mosaic Approach' devised by Alison Clark and Peter Moss (Clark and Moss, 2001; 2005; Clark et al., 2005) and inspired by the work of the Italian preschools of Reggio Emilia. This framework was developed with two- to four-year-olds as a means of evaluating early childhood services and designing nursery spaces. The approach 'plays to children's strengths rather than to adults' (Clark et al., 2005: 47) by encouraging children to communicate their views through a combination of participatory methods such as taking photos, map-making and child-led tours alongside more traditional research tools of observation and interviewing. The desire to play to children's strengths is part of a methodological debate concerning the question of whether researchers need to devise ‘child-friendly’ methods to ascertain children's views (Alanen, 1988; Solberg, 1996; Christensen and James, 2000; Punch, 2002).

*Child-friendly Methods?*

There is a tension between researchers who call for the use of innovative or adapted research techniques that are developmentally appropriate to the age of
the participating child (for example Boyden and Ennew, 1997) and others who argue that there is no need for a specific set of child-friendly methods (Christensen and James, 2000). Punch (2002) argues that it is not difficult to argue that research with a 5-year-old is different from research with a teenager or adult, but developmental distinctions should be used critically as competencies vary and are socially and culturally located, rather than universal. She suggests that what is needed in research with children, as in research with adults, are ‘participant friendly’ rather than ‘child-friendly’ methods (Punch, 2002). Similarly, Christensen and James (2000) argue that the methods chosen should reflect the particularities of the persons involved, should be appropriate to the cultural context and appropriate to the research questions.

**Methods Used with Young Children**

Punch (2002) argues that it is prudent to recognise that children are not a homogenous group and that children’s preferences for different methods vary as do their competencies and ways of communicating. This has led many researchers to use a combination of participatory methods that recognise the different ‘voices’ or languages of children (Rinaldi, 2001). Clark and colleagues’ (2003) review of children under five years old participating in research in Denmark and England found that four broad types of method are commonly used: observation and ethnographic approaches; traditional consultation techniques; structured activities; and multi-sensory methods.

**Observation and Ethnographic Approaches**

According to the ‘new social studies of childhood’ ethnographic methods allow children a ‘more direct voice’ and ‘participation in the production of data’ (James and Prout, 1990: 9) because children control what they do, when and with whom (Tudge and Hogan, 2005). Ethnographic research takes place in the natural settings of people’s everyday lives and involves an extended period of fieldwork. It aims to offer an in-depth understanding of the way people live and work and the culture in which they do so by providing ‘thick’ descriptions (Geertz, 1993) and by paying particular attention to the motives, emotions, and perspectives of those studied. Ethnographic methods include direct first-hand
observation including participant observation, as well as research conversations with different levels of formality from interviews to small talk.

An ethnographic framework can enable researchers to conduct research with children who may not use verbal modes of communication. Traditionally babies, pre-verbal toddlers, children with communication difficulties, or children who prefer to communicate in non-verbal ways have been excluded from participation in research (Davis and Watson, 2000; 2001; Corker and Davis, 2001; Alderson, 2008). However, Davis et al. argue:

...we are all capable of participating with babies and young children because participation is about developing respectful relationships ... a gap in speaking skills does not automatically mean a child also lacks comprehension skills. (2006: 4)

Flewitt’s (2005; 2006) longitudinal ethnography of three-year-olds' multimodal communicative practices combined video, audio and written methods to provide various avenues to represent the multiple, sometimes conflicting perspectives of different participants. By focusing on the range of strategies children use to express meaning, including talk, body movement, gesture and gaze, the research provided a means of challenging language-biased approaches to research by 'supporting multimodal expressions of meaning rather than "pathologizing"...silence' (Flewitt, 2006: 46)

However, although ethnographic methods convey a rich description of children’s lives they rely on an adult perspective and are therefore inferential, partial and partisan. Critical and postmodern approaches to ethnography attempt to make explicit the power relations between the researcher and those studied, and to uncover the subjective nature of the ethnographic account by developing diverse forms for presenting ethnographic research such as ‘polyphonic texts’ that represent multiple and conflicting voices, rather than a singular ‘expert’ narrative (Clifford, 1988).
Observational research may be more short-term than ethnography. Observation is a traditional method often used when trying to understand the abilities, needs and interests of young children (Clark et al., 2003). There are many different types of observational methods including direct non-participant observation and structured observation techniques. However, these have been criticised by many researchers for the way in which these methods can ‘objectify’ children and because they are premised on modernist, scientific discourses (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2000).

Participant observation is a more favoured approach in participatory research with young children because the researcher seeks to join in with the activities as a familiar person whilst observing and recording the interactions of participants and interpreting actions and the contexts in which they occur. Several researchers (such as Mauthner, 1997; Carr, 2000; Brooker, 2001) argue that the advantage of participant observation is that ‘part of the agency can be shared with the child’ and this reduces the power of the researcher (Clark et al., 2003: 30). However, the researcher needs to be aware of the limitations of observation. Postmodern understandings of observation suggest that we can never observe children in a fixed and final way and that all observational accounts are a social and linguistic construction containing possible contradictions and provisional ‘truths’ (MacNaughton, 2005).

*Traditional Consultation Methods*

Consultation methods such as interviews and focus groups have traditionally been used with adults but have also been used with children in participatory research, although most commonly in gathering the views of older children. Brooker (2001) identifies some of the common assumptions researchers might have about young children as interviewees: they are prone to an acquiescence response bias, are more inclined to say ‘don’t know’; are easily distressed; and are over-literal in interpreting the wording of questions (Powney and Watts, 1987; Breakwell, 1995). Other concerns include: children may become monosyllabic (Tizard and Hughes, 1984); and they may try to ‘second guess’ what adults hope they will say (Gollop, 2000).
However, these assumptions have been contested by a number of researchers who argue that ‘the limitations to young children’s competence as respondents are generally the limitations of those who interview them’ (Brooker, 2001: 164). For example, Roberts (2000) questions whether children are any more suggestible than adults, and Spencer and Flin’s (1990) research into children’s ability to provide factual evidence in court, concluded that even the youngest children can recall and describe events and situations as accurately as older witnesses. Young children can comment meaningfully about their experiences, thoughts and feelings when questioned appropriately (Robinson, 1987; Oakley, 1994; Brooker, 2001) and when the researcher recognises that the interview is a process of mutual shaping (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Morison et al., 2000). Clark and Moss (2001) describe how they have used ‘child conferencing’, an informal yet structured interview method, to ascertain three-year-old’s views of their outdoor play space. However, Clark (2004) acknowledges that not all children are interested in talking in this way and that for some children research conversations are best conducted ‘on the move’.

Brooker (2001) argues that the researcher also needs to adopt strategies that enable young children to ‘talk freely’ and reveal their own agenda. For example, Evans and Fuller (1996) devised a method of using role-play telephones linked to a tape recorder into which nursery children entered voluntarily as part of their play. Toys and puppets have also been used as prompts to engage children in research conversations (David, 1992; Brown, 1998; Bosisto and Howard, 1999). Calam et al. (2000) have developed computer assisted interviews to help children with learning and/or communication difficulties. Three-way interaction is established between the child, the computer and the supporting adult. This method makes use of images, sound, speech and video and can be tailored to the child’s interests.

Several researchers advocate the use of group interviews or focus groups to ascertain the views of young children (Lewis, 1992; Mauthner, 1997; Carr, 2000; Eder and Fingerson, 2003). As with all methods there are advantages and disadvantages to this approach. Lewis (1992) argues that group talk may be less stilted and may elicit responses of greater breadth and depth. Children
may feel less intimidated because when children have the support of their peers it may diffuse the normal adult-child power relations (James, 1993; Morrow and Richards, 1996) and because group interviews can build on familiar institutional practices such as ‘Circle Time’ (Mauthner, 1997). However, since they are dependent on words certain members may dominate whilst others may be inhibited from participating (Bragg, 2007).

**Structured Activities**

A number of task-based activities have been developed by researchers including role-play, the use of projective techniques and ranking exercises. Alderson asserts that play methods ‘can enhance children’s research imaginations’ (2001: 147). For example, Miller (1997) describes how playing ‘let’s pretend’ games have involved young children in planning improvements in playgrounds and nurseries. Several researchers discuss using role-play to help infant school children explore their experiences in a de-personalised way (Miller, 1997; Finch, 1998; Cousins, 1999; Bragg, 2007; 2007b).

Some researchers have explored the use of vignettes (Hill, 1997; Barter and Renold, 2000) and other projective methods such as word association games and story or sentence completion exercises (Morrow, 1998; 1999; Carr, 2000; Dulamdary, 2007). Vignettes are short stories or scenarios, usually about imaginary characters in problematic situations. MacNaughton (2003) combined the use of vignettes with persona dolls to elicit four- and five-year-old children's understandings of gender, race and class. Dickens et al. (2004) argue that some children are more comfortable expressing their views this way rather than in response to direct questioning. However, Barter and Renold (2000) argue that there is a theoretical limitation in the use of vignettes because of the distance between the vignette and social reality. If children articulate their views of a situation portrayed in the vignette how representative is this of their actual perspective? For that reason, Barter and Renold (2000) suggest that vignettes may not be useful as a stand alone technique.

Ranking exercises have also been used as participatory methods. For example, happy or sad faces enable young children to demonstrate how much they
like/dislike a situation or activity (Gadd and Cable, 2000; Brooker, 2001). However, some researchers argue that these methods run the risk of being tokenistic if this is the only way for children to express their opinions (Clark et al., 2003) and because they tend to deal with a narrow range of issues (Bragg, 2007).

**Multi-Sensory Methods**
In recent years methods which rely solely on verbal and written competence and ‘provide limited access to the emotional and symbolic aspects of children’s experiences and media-related modes of expression’ have been criticised (Bragg, 2007: 36). Consequently a range of multi-sensory methods such as arts activities, the use of cameras, audio recordings, child-led tours and mapmaking have been developed which shift the balance away from the written or spoken word (Clark et al., 2003) and potentially allow a wider range of children to participate in research (Davis et al., 2000).

Drawings and other arts-based activities have been used to ascertain young children’s views and gain insights into their experiences (Williams et al., 1989; Punch, 2002; Christensen, 2004). The advantage of art is that it can be used to capture more abstract concepts, experiences or phenomena (Szto et al., 2005). Drawing is a popular medium that many children are familiar with and frequently engage in at nursery and school (Mauthner, 1997). However, Barker and Weller (2003) argue that drawings may be popular with some children and inappropriate with others. Further, individuals’ perceptions of their ability to draw may limit what they depict (Backett and Alexander, 1991). The use of drawings needs to be considered carefully as it is easy to misinterpret such information (Thomas and Silk, 1990; Lange-Kuttner and Edelstein, 1995). Barker and Weller (2003) argue that it is necessary to discuss the drawing with the child to ensure that the drawing comes closer to representing the child’s meaning and interpretation, rather than that of the researcher.

Photography is another visual method which yields data requiring further discussion and interpretation with the participating child. In the *Spaces to Play Project* (Clark and Moss, 2005) three- and four-year-olds, including children with
speech and language delay, were given single-use cameras and asked to ‘take photographs of what is important’ in the outdoor areas of their early years settings. Kaplan et al. (2007) argue that photographs can stimulate conversations in the data generation and analysis stages and have the potential to engage children in a meaningful way, not just as subjects of research, but as researchers or co-researchers. Like drawings, cameras enable children to control how they represent themselves and provide an emic perspective (Booth and Booth, 2003; Gabhainn and Sixsmith, 2006).

Visual methods elicit a range of views and uncover a plurality of meanings that challenge literal and simplistic approaches to ascertaining children’s perspectives. Kaplan et al. (2007) highlight the fluidity between a photograph’s potential for realism and expressionism and argue that this inherent duality raises questions about slippery concepts such as ‘perspective’ and ‘voice’, which arguably, remain more hidden in other forms of data. Bragg (2007) argues that photographs may give access to unconscious aspects of responses providing valuable data, however this might also be seen as intrusive and thus ethically dubious. Other potential difficulties arising from photography include: gathering ‘negative’ images that an institution might not want publicised (Bragg, 2007); not every child may feel confident or comfortable with this method (Barker and Weller, 2003); and ethical dilemmas concerning confidentiality, consent and ownership of the data. Prosser (1992) argues that the researcher needs to establish guidelines about how images are to be used at the time and afterwards.

Other multi-sensory methods include guided tours and mapmaking. These methods have been adapted from PRA as a means to enable non-literate communities to articulate their local knowledge of an area and contribute to environmental planning. In child-led tours young children take the researcher on a guided walk of their environment such as their pre-school, local museum or neighbourhood (Hart, 1997; Adams and Ingham, 1998; Clark and Moss, 2001; Weier 2004). They can control the direction of the tour but also how the experience is recorded, through taking photographs, making maps and audio recordings. Clark (2004) argues that the physicality and mobility of this
technique means that it lends itself to being used by young children. However, the nature of this method means that some children may be excluded from participating fully. For example, in a research study I participated in one child who used a wheelchair was unable to access certain parts of the school during his tour due to the restrictions of the building. Hill (2005) cautions researchers to consider how method choices may exclude the viewpoints of certain children.

**Methods of Analysis**

Several authors assert that the active participation of children as research participants is much less evident in the stages of analysis, report writing and dissemination than in the process of data generation (Coad and Lewis, 2004; Gabhainn and Sixsmith, 2006). Indeed Mayall (1994) argues that it is the stage of analysis where power differentials are most clearly experienced. There is a tension between those who assume that only trained adult researchers have the ability to analyse data because this requires types of conceptual and theoretical knowledge that children, or lay people, do not usually possess (Mayall, 1994; Harden et al., 2000), and those who believe that for research to be truly participatory children need to contribute to each stage of the process including the interpretation and analysis of data (Thomas and O’Kane, 1998; Christensen, 2004; Sinclair, 2004).

Although some researchers cite examples of children being involved in analysis and reporting (for example Alderson, 2001; Kellett, 2005; Coad and Evans, 2008) this occurs in research conducted with older children, typically over the age of nine or ten. In research with young children the key issue is the distinction between ‘commenting on or verifying findings’ (Coad and Lewis, 2004) and conducting some method of data analysis. For example in the Mosaic Approach there are two stages: in stage one the children and adults gather data; in stage two the data is pieced together by adults and children for dialogue, reflection and interpretation (Clark and Moss, 2001). Whilst the Mosaic Approach places a strong emphasis on listening to children’s interpretations of data and using these reflections as a springboard for affecting
change, the children are not involved in formal analysis of any kind. However, there is very little discussion of adult researchers conducting systematic analysis of the data either in research conducted according to the Mosaic Approach (for example, Clark and Moss, 2001; Waller, 2006). It would seem that there is a tendency to forgo formal analytic methods and instead to construct lists of themes and highlight the statements of children with minimal interpretation by the researcher. Perhaps formal data analysis is minimised out of fear that children’s perspectives will be truncated by the adult-researcher’s conceptualisations. In future multi-method research with children under the age of five there is a need for researchers to be explicit about this stage of the research process, indicating what analytical frameworks have been chosen and why, as well as describing who is involved in analysis, when, how, and to what extent.

Having reviewed a variety of methods of research and analysis in participatory research with young children I now consider the (im-)possibility of accessing and representing children’s views.

The (Im-)possibility of Accessing Views

Researchers working in the field of childhood studies as well as those from a social constructionist position argue that is it impossible to claim to fully access children's views as children's voices are 'subjected to the mediating effects that all forms of social analysis entail' (James, 2007: 268). Children's views can only ever be partially and inferentially accessed whatever the methodology or method. Moreover, socio-cultural theories have argued that research conducted with children must be ecologically valid as context is vital in accessing children’s views, experiences and competencies (Vygotsky, 1978; 1987; Donaldson, 1978; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Tudge et al., 1996; Dunn, 1998; Hogan, 2005). Consequently researchers who seek to access children’s views need to avoid abstracting children from their everyday environments, should develop methods that reflect children's competencies and preferred ways of communicating, and should acknowledge the limits of their project.
Groundwater-Smith and Downes (1999) argue that children's voices are mediated through our research methodologies. Methods are fundamentally embedded within ontological and epistemological frameworks (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003) and therefore children's views are always filtered through the research design and the interpretative mechanisms employed (Groundwater-Smith and Downs, 1999). Whether we take a participatory approach or not, the methods of data collection and analysis we choose have the potential to silence, patronize or misrepresent children. Participatory methods may offer the possibility of eliciting young children's situated and diverse perspectives however it is impossible to treat participatory methods as if they are atheoretical and capable of being used impartially. Nevertheless a participatory approach is aspirational in its attempt to access children's views through a methodological process that assumes co-construction, interdependency and methodological equality between adults and children. This is only possible when researchers refuse to gloss over the considerable complexities in finding ways of accessing children's views and acknowledge that there is only so much we can know about the Other.

The (Im-)possibility of Representing Views

Another issue, central to the question of children's views, is the problem of representation. Is it possible to interpret the words and communicative behaviours of young children as an accurate representation of their meanings? Lincoln and Denzin (2000) describe this problem as a "crisis of representation", arguing that there can never be a final accurate representation of what is meant or said because researchers do not have direct experience to another's experience. Consequently we can only ever produce different textual representations of different views and experiences. They pose the questions:

Who is the Other? Can we ever hope to speak authentically of the experience of the Other, or an Other? And if not, how do we create a social science that includes the Other? (2000: 1050)
Of course, these questions apply not just to research with young children, but across qualitative research as a whole. Issues of representation may be more obvious in research with babies or young children, but they may not be inherently more problematic than any other research which seeks to include the voice of the Other. This is not to suggest that representation of children's views is unproblematic. Even when we directly report children's words we cannot claim to accurately represent their voices because the process of representation always involves selection and interpretation (Clifford, 1988). One solution to this problem is that we should give up positivist ideals of textual and researcher authority and instead become reflexively aware of the limited portraits we are crafting in our research presentations. There should be an emphasis on reflexivity and 'making ourselves visible in our texts' (Lincoln and Denzin, 2000: 1053).

**Reflexive Representations**

Reflexivity reminds us that meanings are made not found in social situations (Mauthner et al., 1998) and that the adult researcher, child participants, research methods and data are interdependent and interconnected (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). Whilst it may be possible to access children's views (albeit impartially) using methods that listen to children's different voices and body languages it is impossible to claim that our representations of children's perspectives present the whole and only truth. Rather, our methods and representations are socially constructed and require methodologies that reflect the multiple, shifting and situated nature of children's views and experiences. Warming (2005) argues that we should replace an illusionary ambition of representation with endeavours of 'reflexive re-presentations' that acknowledge the perspectival and constructed character of the presented and that seek to uncover our position within the research account. She appeals to Richardson's (1994; 2000) metaphor of the crystal as multi-faceted, complex, partial and changing to suggest that our re-presentations of children's own presentations such as their narratives, drawings and photographs, could present different, not necessarily congruent, perspectives on the same subject.
Ruddock et al. argue, ‘however much we convince ourselves that we are presenting children's authentic voice, we are likely to be refracting their meanings through the lens of our own interests and concerns’ (1996: 177). What children say depends on what they are asked, how they are asked it, who is invited to participate, and then, in turn, on the values and assumptions of the researcher or audience interpreting their ‘voices’ (Connolly, 1997). Consequently, the research accounts we construct need to be reflexively aware of the inter-subjectivity between the researcher, participants and institutions in the research process (Pink, 2001). They should also reflect the ambiguity of the child’s voice (Komulainen, 2007) and be moderate in their claims to represent young children’s perspectives (Cook and Hess, 2007).

**Conclusion**

This paper has discussed the possibility of accessing and representing the views of children under the age of five. It has briefly examined the contested notions of children's 'competence' and what we might mean by children's 'views'. It has questioned an essentialist understanding of these concepts as the inherent property of individuals, and instead has argued that children's views might be accessed through a process of interdependent meaning making. It has also challenged the assumption that research with young children is any more problematic than research with older children or adults as all research which seeks to access the views of others is subject to the pitfalls of representation. Issues of representation go hand-in-hand with issues of responsibility and value. Accessing and representing the views of children involves welcoming the Other, being respectful of difference and not seeking to grasp the Other. Other responsibilities involve: including the Other in our wider research processes, for example through participatory methodologies; accepting meaning-making rather than truth-finding; and a commitment to continual reflexivity.

The paper has also discussed the potential and limitations of participatory methods to access children's views. It has critically examined several methods of participatory research and analysis with children under the age of five and
suggested that a combination of methods that reflect children’s multi-modal communicative practices offer the possibility of accessing children’s diverse views and 'languages'. However, whilst these methods aim to offer children greater participation in the production and interpretation of data than traditional research methods, they can only ever provide inferential, partial and partisan reflections of children’s perspectives. Participatory research offers the possibility of revealing subjugated forms of knowledge and accessing silenced voices, and yet it can never directly capture children’s perspectives or lived experiences. Therefore, it is impossible for the researcher to adequately represent children's views and experiences as they are inevitably filtered through the author's interpretation and research account. Such a realisation demands that the researcher reject the idea of an essential, authentic representation of children’s views in favour of multi-faceted, reflexive re-presentations of what is important and meaningful in young children’s lives.
References


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