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## Abstract

This article offers a methodological contribution to the concept of children's voices and the ways of listening to them. Children's voices are studied in a narrative ethnographical research project in a school classroom. The authors follow children's voices from the level of classroom observation to an analysis on narrative data produced by the Storycrafting method and finally to a more reflexive analysis. By defining three interrelated analytical spaces, the study illustrates how voices are emergent, contingent on their social, discursive and physical environments and power relations, and constructed in reciprocal processes of telling and listening. Finally, the authors discuss the significance of reflexive listening to children's voices.

## Keywords

Children's voices, methodology, narrative ethnography, reflexive listening, school, Storycrafting

Children participate in society with their own voices. This idea, now accepted in most western societies, has given rise to a range of methodological developments in the field of childhood studies during the last two decades. Many studies investigate children's views, and research *with* children (see Christensen and James, 2008) is favoured. 'Giving voice to children', 'eliciting voices of children', or 'making children's voices heard' are parts of the agendas of many contemporary studies. These agendas have been valuable in many ways: new knowledge about children's lives in different environments has been created, and it has become possible to take a child's perspective on different societal issues such as well-being (see Crivello et al., 2009; Karlsson, 2009; Mayall, 2000). Children have been given representation in science, politics and public life (Prout, 2003: 22). However, some structures are not easy to change. For example, schools are resistant

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to change, and research has shown that most classrooms are still managed in a controlling way rather than in ways that support the autonomy of students (Reeve, 2009). Classrooms are dominated by the voices of educators (Myhill and Dunkin, 2005).

Recently, the issue of how we approach children's voices has been re-examined. James (2007) argues that researchers should be aware of how they select and how they represent children's voices in their studies, as well as being conscious of the complexity of the issues that frame what children say. St Pierre (2009) and Lather (2009) have drawn attention to the ways in which researchers link voices with authenticity, reality and truth (see also James, 2007: 267), for example, creating 'evidence' simply by quoting informants. In Komulainen's (2007) study, attention is drawn to the constructed nature of voices in relation to a study on disabled children. Lee (2008) challenges the simplistic and essential notions of voice and agency through an examination of children, adults and sleep.

Voices have been shown to be ambiguous: they are easily shaped by established ideas about the participants and the anticipated research results, and they can be *used* to prove what was going to be said anyway (see Mazzei, 2009; Spyrou, 2011). The prevailing idea of child competence may have given rise to research that strengthens its own starting point by noticing and repeating those active, agentic voices that are readily heard (see Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008; Lee, 2001; Spyrou, 2011: 159).

The recent theorizations of voice based on hybridity presented by Prout (2005) and Lee and Motzkau (2011) acknowledge the ambiguous nature of voice, aiming at a better capacity to represent the diversity and complexity of contemporary childhoods. Still, attention is drawn to the listening procedures, and many have called for new kinds of reflexivity in relation to research on children's voices (Komulainen, 2007; Spyrou, 2011: 162).

In this article we build on the notions of the ambiguous, complex and constructed nature of children's voices. We attempt to deepen the understanding of children's voices in the contexts of school and research. First, we observe an episode in a classroom where there is strict control over the children's voices. Next, we endeavour to open a children's perspective on the same episode by listening to their narratives. Finally, we turn attention to our own ways of listening and selecting voices during the research. The starting point is that what can be voiced, what can be heard and how voices are used are all deeply contingent on the discursive spaces available (Davies, 1993: 11; Gordon et al., 2000: 184, 202). Nevertheless, neither the spaces for voices nor the voices themselves can be understood as simply discursive. Instead, it becomes clear in the course of the article that voices are sites ('multiplicities', see Lee and Motzkau, 2011), where the discursive, the social and the material/physical intertwine.

## **Methodology and context of the study and description of the data**

Our study<sup>1</sup> is situated within the large framework of *narrative ethnography* (Gubrium and Holstein, 2008), where narratives and narrative practices are studied in relation to their narrative environment. We draw on existing ethnographical research on schools (Gordon et al., 2000; Skeggs, 2001) and studies of child perspective (Karlsson, 2012).

Accordingly, we combine a range of different ethnographical and narrative types of data. The aim is to build multiple perspectives (of children, teachers, researchers) on school and voice, without taking any voices out of their discursive, material, cultural or interactional context.

We use the Storycrafting method (Children are telling, 2012; Karlsson, 2000, 2009; Riihelä, 1991) as a narrative child perspective research method to reveal children's perspectives and elicit their voices. Since the 1990s, the Storycrafting method has been widely used in Finland and many other countries as a participatory tool in both research and in various educational and societal settings (Riihelä, 2009). The idea in the method is to provide an open, yet culturally familiar narrative space for children to tell about any issue they choose. During the narrative activity, there is no guidance or correction from the adult. The children have control over their own narratives. Storycrafting thus differs strikingly from the usual assignments given to children, both in school and in research, where adults are largely responsible for choosing the subjects and forms of the children's storytelling. The general instruction for Storycrafting is as follows:

Tell a story that you want.

I will write it down just like you tell it.

When the story is ready I will read it aloud.

And then if you want to, you can correct or make any changes. (Karlsson, 2005, 2009; Riihelä, 1991)

The empirical portion of the study was carried out as an ethnographical participant observation in a Finnish elementary school classroom. In Finland children start school at the age of seven, with the school year beginning in August and ending in early June. The fieldwork took place in a first grade class of a lower elementary school during the last three weeks of the school year in 2006. The research school was located in an average working-class/middle-class area in the Helsinki region. Of the 16 pupils in the class, 11 were boys and five were girls. The fieldwork included the researchers' participation in every school day according to the pupils' timetable. The field notes were written mostly by hand in a diary. Although in this article we draw mainly on our field notes and the Storycrafted narratives, we also reflect on our findings in other types of data, such as interviews, the school curriculum and informal conversations.

## **Analysing children's voices through different spaces of research**

In narrative ethnographical research (Gubrium and Holstein, 2008), narratives are examined in relation to their context and social circumstances. To make sense of children's narrative voices, we employed dialogic analysis of narratives (Riessman, 2002, 2008), taking into account the interactive production and performing of narrative. Our approach can be described as holistic, because in the end, all of the narratives in their entirety told on a specific day were examined in relation to their ethnographical context.

The analytical readings were guided by our interest in children's narrative voices as voices of *knowing* (Karlsson, 2012; Mayall, 2000). It is only in positions of power that a voice of knowing can be produced, whether observed in institutional practices, in peer relationships, or between categories of generation and gender (Alanen and Mayall, 2001; Foucault, 1980; Gore, 1995; Hoskin, 1990: 49). In the messy reality of school, there are multiple simultaneous discourses at work, shifting and crossing each other (Davies, 1993). Each of these discourses permits different positions of power and knowing. For example, the institutional power position of the teacher, legitimized through professional knowledge, exists simultaneously with ongoing peer interaction where other categories of knowledge and power positions may matter (see the following section). Within this article, we do not provide profound analyses of power per se. Nevertheless, an understanding of the dynamics between knowledge and power is crucial for our analysis of the emerging narrative voices of children and the conditions that define them.

Our analysis proceeded as a two-way process: we used ethnographical observations and interviews to make sense of the children's narrative voices, and with the information provided by the children's narratives, we returned to the ethnographical context. When reading and re-reading the material, we asked the following questions: What is the discursive, the social and the material/physical environment like? Who among the children or adults can use their voices? Whose voice counts as a voice of knowing? How is the emerging narrative related to power relations and control in the classroom?

The voices of children were analysed in three phases. The first phase was based on the ethnographical field notes on episodes around the spring festival preparations in the class. The episodes were structured as a narrative (see next section). The second phase was an analysis of the children's narratives. There we analysed four stories that children told in Storycrafting sessions held on the same day. In the third phase, we returned to the Storycrafted narratives for a reflexive analysis on four more stories told on the same day. Finally, we discuss the complexity of listening to children's voices in the classroom and in research, together with the implications of our findings.

In the course of the three phases of analysis explained above, we will move across three different kinds of analytical spaces: (1) the observational space, (2) the participatory space and (3) the reflexive space.

## **The classroom: Voices in the observational space**

In each section of this article, we are dealing with a single school day during our field-work, although we are looking at it from different perspectives. During that day the class being researched was preparing for their spring festival. The spring festival is the traditional close of the school year in all Finnish schools to which the children's families are invited. Part of the tradition is to have different kinds of musical performances. The class we observed was to take part in the spring festival by singing a choral work accompanied by instruments, meanwhile executing a short choreography. To put a decent performance together seemed to demand significant effort from the class teacher, while among the children, there was visible excitement about the forthcoming occasion.

The ethnographical narrative below is a result of an analytical reading of the field notes (see Coffey and Atkinson, 1996: 68) from which we have selected episodes that relate to children's voices and their social, discursive, and material/physical context.

At the beginning of the school day the teacher prepares the class for the spring festival rehearsal. She promises a special reward to those who behave well – *'stay focused on their own doings'*.<sup>2</sup> Later, when there is a lot of loud interaction among the children, the teacher reminds the class about the promised reward: *'Soon we'll see if everybody is losing their reward!'* With the third lesson, it's time for the class to proceed to the hall for the rehearsal.

*... There is a woman playing the piano, there is singing and playing, and the women [teachers] show what you must do. You must not fool around. You must sing 'in a loud voice', but not too loud!* (field notes)

The rehearsal starts with a long episode of getting organized: the adults tune instruments and arrange children in suitable groups for singing and dancing. The children are supposed to stand still, meanwhile suppressing any interest in their friends and the new environment. The focus of their attention seems to be the microphone. Two children are holding microphones in their hands, but other children also use the microphones, trying them out with short exclamations. Some of the boys especially make noises and repeatedly move away from their assigned places.

*Twenty minutes have gone by, and the mess is still not over. Threats are tossed at the children. The microphone seems irresistible, but you are still not allowed to say anything into it, but just hold it in your hand unused. ... Jani: 'Do we get the reward? I'm not going to get any!'* (field notes)

After the rehearsal, the teacher and the pupils return to their classroom. The teacher begins to talk about the rehearsal.

*Ville [one of the boys]: 'It's neat to say things into the mic.' Teacher: 'But it is not appropriate to say things when the performance is going on!' And the music teacher tells the children not to play with the instruments. The atmosphere becomes strained. It becomes obvious that not everyone is going to get the reward. Teacher: 'I'm not going to reward bad behaviour!'* (field notes)

Later, after lunch, the teacher gives the behaviour rewards to the children. Those who have behaved well are given lollipops. But just as the teacher said, there are also children who don't get lollipops because of their behaviour. They are nevertheless given a chance to improve their behaviour during the school day and earn a reward in the end. Finally, the teacher gives lollipops to the rest of the children, too.

During the spring festival rehearsal, the educational institution appears at its most traditional. The control has increased: the discursive frame of the festival allows children only a narrow space for their actions and voices. Children are supposed to stand still, waiting for something to happen. They can use their voices only for singing, but even then they have to use their voices carefully, to be 'loud, but not too loud'. According to the traditional school practice, there is a physical asymmetry between the large group of children and only few adults who are responsible for organizing their actions. This is usually made possible through the authoritative power position of the adult in the class. Now, however, this position is challenged, and a struggle between voices emerges. The controlling actions of the teacher confront the movement, sound and energy of the lively

group of children. The microphone plays a central role in creating a rupture in the teacher's control, enabling the children to take positions of power and use their voices. For the ethnographer, the voices of the children are difficult to follow and to make sense of, because they seem irrelevant and not legitimized. The struggle of the voices does not go unnoticed, however. In the later Storycrafted narratives, children refer to the disobedient voices of their peers as 'untidy' behaviour. For the teacher, these voices are signs of individual behaviour problems in her class, as she told Riikka in later discussions.

The episode illustrates how the discursive and the material intertwine in the school's practices. Together, these dimensions pull the teacher and the pupils towards oppositional positions of power. Reeve (2009) observes that most teachers still use a controlling style of instruction, even though its pedagogical efficiency has been widely questioned. Our analysis of voices shows that, despite the acknowledgement of modern discursive notions of learning, voices and practices still have to be situated in social and physical spaces, which can be loaded with historical discourses. The traditional school festival, rehearsed by a large group of children under the supervision of only two teachers, offers an example of this situation. The result is increased control and children's voices being regulated or silenced. The teacher was not happy to be taking the authoritative position of power: in several conversations, she seemed to need to explain the situation to Riikka. The school's practices, simultaneously social, discursive and material/physical, regulate the spaces for actions, as well as the use of the voices of both the adults and the children.

## **Lollipop stories: Voices in the participatory space**

Our plan was to use the Storycrafting method as a narrative participatory tool to listen to children's perspectives. The Storycrafting sessions started later on the rehearsal day. Eight children, two at a time, came to tell Riikka their stories freely, about any subject they wished. All the children eagerly volunteered to come to the sessions, and all of them wanted to tell their stories.

Our earlier observational data show that access to children's knowledge is problematic. According to the dominant discourse, children do not have the right knowledge before they learn it. In the strictly controlled space of the rehearsal situation, it was almost impossible to listen to children's voices as voices that made sense, and the teacher's voice dominated the rehearsal episode just as it had dominated almost all the other lessons during the fieldwork. The discursive space of Storycrafting is different from the usual approaches in school or research methods such as interviews, because no direct questions are asked of the child. Instead, we simply asked children to tell any story they wanted (see the description of the method in the first section). We did not assume that we would hear stories dealing with the observed ethnographical episodes. Yet it turned out that the rehearsal situation was exactly what most children wanted to tell about, either more or less directly (this section) or indirectly (see next section). The seven-year-olds took advantage of playful ways to elaborate on issues that mattered to them.

Before the Storycrafting, some of the children had already been given their lollipops. Even though they were not asked, five children out of eight gave us their perspectives on the events of the rehearsal. The following four stories caught our attention, because the issue in each clearly seemed to be the voices of children and the control they had experienced.

Jani and Matias, two boys, came to the Storycrafting session together. Jani had not been given a lollipop, just as he had predicted, while Matias had been rewarded with one.

Jani: *Jani who didn't like Matias because he ate lollipops all the time which Jani didn't like*<sup>3</sup>

*Once upon a time there was Jani who didn't like lollipops. Or the lollipops that Matias is munching next to me. The end.*

Matias: *The lollipops*

*Once upon a time there was Matias who really liked lollipops. And Jani is barfing all the time next to me. The end.*

Ville and Samu came to the session together. At this point both boys had been left without a lollipop reward.

Ville: *I didn't get a lollipop*

*Because I didn't listen to the rules or keep up. That is why I didn't get a lollipop because I was behaving badly. The others got lollipops because they behaved well and untidily.<sup>4</sup> Maybe I will get a lollipop if I behave well and untidily in the next lesson and start shouting into Samu's mic because I'm starting to laugh. The end.*

Samu: *Lollipop*

*Once upon a time there was Samu who didn't get a lollipop 'cause he behaved so well. And then the others got lollipops 'cause they behaved so badly and untidily. And then when we go to sing, I shout into Ville's mic as loud as I can. The end.*

The stories told by Jani and Matias are short, but we maintain that they can be approached as *knowledge*. Their narrative voices can be understood with the help of notions of the performative and interactive nature of narratives (Riessman, 2008). The stories reveal children's individual ways of coping with the constraints of the rehearsal situation. Children use narratives to construct meaning and to elaborate performatively on their experiences (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008: 378–379). Riessman (2002: 701) defines narratives as 'stages, where the narrators can manage potentially spoiled identities'. In the title of his story, Jani performs his negative opinion about lollipops: '*Jani who didn't like Matias because he ate lollipops all the time which Jani didn't like*'. At the same time his friend's success is presented as being ridiculous, certainly not something to be envied. For Ville and Samu, the position of 'naughty boys' seems to rescue their identities as intentional and agentic. Ville's story shows that he recognizes the dominant discourse in the classroom and the rationale behind the teacher's actions. Nevertheless, in his story he struggles to find a tolerable position instead of staying in the position of an object of power (see Riessman, 2002). A position in power is taken by the narrator. An agentic voice, one that did not have the space to emerge within the dominant discursive space of school, wants to be heard here.



The narrative voices in the stories above are not individual and complete in themselves, but are constructed using the available discursive, social and material/physical resources. Unlike in the observational space, the voices of children are now discursively positioned as knowledge. The researcher does not require correct answers, but takes the position of the listener to something not yet known. Physically, there is now the space and time for listening to children's voices. Without Storycrafting, there were children whose voices would have been left completely unheard in the study.

Socially, Storycrafting happens in a reciprocal relationship with the researcher, who is actively listening, and a friend, a situation that helps create a safe and pleasurable context for narration. The reciprocity becomes visible, for example, when Matias echoes the two-sentence structure that Jani used in his story. Ville and Samu collaboratively work their stories across time, beginning with past events and ending in the future. An important resource is humour, which was used in a gendered way in many situations in the class (see also Davies, 1993: xvii; Lahelma, 2002). By stating that 'The others got a lollipop because they behaved well *and untidily*', Ville says something that does not make sense at a first glance. But with his humorous expression 'untidily', he succeeds in carnivalizing his experience of oppressive power during the school day.

Without the children's narratives, we would not have learned how pervasive the existing asymmetrical power relations are for them. We also came to understand that this asymmetry is not without consequences. The possibility of a vicious circle was created through the increased control and the boys' dedication to continue challenging it: '*I'm going to shout at Ville's mic as loud as I can.*' This vicious circle is related to the gendered category of 'naughty boys', which is thus strengthened and still seems to shape children's lives in school in a powerful way.

## Lollipop stories revisited: Voices in the reflexive space

In the shared process of analysis, we became more and more aware of a range of ways to listen to stories and to children's voices. We began to ask uncomfortable questions of the data and of ourselves. The narrative analysis had revealed the ways in which children's voices were discursively, socially and physically constructed, but were we aware of our own expectations in doing research? Were we conscious of the discourses that informed us as listeners? For what purposes did we use voices in our study? We realized that in our analysis, we had focused on voices that we could easily relate to our earlier ethnographical observations. Those voices suited our participatory agenda and at the same time were the easiest and quickest voices to handle (see Mazzei, 2009: 48). For example, we had chosen only stories by boys, whose reactions to control during the rehearsal had been easy to recognize and follow. At the same time, there were girls who were silent in the classroom and whose stories did not resonate with our ideas about children actively representing themselves by using their voices. We had been attracted by rebellious voices and strong constraints, while the voices of the children that adapted to the control did not inspire us as much. We also found that it was easier to grasp those stories that worked with elements belonging to the factual world and did not go too far into fictive realms.

We returned to our data with a new reflexivity, distancing ourselves from our own stable positions of knowing. Lather (2009: 23) suggests turning to the uncomfortable and 'getting

lost' as a strategy for avoiding interpretations that are too easy and that question the researcher's authority in telling other people's stories. Gallacher and Gallagher (2008: 12) have described a similar attitude as fruitful 'immaturity in methodology'. We now wanted to look for silences, messy voices and voices of which we could not fully make sense (see Mazzei, 2009: 46–53) without trying to fix meanings, but rather to think of 'voice' as a question (Lee and Motzkau, 2011: 15). The four remaining stories that were told to us had not seemed as interesting as the previous stories. Now we wanted to be challenged by their narrative voices.

Jere and Tomi told us the following stories.

Jere: *The frog-eater*

*Once upon a time there was a frog who went swimming. He saw a frog-eater. He was eaten. Then his dad came there. Then he said: Where is my child? Then he was shot by a bow into his butt, and he went like a rocket to the frog-eater's home. The end.*

Tomi: *The swimming turtle*

*Once upon a time there was a swimming turtle who saw a whale. The turtle was scared and escaped. But the whale was so fast that he ate the turtle. Then came a shark. Then the shark ate the whale because it looked so good. It looked so good, so tasty. Then came a diver who caught the shark. The end.*

At this point Jere wanted to continue his story of the frog-eater:

*The frog-eater was eaten for breakfast, because the frog's mum ate it. And the frog's mum vomited for at least a month. He went to play on the computer. Then he played his own game. It was the game where the mum ate the frog-eater. Then the frog-eater heard it. Although he was dead (the frog-eater). Then the frog-eater came with its sharp claws through the frog mum's tummy. Then the frog mum's tummy opened and squirted blood. The end.*

Tomi also wanted to go on:

*Then the diver took the shark to the boat. Then there came a big storm, and the diver fell out of the boat. Then a flea ate the human for lunch. It took it at least a million days. Then the turtle ate the flea. Then the turtle was caught and eaten for lunch. [Who ate it? asked J.] A human. The end.*

The narratives of Jere and Tomi are completely fictional, and at first glance they resemble traditional fairy tales. They tell about animals eating each other, which is one of the central themes in the cultural heritage of fairy tales (Karlsson and Karimäki, 2012). The encounter between the strong and the weak has been repeated thousands of times in stories, films and folk tales. Thus, the boys are telling culturally shared stories of power.

The voices in these stories are open to collaborative fantasy. Jere and Tomi are so taken by the narration that they break the conventional structure. Their stories proceed at high speed and with mutual inspiration that turns 'the end' into a starting point for new

variations. The blurring of fact and fiction that continues as a blurring of fiction and virtual reality is a central element of this intense and joyful development. The main purpose of the narrative seems to be amusing the audience and the storyteller himself. The carnivalizing of a traditional fairy tale and the feasting on violence shows how the discursive space of Storycrafting allows children to say things that normally are not allowed. Even the traditional power figure, the ‘mum’, is taken as an object of violence. Based on the ethnographic observations, we know that the narratives are strikingly rebellious, because all kinds of references to violence were forbidden in the classroom. Thus, part of the joy of these storytellers seems to be the collaborative use of the discursive space for challenging the classroom practices of power.

The last two narratives were told by Laura and Sonja.

Laura: *Little white lollipop*

*Once upon a time there was a lollipop called White Feather. One day she went for a walk when she saw a beautiful shiny rock.<sup>5</sup>*

Sonja: *The duck and the bear*

*Once upon a time there was a bunny who went to get food for her family. On the way she met a bear. The bear asked: Where are you going? The duck answered: To get food for my family. The bear asked: Can I have half? She said: No. Then the bear said that he would eat the duck if he didn't get half the food. The duck still said no. Then the bear ate one of the duck's legs. Then the duck was given a pegleg, and he got the food and went home. The end.*

At first glance, Laura's story seems conventional. Here we have the beginning of an adventure, while the adventure itself remains untold. The events take place in the realm of fantasy, far from the constraints of real life. On further readings, the story began to speak to us. In light of our ethnographical data, Laura's narrative depicts the quiet child in the class. The real story remains hidden – just like the voices of most of the children in the observational space. There were some quiet boys in the class, too, but it was mostly girls who willingly took this kind of position on the day of the rehearsal, as well as in other situations that we followed during our fieldwork. The category of ‘nice girls’ is a historical cultural category just as is the category ‘naughty boys’, which we examined earlier.

Among the eight stories told on the same day, we initially found Sonja's the least informative. It seemed fictional and conventional compared to the earlier stories told by the boys. Nevertheless, on re-reading Sonja's narrative, we turned our attention once again to the cultural theme of the encounter between the strong and the weak. The narrative is about insisting and threatening, elements that had also been visible in the rehearsal situation in the classroom. We recognize here another story of power, like the earlier stories told by the boys. But in the world of fantasy, Sonja finds a playful discursive space suitable for her to elaborate on power relations.

Puroila et al. (2012) define children's narrative rights as the ethical and moral right to express themselves. Instead of the usual ways of approaching children's narratives in terms of language and cognitive development, these researchers say that children should be listened to and allowed spaces to work with things that are important to them (see

Karlsson, 2000, 2012). The narratives function as ‘dynamic meeting places’ (Puroila et al., 2012) – spaces where children meet their friends, grown-ups and society. That Sonja’s and Laura’s stories are fictional made them less interesting to us at first. But for them, these stories were spaces in which to participate in society and the global narrative culture in a meaningful way, even though the exact meanings may remain enigmatic to us.

Children’s narratives blur the general assumptions about what is considered truth and what is fiction. These assumptions are closely linked with notions of children and adults as capable of knowing and using their voices in communities. In this last reflexive analytical space, we realized that we had simplified ideas about fact and fiction. Even if a story is composed of factual elements, it can be fiction. On the other hand, fictitious characters and landscapes can function as stages for important processes of ‘real’, lived worlds. Children’s narratives give us access to a rich variety of perspectives on classroom interaction and school practices. In light of this knowledge, the adult-centred views of children’s problematic behaviour may look fictional. As researchers of childhood, we should not reduce the heterogeneity, either within groups of children or within individual narrative voices. When doing ‘research with children’, we should not privilege agentic, easy-to-understand, factual and loud voices, the voices that need no extra effort to fit in with ‘research with adults’. Otherwise, we may end up with research that strengthens stereotypes and asymmetrical power relations between categories such as generation or gender.

## **Building spaces for voices: Building participatory and reflexive communities**

In this article, we examined children’s voices in classroom interactions in a narrative ethnographical research project. We were interested in children’s perspectives, and we employed a narrative participatory tool, the Storycrafting method, to elicit these perspectives. The analysis showed that children’s voices are not unitary and complete in themselves, but emergent and contingent on the discursive, social and material/physical resources available. We followed the voices of the children through three different discursive spaces, which were discussed using recent suggestions about reflexive listening.

*The observational space*, which was constructed by observing the class rehearsal for a spring festival, illustrated a struggle between the controlling institutional voices of adults and the voices of the children. Children’s voices appeared to be defined by the teacher as largely irrelevant, disturbing, and even as signs of behavioural problems. The children were positioned as either powerless or ill, and their voices were not regarded as voices of knowing. The discursive and the physical intertwined in the classroom practices of control: voices were shown to be ‘multiplicities’ (Lee and Motzkau, 2011: 15).

*The participatory space* was created by implementing a participatory narrative method as part of our ethnographical research. With the Storycrafting method, children were given an open-ended opportunity to tell any story they wanted to the adult researcher. In this space, it became possible to hear the children’s voices in the physical and the discursive senses. Here, children’s narratives were positioned as knowledge. The narrative voices of children provided diverse and even surprising perspectives on classroom

interactions. The analysis revealed children's performative styles of elaborating on the power relations they had experienced in which reciprocity, friendship and humour were central.

We entered a *reflexive space* of listening when we started to question our own ways of selecting and interpreting children's voices. After focusing on the discursive, social and physical dimensions of the narratives, we turned our attention to listening to voices. We returned to our data to analyse four more stories that had been left out of the study at an earlier stage. We realized that by listening to the easier-to-understand voices, we had reproduced a gendered and simplified picture of children's worlds. Through reflexive listening, we were able to embrace children's diversity. Now the cultural and collaborative dimensions of children's narrative activity took central place. We found that children have different ways of taking advantage of the narrative spaces as places in which to work with culturally shared tools on matters important to them.

For children's narrative rights to be realized, adults must take responsibility for creating spaces for children's voices. In this connection, based on our holistic and reflexive analysis, we would like to make three suggestions. First, voices need space and time in a physical sense. A conscious effort in this direction is needed in educational institutions, where historically, children's voices have been strictly regulated and silenced. Second, children's voices may be more effectively elicited in reciprocal processes of holistic narrative activity instead of in single narratives, interviews, or focused statements. Third, an understanding of power relations that penetrate the discursive, social and material/physical dimensions of voices is needed.

The notion of narrative voices as emergent and reciprocal puts new demands on research. Realities and meanings are found not only in the voices of the participants, but are created also in interpretations and retellings. Time is needed for reflexive listening through repeated considerations and experimentation on the researchers' side. This contrasts sharply with the current neoliberal demand for effectiveness produced through quickly generated results, which puts the quality of research and truly new findings in danger.

We have given an example of a holistic and reflexive approach to children's voices, an example that is still limited and deserves further elaboration in terms of power, for instance. Nevertheless, we have shown that understanding voices as emergent and constructed simultaneously from available discursive, social and material/physical resources clarifies the obstacles and the challenges that exist on the way to children's participation. Entering the reflexive spaces of telling and listening can help to intervene in the persistent controlling practices in schools and to build spaces for the complex and diverse voices of children, even if it requires taking an uncomfortable distance from earlier assumptions.

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## Notes

1. All the empirical data were collected by Riikka Hohti in the spring of 2006. The study continued as a doctoral thesis (begun in 2010 and still underway). Liisa Karlsson joined the research for this article in order to analyse the data from the point of view of the child’s voice.
2. Direct quotations from the field notes are given in italics.
3. The names for the stories (underlined here) were given by the children themselves after completing their stories.
4. The word in Finnish is *epäsiisti*, which is a nonsense expression and marks a humorous turn in the narrative. This turn will be taken up below.
5. Although in Finnish the personal pronoun *hän* does not indicate gender, we have used ‘she’ or ‘he’ in the English version.

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