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From listening to understanding: Interpreting young children’s perspectives

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From listening to understanding: Interpreting young children’s perspectives

As young children’s perspectives are increasingly "taken seriously” across disciplines, the pursuit of authentic and ethical research with young children has become the subject of recent discussion. Much of this relates to listening authentically to (or understanding) young children, focusing on research design, ethics, theory, methods and data analysis. However, the literature on data analysis provides insufficient guidance to help researchers move from listening to young children to truly understanding them. To illustrate the deficit, this paper draws on data from a study of young (two- to five-year-old) children’s perspectives on their learning. The argument is supported with a discussion of the challenges of analysing data. The paper concludes by suggesting how a robust theorisation of the key concepts of a study is one way all adults can move from “adultist” assumptions towards more valid understandings of young children’s perspectives.
Listening to children - all of us want to, but few really succeed (Delfos 2000, 229).

Introduction
The importance of quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) to achieve better outcomes throughout the lifespan is increasingly recognised by empirical research (Sylva et al. 2014, Shonkoff, Boyce, and McEwen 2009). Yet it is vital that efforts to improve the quality of ECEC are guided by the experiences and perspectives of the very people whose lives we seek to improve: young children themselves. This section lists some of the reasons why their perspectives are considered important.

Young children’s perspectives are an essential consideration for democratic representation of all citizens in a society (Broström 2012, Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson, and Hundeide 2010). This is reflected in the uniqueness of their perspectives on matters that affect them, such as where, how much and with whom they play (Einarsdottir 2005, Rogers and Evans 2008). Representation of children’s perspectives has been recognised internationally since 1989 in the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, particularly a child’s right to “express [her/his] views freely in all matters affecting [her/him]”, with “the views of the child being given due weight” (Article 12).

As a unique social structure, childhood is worthy of research in and of itself, as well as for the insights it provides about the other social structures (Qvortrup 2002). Young children are arguably crucial informants for this research, and thus their perspectives ought to be valued (James and Prout 1997).

Researching young children’s perspectives is also an act of receptivity, which is crucial for the quality of educative relationships in ECEC (Rinaldi 2006). The capacity of educators to listen to young children’s views is pivotal to generating curriculum within the dominant child-centred approach (Clark 2005). This approach has been shown to improve educational and social outcomes throughout life (Coley, Lombardi, and Sims 2015, Sylva et al. 2014), but is reliant on adults listening to, understanding and acting upon young children’s perspectives in sustained and meaningful ways (Rinaldi 2006).
Finally, there has been a historical tendency to discount the perspectives of young children that continues today and for which research must compensate (Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson, and Hundeide 2010). A recent survey of 46 countries showed that policy-makers and researchers around the world ascribe little or no weight to young children’s perspectives (Powell et al. 2011). Researchers believed young children are not competent reporters of their own experience, despite recent research (Colliver and Fleer 2016, Harcourt 2012, Rogers and Evans 2008) indicating otherwise. Due to this historical underrepresentation, there is a moral imperative to prioritise young children’s perspectives.

Although there are many reasons why they are important, researching young children’s perspectives ethically and authentically can be difficult. The next section reviews the existing literature about conducting research with children. This literature can be divided into five stages of research: (i) design, (ii) ethical considerations, (iii) theory and methodology, (iv) methods and (v) data analysis. Although the review is not exhaustive, it suggests that the guidance available in current literature may not be insufficient to shift researchers from listening to children to truly understanding them. That is, when data from young children is difficult to analyse, the literature offers more guidance on “listening to” rather than understanding them.

(i) Guidance on research design

The literature provides some guidance for designing research with young children. Scrutinising Article 12 of the UNCRC, Lundy (2007, 933) argues that researchers need to give children’s perspectives more than a tokenistic consideration, ensuring designs incorporate “space”, “audience” and meaningful “influence”; to let children express themselves freely (without judgment) on matters that adults can act upon. Incorporating “space” may include allowing sufficient time for children to trust and confide in the researcher. A “familiarisation phase” can help young children to trust the researcher(s) and to explore “techniques that respect their preferred methods of responding and interacting” (Mayall 2008, 103), particularly for sensitive topics like emotions (Mortari 2011).
(ii) **Guidance on ethical considerations**

The issue of how to conduct research with children ethically is arguably the most widely canvassed in the literature. Western children’s perspectives and wishes have historically been “seen but not heard” through centuries of disempowerment, forced labour and disregard (Aries 1963). For research today, power imbalances manifest in at least three ways. First, the *researcher* holds power in scrutinising the actions of the *researched*, often judging these in relation to variables and scales (Cannella 1999). Second, the *adult* holds power over the *child* in multiple ways, as a gatekeeper of knowledge about the world and its processes, typically controlling more resources than the child (Burman 2008). Third, within educational settings, *teachers* and other staff hold power over *student* subjects, deciding what is taught and how students demonstrate adequate learning (Bradbury 2013). To minimise power differences in research, the literature recommends being sensitive to young children’s signs of dissent to participate (Dockett, Einarsdóttir, and Perry 2012), actively deferring to children’s choices (taking the “least adult role” in interactions with them; Mandell 1991). Researchers must obtain young children’s authentic consent to research participation, acknowledging socio-historical roles wherein children have not been allowed to dissent (Flewitt 2005, Harcourt and Einarsdottir 2011, Lahnman 2008, Valentine 1999). While it may be difficult to inform children of this socio-political context, implications of their participation can be explained in a meaningful way (Elbers 2004, Harcourt and Conroy 2005).

Mayall (1996) made the critical distinction of researching *with*—rather than *on*—children, acknowledging their agency in informing the research. This distinction forms part of the orientation of taking children’s perspectives “seriously” (Brooker 2011), rather than seeing them as cute, vulnerable or immature, as many European cultures have. Much literature also advocates for research *for* children, directly benefitting child participants (Rogers and Evans 2008, Thomson 2008).

(iii) **Guidance on theory and methodology**

A study’s theoretical framework determines how it views the world (and, by implication, children), and how it will obtain knowledge about it (Carter and Little 2007). As such, scholars advocate viewing young children “from an additive rather than deficit perspective” through a methodology that provides ample opportunities for
their full and capable expression (Broström 2006, 228). Children can fully and meaningfully contribute to the whole research process, such as in the Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss 2001), where children and adults alike collect artefacts and stories using a range of techniques including photos, drawings, in-depth and group interviews. The flexibility of a methodology to employ a range of tools is thought to facilitate *listening* to young children’s perspectives (Gallacher and Gallagher 2008, Pascal and Bertram 2009).

(iv) Guidance on methods

As well as the general approach to research (methodology), the specific tools, techniques or methods suitable for young children’s participatory research is covered in depth in the literature. For example, the literature shows that when participating children draw, they provide more information than if they were to discuss or re-enact an event (Clark and Moss 2001). Non-verbal prompts (such as video) enhance children’s recall (Salmon, Roncolato, and Gleitzman 2003). Young children’s use of child-friendly video cameras is gaining wider popularity as a rich and accessible method (Haggerty 2011, Thomson 2008). However, researchers have pointed out that “participatory” methods themselves do not necessarily provide direct access to children’s views (Bird, Colliver, and Edwards 2014, 11), but rather that an ethnographic approach strings the data together to make sense of their views (Dupree, Bertram, and Pascal 2001, Gallacher and Gallagher 2008).

Even traditional “interrogation and answer” interview formats can be problematic. Typically intimidating for children, they entrench the archaic assumption that children are less knowledgeable than adults (Hviid 2008). Instead, non-normative, open questions elicit more information more accurately (Powell and Snow 2007, Waterman, Blades, and Spencer 2004). Moore (2014) confesses how interrogatory interviews were her subconscious default, giving her control over child interviewees yet stymying their authentic expression. Likewise, Lahman (2008) advises researchers to let go of their agenda to fully understand “the child”, allowing children to drive the data collection. The question of how best to understand young children’s authentic expression is prominent in data analysis.
(v) Guidance on data analysis

As noted in the previous section, simply speaking and listening to young children with an “open attitude” (Broström 2012, 263, Haynes and Murriss 2013, Waller and Bitou 2011) can provide rich, and accessible, data (e.g., Harcourt 2012). However, attending to merely the linguistic at the expense of non-verbal, bodily communication limits research’s capacity to fully understand children’s perspectives (Akin 2011), as actions can speak louder and be more important than words (Raittila 2012). For example, walking away from questions can speak volumes about how (un)interesting or (un)comfortable research is for participating children (Dockett, Einarsdóttir, and Perry 2012, Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir 2015). The body is central to young children’s experience (Gallacher and Gallagher 2008), and scholars (e.g., Taylor 2014, 407) recommend transcribing children’s “mirrored bodily actions, repetitive gestures, exchanges of glances” to form a more holistic picture of children’s communication. For example, Klerfelt (2007) categorised children’s gestures into deictic, iconic, beat and metaphoric, sketching out ways different studies could determine meaning reliably. Yet it is difficult to ensure interpretations are consistent, as non-verbal communication is interpreted according to researchers’ “common sense”, which is socially and culturally informed and thus can vary widely (Gallacher and Gallagher 2008, Haynes and Murriss 2013).

Interpretations are informed by our common sense. Social research has a long history of trying to understand (“listening to”) children using adult common sense and assumptions (Elbers 2004, Hviid 2008, Smith, Duncan, and Marshall 2005). The study described in this paper gives examples of how these assumptions impeded comprehension of young children’s perspectives on learning through play. Even though literature (e.g., Harcourt 2011, Paley 1986/2007) advises consulting children throughout data analysis, examples here suggest this may not be possible when adults are unaware that their assumptions can impede understanding children’s perspectives. Through examples of ways researcher assumptions can prevent effective data analysis, this paper offers preliminary guidance about navigating the complex terrain of differing perspectives in order to understand children’s voices.
The current study

The study presented in this paper formed part of a larger investigation of family members’, educators’ and young children’s perspectives on learning through play. The 28 participating children were aged two to five, of urban, middle-class socio-economic status. Ethics clearance was obtained from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and Australian Catholic University’s Human Research Ethics Committee. All ethical considerations discussed earlier (informed and ongoing consent, child-chosen pseudonyms, familiarisation phase, etc.) were observed. The researcher attempted to take “the least adult role” in interactions with children (Mandell 1991) and refrain from employing “adultist assumptions” to understand them (Valentine 1999, 142). However, data analysis became difficult because the researcher was blind to such assumptions until key concepts were retheorised.

The study used a method known as video-stimulated recall dialogues (VSRD; Morgan 2007), inviting participants to record play experiences over several months using handheld Flip™ video cameras, and later initiating dialogues about the learning that participants saw when viewing videos. Videos were coded inductively using Nvivo™, creating analytical categories suggested by the data (Shank 2006) rather than by predetermined concepts (Gibson and Brown 2009). This process was unproblematic and productive for the data from educators and family members (see Collier 2016). For example, one educator commented on a video she made of several four-year-olds playing Lego®:

> The reason that I chose this [play episode to record] was because there was a lot of dialogue … I instantly thought, ‘Wow, this is such a great example of the social learning that’s happening there’ (Tarnı, 0:55#1)

Comments such as these were easily coded into types of learning (e.g., “social”). This was because the educators and researcher shared the view that the physical acts in the play (e.g., building Lego® constructions) led to an acquisition of knowledge (e.g., how to negotiate, which were considered a form of social learning). However, as the following section will show, this data analysis process was problematic and unproductive when used to analyse children’s perspectives.
Findings

Young children’s perspectives on learning through play were vastly different from conventional adult perspectives. For example, four-year-old Saule commented on a video of her playing Goldilocks with a felt diorama of a doll in a bed.

![Image of Saule playing with a felt diorama](image)

*Figure 1: Saule’s felt Goldilocks diorama*

[Researcher:] What are you learning there [pointing to the video of the felt diorama]?
[Saule:] Um.. I’m learning that I could sleep by myself.
[Researcher:] Ah, you’re learning how to sleep by yourself! That’s clever. [Saule nods]
[Saule:] I have my own bed [presumably in reference to home]
[Researcher:] Do you? Do you always sleep by yourself or sometimes with Mum?
[Saule:] Um, I always sleep with my mum.
[Researcher:] But you’re learning how to sleep by yourself? [Saule nods]
[Saule:] But my bed is a cot [as opposed to the adult bed in the diorama] (Saule, 1:20#62)

Intuitively, Saule seemed to believe that playing with a doll (who represented an independent Goldilocks) allowed her to learn to sleep without her mother. However,
data analysis could not capture this. Inductive data analysis of the 772 children’s comments (e.g., “learning how to sleep by oneself”) resulted in as many categories as there were play scenarios. For example, when viewing videos of himself playing instruments (Figure 2), Davis (three years) stated he was learning “the strumming … Putting your fingers somewhere, on the chords” (1:29#45). The inductive coding used in data analysis accounted for this as “learning how to strum” – a learning category with only one example.

Figure 2 – Davis putting his fingers on the chords
Rather than resulting in broad learning categories such as “social”, “physical” or “cognitive” learning, data analysis yielded an unmanageable number of categories that provided little insight about what children as a stakeholder group thought about learning through play. Maddock (2006) alluded to this data analysis process as “mechanistic” because it relied on categorising learning as “the acquisition of specific knowledge, skills, concepts and understandings” in her ethnography of children’s learning agendas in the home. As a researcher conducting this analysis, I had little awareness that I had an acquisition model of learning (Sfard 1998), a model that assumes learning happens as the result of a behaviour; the dominant Western model of learning (De Houwer, Barnes-Holmes, and Moors 2013). In this model, the learner individually acquires new knowledge after and as a result of an activity. Therefore, comments such as Saule’s and Davis’ were non sequiturs: I could not accept that Davis was learning to strum the ukulele because he was already evidencing the ability to strum – because I had assumed the ability would be the result of learning. The acquisition model of learning also assumes learning is individual and not conferred to others unless they also engage in the activity. I assumed Saule could not be learning to sleep by herself because she herself was not engaging in the activity of sleeping by herself; She could not acquire learning as the result of an imaginary character’s behaviour. Without sufficient guidance from the literature about how to understand different perspectives to my own, initial data analysis failed. The initial – and convenient – conclusion to arrive at was that children conflated process with product.

Moving from listening to understanding

Despite being analysed seven times over 18 months, data from the study evaded straightforward analysis. It was only when the main concepts of the study—learning, perspectives and play—were rigorously re-theorised (in this instance, using cultural-historical theory) that the researcher’s entrenched assumptions could be challenged. It became apparent that assumptions differing from those of the children’s perspectives were preventing understanding what the young children were saying.

Retheorising key concepts

Cultural-historical theory sees learning as a process of participation rather than the product of acquisition (Sfard 1998). Thus, rather than engaging in an activity which
results in learning, learning is theorised as participation in “socio-cultural activity” (Rogoff 2003, 157), and the learning occurs as the activity occurs, rather than as a result of it. Retheorising learning as such explained children’s perspectives on their learning through play not as skills resulting from the activity (Maddock 2006), but as participation in cultural practices; practices such as playing the ukelele or sleeping by oneself. Children believed they were learning how to participate competently in cultural practices that surrounded them. Understanding this required a dramatic shift in the researcher’s model of learning, allowing all 772 comments to be re-categorised as the meaning play had for children: participating in cultural practices around them. Play restaged the cultural practices they saw around them. In each play example, this re-enactment was the aim of the game. The aim of the game in each play scenario appeared to provide direct insight into what children were learning about through their play.

In addition to learning, retheorising learning through play proffered even deeper understanding of their perspectives. For example, one of the four ways Vygotsky (1967/2004) saw children learning through play was through the emotionally evocative capacity of imagination. While we may know that the story of a horror movie is not real, the emotions they evoke in us – and physiological responses (sweaty palms, increased heart rate) – nonetheless are. Vygotsky (1978) also wrote about how imaginary play is the leading activity at Davis’ and Saule’s age, and this is because play allows children to experience emotions and satisfy desires they cannot satisfy in real life. These desires might be to experience what it is like to sleep without one’s mother, or to play the ukulele well (as did Davis’ idol – Elton John – the guitar). Retheorising this key concept provided a deeper understanding of what it might mean to learn “that I could sleep by myself” (Saule, 1:20#62). Saule could experience the mastery of the emotions required to sleep by oneself through the imaginary scenario of Goldilocks finding a bed “just the right size” (a cot).

While initial analysis yielded unmanageable numbers of categories of learning from the 772 comments, a retheorised understanding of learning through play and learning provided the “space” to understand young children’s perspectives in cultural-historical terms (Lundy 2007, 933). Using an “additive” view of children’s perspectives (Broström 2006, 228) meant uncovering the ways in which children’s perspectives were accurate (and the researcher’s assumptions inaccurate): a unique
take on Gallacher and Gallagher’s (2008, 512) advice for researchers to “proceed from a position of ignorance.” Not only did it dissolve the archaic view that young children are not competent reporters of their own experiences (Colliver and Fleer 2016), it opened up a new world of insight about what children understood about their own learning, surpassing the cumulative adult knowledge from over 50 years of research on the topic, which remains inconclusive (Lillard et al. 2013). The adult debate about whether children’s play leads to learning would arguably not be raging today if researchers had unpacked their own assumptions about learning to understand children’s perspectives on the debate earlier.

**Conclusion**

The intention of this paper narrating the shift from *listening* to *understanding* young children is not to undermine, but rather add to, the important literature related to researching young children. It wishes to underscore the value of researchers analysing young children’s data with a critical view of their own assumptions about key concepts. As Cook and Hess (2007, 44) argue, young children’s perspectives are “fragile”, and “can easily be crushed by adult [researchers] who cannot move from their own version of experience.” Because decades of sociological work have highlighted the “adultist assumptions” about children (Valentine 1999, 142), it may be equally important for researchers to challenge assumptions about a study’s key concepts, measures and scales (e.g., learning, wellbeing, rights, etc) when data analysis strives to *listen* to children but fails to *understand* them. “Methodological maturity” in research with children (Gallacher and Gallagher 2008) should include rigorous theorisation of the key concepts, scales, measures and assumptions to ensure they are not adultist. Doing so may yield an “open attitude” towards their perspectives (Broström 2012, 263). A “contextual intersubjectivity”, whereby the adult shifts her/his understanding towards that of children, is perhaps required to understand their voices (Fleer 2010, 16). This principle can be applied not just by researchers, but by all adults interacting with children.

Extending on Lundy’s (2007, 933) concept of “space” for children to express their views, this paper proposes that adults generously offer *conceptual* space around how the world is viewed, so that as a society we may move from striving to *listen* to young
children towards truly understanding them. As research continues to demonstrate that
the first five years of life are the most vital ones, understanding children well may be
the best thing we can do to improve our provision for this crucial period.

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