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## Exploring young children's voices

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# General Introduction



## Chapter 1



# General Introduction

Many researchers and practitioners are engaged in researching children's voices. Listening to what children have to say about their own everyday life has become increasingly relevant for the profound understanding of children and to contribute to their development in the best possible ways.

At the same time, we have to acknowledge that educational practitioners as well as researchers and psychologists for instance, have different views on children's development and the contribution of teaching and children's learning to this process. Vygotsky mentioned three categories of views on this issue. The first category are educational professionals who argue that education has to follow children's development. The second category argues that teaching is the most important factor in development, not the maturity of the child. There is a third category of educational professionals who claim that professionals in both categories 1 and 2 are right (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 80 – 81). The views educational professionals have on the contribution of education to children's development will probably influence their view on understanding what children have to say about their childhood. Even more, if educational professionals merely follow children's development, children will in fact reproduce, at least partly, the educational system they are familiar with, with its structures and its functioning (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1998). It is of major importance, as an educational researcher, to be aware of one's own beliefs and perspectives in conducting research on children's voices. Not only on the research of children's voices per se, but also in understanding what children have to say about their childhood in the light of the educational philosophies proclaimed by the researchers and practitioners.

The way in which children perceive and interpret the world around them differs from the way adults view the world. At the same time, children's perceptions of the world are often interpreted by adults, hence from an adult's point of view (Engel, 2005). According to Komulainen (2007, p. 13), adults have the tendency to see young children on the one hand as "dependent, vulnerable receivers of care and education, and [on the other hand as] 'agentic' subjects with distinct 'voices'". This dilemma causes fundamental ambiguities in research on understanding communication with children. Spyrou (2011) stipulated that in the discourses between adults and children the interests, assumptions and values of both adults and children are at stake, as well as issues of power. Therefore, there are limits to all individual voices, including those of children. Ebrahim (2011) acknowledged that it is complex to determine to which extent children's perspectives are their own personal perspectives. Children develop perspectives through the values and beliefs they receive from birth onward (Vygotsky, 1994, 1997).

Children grow into society by participating in different settings or microsystems, like family and education, in which they encounter different demands to which they have to relate (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hedegaard, 2008a; Meadows, 2010). The child's evolving constructions of reality cannot be observed directly. It can only be inferred from patterns of activity - expressed in both verbal and non-verbal behavior -, in the activities, roles,

and relations in which the person engages. These three elements also constitute what is designated as “elements of the micro-system” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 3-13). Influenced by the perspectives of significant others, it is probably more likely that children reproduce partly those perspectives of others, as well as the social context in which these are expressed (see also Bourdieu & Passeron, 1998). The culture in which an individual participates, and meets other people, is crucial for a person’s actions. In that sense, acting is a form of cultural acting in cooperation with others (Komulainen, 2007; van Oers, 2009b).

Research indicated that meanings acquired by someone have traces of both cultural content, and senses acquired by others at the same time (Christopher & Bickhard, 2007). Opinions or perspectives acquired by children thus have a personal dimension, connected with children’s own life history, and a collective dimension built on the generational structures of childhood (Warming, 2011; Wertsch, 2002). Attribution of meaning and the acquisition of opinions occur in interaction with others, in a dialogical process, in which the voices of others resound as well (Bakhtin, 1981; Spyrou, 2011; Wertsch, 2002). To define the construct of voice, we follow Bakhtin (1981). He referred to voice as a polyphonic phenomenon, expressed in the utterances of “the speaking personality, the speaking consciousness” (Wertsch, 2002, p. 12). Bakhtin therefore stated that any word uttered by an individual is essentially inter-individual. An utterance can never be attributed to a single speaker, as there are always predecessors and real or virtual listeners involved, whose anticipated answers may be integrated in the speaker’s utterances.

Voice is a social construction. Voices people build up have a personal dimension (sense), connected to people’s own life history and a collective dimension (cultural meaning), constructed in social interaction. So children create their own personal meaning about the educational environments they are involved in on the basis of interactions with others and hence, develop their own personal voices (Wertsch, 1991, Warming, 2011).

Despite the diversity in notions on how children perceive, interpret and contribute to the world they live in, researchers and practitioners find agreement in the conviction that more research on listening to children is still necessary. The aim of this first chapter is to provide an introduction to a PhD-research on exploring young children’s voices. The chapters 2-5 have been published in or are submitted to peer-reviewed journals before. In these chapters we report on the steps we have taken to gain a deeper insight in the contents of young children’s voices by providing a method for listening to and analyzing young children’s voices. We focus on research on communicating with young children in and about their educational context and research settings. Some of the results of former research in this matter are presented in the next section, followed by a section on the conditions for researching children’s voices. Then our theoretical framework is presented, which is grounded on research literature. After a description of the complexities researchers on young children’s voices are confronted with, we provide an introduction of our present research, which is presented in the chapters 2–5. Our conclusions and the discussion section are presented in chapter 6.

## Brief review of research on listening to young children in educational contexts

Many researchers, in many countries, have been and are involved in studies of young children's perspectives in early childhood settings (see e.g. Clark, 2010; Dockett & Perry, 2007; Einarsdottir, 2010; Fabian & Dunlop, 2006; Formosinho & Araújo, 2004; Kjørholt, 2005).

Clark (2007, 2010), in cooperation with designers, architects, practitioners, and parents, has involved very young children - at the age of three and four - in her research in England on designing learning environments. The researchers consulted children about their views and their needs for participating in those environments. They stipulated that children, even very young children, are capable of expressing their own views, and that adults often have a limited understanding of children's experiences. Clark developed and applied the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001). A multi-method for communicating with young children, about their perspectives on their early childhood settings, here and now, and in the future. The children were observed when they were involved in all kinds of activities, and they were provided with a photo camera to explore their existing institution. With the researchers the children made a tour in and around the institution while talking about the pictures they had taken earlier. The researchers also asked the children about their favorite places or spaces to stay. Thereafter the children built, upon the request of the researchers, a new provision, using blocks and draperies. They were invited to talk about a new service, while sitting on the "magic carpet". On the magic carpet the children looked at their own photos and images again. The Mosaic approach was inspired by Reggio Emilia with its notions of the competent child and the pedagogy of listening to children. The children in Clark's research were shown pictures of another preschool, in Reggio Emilia (Italy), on a laptop. Then the children made a drawing about the elements they would like to keep as in their present preschool, the elements which should be replaced, and about new elements they would like to add to the new provision. In this research it became clear, that the children, especially the youngest, were interested in their own nursery, but showed less interest in some other nursery (Reggio Emilia). Feelings about their preschool were connected with children's notions about their own identity, according to Clark. They made, for instance, photographs of their own photo near their own coat peg. They related their parents or other family members to the places in the nursery, where they had spent time together, while they were making the tour with the researcher, and they showed her corresponding photos. The Mosaic approach is used by many more researchers on early childhood ever since, in various ways and for various purposes, also beyond designing processes in and around educational practices. The approach is used to support children with special needs, documenting their everyday school life, and discussing it on aspects of cultural similarities and differences for instance, but also as a way to document children's experiences in conflicts in Africa (Gray & Winter, 2011).

Formosinho and Araújo (2004) advocated that children are social actors and that they play their part in different practices, like educational processes and research. It is important

that they are listened to and heard, in the sense of: do researchers fully understand what children are telling? The researchers involved children in two different preschools in Portugal. Their research was about young children's perspectives on adult's reactions in response to what is considered "nice or bad" children's behavior. Children were interviewed about what happens when boys and girls misbehave or act nicely, or children were heard about critical incidents in daily life in contexts in and outside school. It seemed, as one of the results in this research, that children are more aware of probable consequences on bad than on nice behavior. This is in line with a culture that is more oriented on controlling bad than on praising nice behavior, according to the researchers. This probably culturally influenced teachers' perspective on children's desired behavior, is leaving the children little room for developing autonomy in this matter.

Kjørholt (2005) reflected on a Danish project in an early childhood center with an emphasis on listening to children's voices, in which young children are seen as competent to influence their daily lives in the context of children's rights (UNCRC, 1989). It is in line with concepts as autonomy, self-realization and authenticity, or, in fact, with children's rights as citizens. One of Kjørholt's reflections concerned the early childhood center, in which the aim of increased empowerment for children in this project, proclaimed as the right to be themselves, was applied. This space for children as citizens is designed - as all spaces - in a certain style with attributes representing an implicit or explicit ideology. An ideology with appropriated norms and values for children to relate to, and with restrictions for children, in one way or the other, in being themselves. So children's voices are expressed within this context and are produced by this cultural context as well. In other contexts other voices by other children could be heard, which are also produced by other contexts. Another reflection concerned the strong emphasis on the right to be oneself. This right could easily be understood as a purely individualistic, appreciated orientation in child development. Whereas the notion of children as social participants and fellow citizens, for example balancing between dependence and independence, should rather be the object of critical research, according to Kjørholt. There is a need for research on the complexities of the moral and cultural contexts - spaces - in which children participate. A need to gain insight into the ways that children's identities are constructed in these cultural contexts, as well as how children position themselves within these different contexts or society (Kjørholt, 2005).

Fabian and Dunlop (2006) focused their research on children (aged 4 - 5) in transition from nurseries and preschools to primary school in Scotland. Interviews were held and questionnaires were used with parents and staff members in preschool and in primary school. Children were observed in their educational settings and group interviews with children were held. Dunlop (2006) observed that the children were aware, though there were differences in awareness among children, that their transition from preschool to primary school meant a change of position: instead of preschoolers, they became *learners*. Their images of being a learner coincided greatly with the images their parents had about the child's competences, the way the former preschoolers felt supported by their preschool teachers, and the friendships they maintained with peers. One of Fabian's (2006) reflections was, that a determinant factor of school success is whether the children are able to make

sense of learning. When children are offered the opportunities and appropriate support to communicate about what school means to them, then making sense of learning is to be expected. Teachers, besides parents or caregivers, have to be aware of their responsibility to initiate these teacher-children dialogues, as well as to take the perspectives of these children involved in dialogues. This is easier said than done. For teachers not only have their own explicit and implicit perspectives, they should also be aware that their own perspectives were and are influenced by others.

Dockett and Perry (2007) also studied young children's perspectives about transition to primary schools, as well as their possibly changed perspectives over time, in Australia. In their research, the researchers asked children at the starting point of their primary school life to make a drawing, reflecting their image of their future school life. With the drawings at hand, the researchers talked with the children about their expectations. How they presumed school would be like, what they felt (positively or negatively), when thinking about their upcoming school life, and what information they had gathered about primary school and how they had done so. At the end of their first year in school this research was repeated. The children were also asked to reflect on their perceptions of their start in primary school, and to compare these former perceptions with their actual perceptions. Like Clark and Moss (2001), Dockett and Perry consider young children as experts on their own lives, being competent, capable, and effective reporters of their own experiences. At the same time, researchers have to accept that children – as well as adults – will regard one and the same issue from different perspectives. It makes a difference whether children regard issues within a group of children, or as a child at an individual level. Children's perspectives may differ as well, due to the context or contexts in which research is conducted.

Einarsdottir (2010) conducted her research with 6 year old children in Iceland on their experiences of their first year in primary school. In line with Clark (2007) and Dockett and Perry (2007), she advocated that special methods and requirements are necessary to meet children's needs in research. Special attention must be given to ethical issues (including the requirements for children's consent) and the inequality of power within relationships of adults and children involved in research. Besides paying attention to children's verbal expressions, researchers should also be aware of the non-verbal actions of the children, which may also provide indications for their real views. The children in Einársdottir's research were individually interviewed (the youngest) or in pairs or trio's. They made drawings (see also Dockett & Perry, 2007), and photographs, which were discussed afterwards (see also Clark, 2007). The children commented on why they attended school, what they were doing in school, and their feelings towards school, such as their likes and dislikes. They also commented on what they found difficult or not, as well as on what their teachers were doing in school. The children were asked about what they could decide for themselves, or where and when they experienced that they had room for choices in school. The major conclusion in this research was that children experience only few opportunities for decision making in primary school, compared to preschool. According to the researcher the research also raised unanswered questions, regarding the reflections of the adults involved in the research, and whether the adults genuinely interpreted the children's notions and experiences.



In all these studies, the social context is considered to have a major influence on young children's perspectives. However, the researchers' definitions of context tends to vary. In some studies the context refers to the school as pedagogical context. In other studies it refers to the relationships with peers and teacher, or to family members and friends in preschool. At the same time, these researchers acknowledged that they were confronted with dilemma's in their research. Gaining insight in how and to what extent this influence of the context is manifested in children's personal perspectives, and how these are voiced, is obviously a significant dilemma.

The researchers' use of the concept of children's voice varied as well. Some researchers related the concept of voice to children's rights. Some researchers referred to children's capacity to express their own views, and some researchers did both. It raised the question about what the researchers in fact meant by the concept of voice, its content and how it was used.

Before researching young children's voices, a clear definition of the concept of voice is needed and the content of this concept has to be object of research itself too. In our research we aimed to make a contribution to a clarification of voice content in relation to young children, aged 5 – 6, and the social context they are involved in. We started our research by a description of the concept of voice, in line with Bakhtin (1981). In our theoretical framework, and the case studies we conducted, we have explored the concept of voice in relation to young children in a school context.

## Conditions for researching young children's voice

In research on young children's perspectives many researchers advocate the participation of young children as co-researchers (Christensen & James, 2008; Clark, 2007, 2010; Fraser, Lewis, Ding, Kellet & Robinson, 2004; Greig, Taylor & MacKay, 2013; Harcourt, Perry & Waller, 2011; Lewis & Lindsay, 2000; Lundy & McEvoy, 2011). They described the strategies and methods for offering children the best opportunities in working together with researchers, with reference to the standards of human rights. Researchers have to take care that children are involved in research in which the children feel safe, and the research is inclusive and engaging for the child. At the same time, the research has to be constructive and flexible in the hands of the researcher, and the researcher has to be responsive to children's needs. Children's participation in research that recognizes their best interest, has to be built on trust, so children feel free to share their lived experiences (Rainio, 2010). If not, children may have the impression that they have to communicate about how they were supposed to feel or expected to act (Grover, 2004). Another issue is the power relation between adult and child. According to Warming (2005), the researcher should take the "least adult role". The researcher has to diminish this inequality in relationship as much as possible and to offer the child (more) space for expressing his<sup>1</sup> voice.

As stipulated before, the context in which research with young children takes place is of major importance. A *meaningful context* for young children is a condition a priori for

<sup>1</sup> With the child 'himself' or every time the child is referred to as 'he', is also meant the child 'herself' or the child as 'she'.

researching young children's perspectives (Engel, 2005). It questions possible research in experimental ("laboratory") situations for this matter, although this kind of experimental research may contribute to a meaningful and methodologically sound context for the researcher. However, children are expected to behave differently in different contexts (Formosinho & Araújo, 2006; Lewis & Lindsay, 2000), certainly without relevant others being present, like peers and teachers. Moreover, research in such constructed research settings provides here and now pictures of children fulfilling arranged tasks. Researchers in those research settings see children as research subjects, looking for children's conventional goal-oriented behavior, whereas children are in transition, and many and quick changes in their views is one of their characteristics (Engel, 2005; Warming, 2011). Those views are influenced by environments and pedagogical ideologies, and these are not fixed, but changeable and dynamic, and a resource of development (Vygotsky, 1994).

As a consequence, research with young children takes time and requires a range of *participatory methods*. Methods, in which children are not only involved in conversations, but also in acting and moving around (Christensen & James, 2008). That is, children using real tools, like a hammer or a screwdriver, or taking photos with a photo camera, and being involved in arts-based activities. In our view, such methods are appropriate attempts to be in line with children's competence, knowledge, age and maturity, and their interests (Clark, 2007, 2010; Einarsdóttir, 2007; Harcourt et al., 2011; Komulainen, 2007; Lundy & McEvoy, 2011). Different children have different perspectives ("voices"), different ways of communicating, and they may prefer different methods (Einarsdóttir, 2007; Grover, 2004). At the same time, using different methods for one and the same issue might also lead to different views (Spyrou, 2011). A child may express in an interview that he does not like to play with Lego for example, and may choose by repetition to play with Lego in class during observations (Einarsdóttir, 2007; Engel, 2005). Interviewing children is an appropriate method to gain insight in children's implicit, as well as explicit perspectives, provided the interviews are held by an adult, who is very familiar with the children (Brooker, 2001; Clark, 2007; Dockett & Perry, 2007; Einarsdóttir, 2007, 2010; Formosinho & Araújo, 2004; Greig et al., 2013; Harcourt et al., 2011). Researchers should keep in mind that children may perceive the interview-setting differently from an adult's perspective. Children may view an interview merely as a search for "the right" answer or as an obligation to provide any answer, even when they do not understand the question (Harcourt et al., 2011; Lewis & Lindsay, 2000). Interviewing children in small groups in a familiar context could diminish this possible dilemma. Discussions among the children involved, may provide new, complementary information as well (Formosinho & Araújo, 2006; Lewis & Lindsay, 2000). Children's play is also a resource of information. It is one of the main activities during the day in which children show what they are capable of and what is on their minds (Engel, 2005; Harcourt et al., 2011). Telling narratives is for children an important way of communicating. It is a way for reflection on their own complex thoughts and feelings as well, and as such offers another method for gaining insight in children's views and notions (Hohti & Karlsson, 2014). Not only in what children have to say, but also what is shown in their facial expressions, gestures, and actions (Engel, 2005). Overall, children's

style of communicating is often more emotional and less structured than the adult's style. Sometimes opaque and then again transparent, but highly informative about their lived experiences (Engel 2005; Grover 2004). Every research with young children should at least involve observations in certain contexts, individually as well as in relation to others. With questions in mind like, what do children see, what do they feel, what are they thinking and what are they doing? Observations make it also possible to hear the silent voice of children, as children may express their notions also in a non-verbal way (Jackson & Mazzei, 2009; Lewis, 2010). Besides, Spyrou (2011) and Fleer and Ridgway (2014) underline the importance of using visual methods, certainly on behalf of children who face difficulties in expressing their notions verbally. At the same time, visual methods may also provoke more emotional, instead of merely intellectual, expressions (Clark, 2007; Einarsdóttir, 2007; Warming, 2011).

Special attention is required for *the role of the researcher*. A close and often long-term relationship between the researcher and the children can contribute to the potential quality of children's participation in research. Children are often well aware of an unequal relationship between the researcher and themselves, with the imbalance of voice and power in those relationships as a consequence (Fraser et al., 2004; Grover, 2004). Socially desirable answers (i.e. providing the "good" answers), are ways in which children may try to deal with this unbalanced character in the relationship (Einarsdóttir, 2007). Some researchers claimed to act as the "marginal participant observer" (Komulainen, 2007; Lewis & Lindsay, 2000; Rainio, 2010). Some claimed to act as "the least adult", participating as childlike as possible without adult authority and privileges (Warming, 2011), or presenting themselves as atypical or incompetent. Some became a familiar figure for the children (Lundy & McEvoy, 2011). Others proclaimed that the unbalanced relationship between researcher and children is inevitable. Researchers have to seek the children's assistance in the research by presenting themselves as outsiders, and therefore as learners in the context in which the children are the experts (Christensen & James, 2008; Einarsdóttir, 2007). Komulainen (2007) concluded that she as a researcher had many roles in one and the same research project, and only discovered what roles were comfortable for her. Despite the role or roles the researcher has chosen, he has to keep in mind, that it is never possible to escape from one's own interpretative framework completely (Grover, 2004).

All researchers need to consider issues related to *ethics* in research in which young children are involved (Ethical Code, 2014; Lewis & Lindsay, 2000). The aspect of - written and/or oral - consent should be taken care of in particular. Consent has to be checked over and over again with the children during the whole process of the research (David, Edwards & Alldred, 2001; Formosinho & Araújo, 2006; Harcourt et al., 2011; Maybin, 2013). Consent of participation in research is not only a matter of the researcher and the children, but must also be discussed with the adults who have their own responsibility towards the children, like their parents or caregivers (Fraser et al., 2004; Holland, Renold, Ross & Hillman, 2010). Involvement of children in research should always be voluntarily. For providing their informed consent, the children have to be able to understand the nature of the study in which they play their part, according to David et al. (2001) and Einarsdóttir

(2007). At least, they have to know what is going to happen and for how long, what their role is, and what will happen with the results. This last part of the research deserves special attention, for at the end the children do not really have the power to determine how the data are used (Grover, 2004). The children should know from the start that they are always free to withdraw from the research. That they have the right to have second thoughts about what might be used or not in the research of what they have shared (Harcourt et al., 2011). The researcher has to be aware of non-verbal aspects in the communication as well on this matter (Einarsdóttir, 2007). Children may feel a “hidden pressure” to stay involved in the research for reasons of politeness, their teacher’s approval, or being helpful to the “visiting” researcher (David et al., 2001). It is necessary that the children have trust in the researcher’s confidentiality. The identities of the children have to be protected in presenting the results of the research for any audience, as well as in communication with parents, teachers and peers (Einarsdóttir, 2007; Formosinho & Araújo, 2006; Fraser et al., 2004; Holland et al., 2010; Rainio, 2010). These considerations could also lead to limitations in children’s participation in research for reason of protection.

As stated before, different children have different voices, different ways of communicating, and they may prefer different participatory methods (Einarsdóttir, 2007; Grover, 2004). In our research on the content of young children’s voice, we had to keep these conditions in mind. It meant we had to share with the children involved, the reason and goal of the research, and to offer a range of appropriate research methods in a context which was meaningful to the children. We had to protect the children’s privacy throughout and after the research. We had to guarantee them, that they could withdraw from the research whenever they indicated that they wanted to.

## Theoretical framework

Before reflecting on the content of children's perspectives in the light of their influence on the educational contexts in which they are involved, we had to step back to pay attention to the theoretical concept of children's voice first (Maybin, 2013). We, as researchers, explored this concept from a dynamic, dialogical and contextualized point of view (Bakhtin 1981; Wertsch, 1991, 2002; Vygotsky, 1994, 1997). The concept of children's voice is often related to concepts as meaning making, as well as identity and autonomy, as we have stipulated before. Those concepts had to be explored as well, as part of a coherent framework of study.

### Key concepts related to voice

Bakhtin (1981, p. 434) defined the concept of *voice* as "the speaking personality, the speaking consciousness" (Wertsch, 1991). To Bakhtin, any utterance produced by a voice is expressed from a point of view in a specific context. So the voice of an individual can be heard in the utterances a person in a certain situation wants to express. An utterance however, also has non-verbal aspects, so we used the concept *expressions*, in which the voice of an individual is emitted. In Bakhtin's definition of voice, we see a dimension related with the personality, and the developmental history of the speaker (see, for instance Wertsch, 2002, p. 16-18). We also see the dimension of contextualization, related with the intentions (meanings) somebody wants to express in a certain situation (according e.g. to Bernstein, 2000; Daniels & Edwards, 2009).

The notion of *meaning* has a long history, and the complexity of this notion compels us to clarify our interpretation. From a cultural-historical approach (see for example Edwards, 2004; Leont'ev, 1981), two dimensions in the notion of meaning are to be distinguished. On the one hand, there is the cultural dimension, which defines the cultural content of the terms we use (mostly equivalent with the conventional meanings one can find in dictionaries). On the other hand, there is also the personal meaning or *sense* people attribute to cultural objects (including words), based on the personal value ascribed to these objects in the light of their personal motives and interests. For example, a child may explain school as a place where things are taught (conventional meaning), or "important for later" (ideological belief). The child may also attribute personal value to this definition, like "interesting" or "boring" et cetera. Both the cultural meaning and the personal sense are appropriated in the interactions with others. Research indicates that meanings acquired by someone, have traces of both cultural content and senses acquired by others at the same time. Whatever someone is saying, "the word in language is half someone else's" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 239; Wertsch, 2002). The attribution of meaning and the acquisitions of opinions occur in interactions with others, in a dialogical process, in which the voices of others resound as well. This is what Bakhtin calls the process of "ventriloquation" (Wertsch, 1991, p. 59). Consequently, the question is whose voice is actually heard when children express their

opinions about meaningful education (Bakhtin, 1981; van Oers, 2003). Wertsch (2002) showed in his research that remembering – how personal this may seem for an outsider – is, in many cases, a collective process (“collective remembering”). In his research, Wertsch spoke with many young people (born after World War II) in Russia. He asked them for their personal judgment on the events in Russia during and shortly after World War II. It was obvious that young people had very outspoken and personal ideas in which the distortions (forged reports and retouched photographs) brought in by the Russian authorities were included. Even those last aspects were communicated by the young people as if they were present at events, which in reality never took place. The only explanation one can come up with, according to Wertsch, is that even personal recollection is a construct mainly filled with information by others. This illustrates that opinions and images of individuals are probably colored by others to a great extent. According to Edwards (2004), meaning making is located within pedagogical or other practices, shared across settings (public) as well as in a particular setting (local). It results in a multiplicity of meanings within a practice (Hohti & Karlsson, 2014). So attribution of meaning is always (partly) shared, and often “negotiated” with others (see for instance Bruner, 1987; Ruddick & Fielding, 2006).

Hadfield and Haw (2001) found in their study that the position of the speaker, who is addressing others – a child addressing a peer or a teacher, or the teacher addressing another adult or child – has an influence on the type of voice of the speaker. Every individual has a voice and this voice enables the individual to participate in a community. Having a voice means having relationships. Motives and emotions are very important elements in voices. The character of the voice, however, also depends on the *power* which is attributed to a voice, when the individual is listened to. Power often relates for instance to age, social class, ethnicity, and gender of the speaker. Ruddick & Fielding (2006) referred also to the traditional power relations between teacher and children, defining the boundaries of children’s freedom in “having a say” (Hohti & Karlsson, 2014; Rainio, 2010).

Expressing their perspectives, feelings and insights in school and discussing them, is contributing to the child’s development of a personal *identity*. Identity is related to self-understanding. People tell others and themselves who they are and try to act in the way they say who they are (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998). Christopher and Bickhard (2007) understood the concept of identity, grounded in the interactivism-approach, in relation to the concept of “Self”. From the general propositions that the Self is, collectively, constituted in interactions with others through sociocultural participation and as a product of history. McAdams (2011, p. 103) referred to the concept of *selfhood*, the joining of “I” and “Me” to the full Self. The full Self is recognizable in three manifestations, that is, from the self as actor, the self as agent, to the self-as-author, throughout a person’s life. One of the important theoretical tools in interactivism is the Levels of Knowing model for understanding the development of identity (Christopher & Bickhard, 2007). Level 1 is the kind of knowing and awareness of infants and young children. At this level all knowledge is implicit, and for a child there is no clear separation between him and the world. The infant as an actor-self begins to form, the I, and takes note of basic traits and tendencies that fill up the Me (McAdams, 2011). According to Christopher and Bickhard

(2007), children are able to interact with the world and their knowledge is formed through trial and error. The culture is always present and implicit. Level 2 is the level of reflective abstraction. At the age of four, young children are able to reflect upon what previously was implicit and start to know the Self. The child starts to recognize and to act upon differences among the diverse cultural patterns he encounters. It is the level of development of meta-cognition and autobiographical memory. The child has a sense of himself and an implicit self-representation. According to McAdams (2011), the child begins to see himself from a standpoint of a motivated agent with goals, plans, desires, and programs, which are inhabited in an expanding Me. The ability for an explicit self-representation is an aspect of the last level, level 3. It allows the child, by the age of about eight or nine, a form of self-reflexiveness, to compare and judge his notions, values, beliefs to alternatives. This is the level of identity-formation. It is the level to which Christopher and Bickhard (2007) related the concept of agency. Children's agency refers to their possibilities and willingness to control and take responsibilities for their own actions to a certain extent. Agency is in that sense a qualification of situated acting, visible within specific situations. Formed identities offer the possibilities for mediating agency in specific culturally constructed practices (Holland et al., 1998). McAdams (2011) referred, from the age of adolescence, to the self-as-author. The Self which is trying to capture the Me in a socially, morally and culturally self-defining story, as part of a narrative identity. The Self, whose stories change over time, across the course of adult life (Holland et al., 1998). At each level of knowing (Christopher & Bickhard, 2007), the child is confronted with a variety of goals and values, in various states of acceptance and conflict. In this way, interactivism is in line with a dialogical view of the Self, and attributes to Bakhtin's notion of polyvocality (Hermans, 2001). Within a person a number of voices emerge, of which some are explicit in behaviors and shown in emotions and others are still implicit in (un)conscious patterns of thinking (Christopher & Bickhard, 2007, p. 265). The concept of voices can be seen as mediating between the concepts of identity and agency (Holland et al., 1998). Whereas agency is attributed to the child, based on what the child shows in non-verbal and verbal acting within a specific situation, voice is a meta-situated construct. The child expresses his perspectives on certain issues, like school or family, independent from specific situations here and now.

The cultural space in which the individual participates, meets other people and has relationships, is crucial for a person's actions. From a developmental perspective, a culture is a resource, shaping individuals and is shaped by individuals at the same time (Christopher & Bickhard, 2007; Edwards, 2004; Vygotsky, 1994, 1997). This is also the case in educational contexts. Children may (re)shape the contexts they are involved in, whilst the contexts (re)shape children as well. In that sense acting is basically a form of cultural acting in cooperation with others. In such a context, the individual has to learn also to connect his actions to emotions, to affects and to his own motives, and as a result what is learned may turn out to be meaningful to the individual. In this way the individual is able to appropriate cultural acting, and at the same time attribute a personal sense to his actions. We see here that the autonomy for social participation is developed in cooperation with others (van Oers, 2009a). The autonomy of the individual is highly defined by the web

of social relations on which the individual depends for a great deal. Mostly other people take care of our autonomy, allow us and enable us to be autonomous (Kjørholt, 2005). Autonomy can thus be seen as a polyphonic concept, built on different voices, more or less supported by others. Autonomy, as a form of self-fulfillment, is often associated with creativity, motivation, well-being, and being happy (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä & Paloniemi, 2013). Hence, autonomy is diverse, as it is different in each situation and for each person, depending on the life history and the culture of the individual. So a person's autonomy is also dictated by several others, the individual has encountered during his lifetime, and whose voices are not only different, they may be contradictory as well. The same may be true for the voices embodied in an individual (van Oers, 2009b). Vygotsky (1997, p. 212) pointed out that if we would analyze a person's mind, we would find views, words and thoughts of so many, that it would be impossible to determine where the social personality ended, and the individual personality began.

The concept of autonomy in this context is often related to the concept of *agency*, as demonstrated through a person's competence, strategy and awareness in acting. Rainio (2010) defined agency as the human capacity to have impact, and to transform or even resist against the life circumstances and practices persons are involved in. Agency is related to the societal notion of critical, autonomous, rational, and creative citizenship. However, the concept of children's agency should, in addition to a developmental perspective (e.g. Christopher & Bickhard, 2007; McAdams, 2011) also be considered from a socio-culturally constructed perspective (Maybin, 2013). Agency mediates the interconnections between culture and economical forces, between identity-formation and social structures, with an orientation on self-reflection and self-realization (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1998; Eteläpelto et al., 2013). Holland et al. (1998) stipulated that agency is expressed in the improvisations people create in response to particular situations, mediated by the senses of and the sensitivities people presume about or experience in those situations. Rainio (2010) referred to agency as a social and shared process. An individual's possibility to express agency may be limited by contradictory aims of other people's expressions of agency within the same situation. At the same time, an individual understanding of the possibility of being an agentive actor and the individual effort to act accordingly, is crucial for attributing agency to a person's acting. Though children may be potential agents, they are not always in the position to show agency. Spyrou (2011, p. 158) criticizes researchers' "overwhelming preoccupation" with children's agency, who take the creative, innovative and productive capacities, expressed in children's voice for granted. Agency is, in that sense, also often related to the concept of power. Children's possibilities of exposing agency, as participating within and contributing to a certain culture, is often limited by the social norms and hierarchies of the dominant culture, in which children live (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1998; Valentine, 2011). Children's voices are, even before children are entering school, fulfilled with socio-cultural values, they have encountered already. In school, their voices are characterized and framed by the (authoritative) voices of others, like their teachers. Children express agency dialogically in interaction with others, peers and adults, according to some of the values they have incorporated (Maybin, 2013). Agency



in educational contexts is about how children shape their school settings, as well as how children are shaped by schools. Those schools offer privileged children more opportunities for expressing agency, than the less privileged children, as schools have historically favored the dispositions of the more privileged (Bernstein, 2000; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1998; Valentine, 2011). Educational contexts have their own cultures of values. Values about being a good or an obedient child from the teachers' perspectives, and group cultures with notions of inclusion and exclusion, being listened to and silenced, and friendship and rejection. These cultures of values color children's development of agency (Holland, 1998; Maybin, 2013; Rainio, 2010). Valentine (2011) concluded that children's agency is more often directed towards the reproduction of conventional norms about gender and race, rather protecting the status quo in schools, than transforming social relationships. The concept of agency, in relation to children, should be handled with care. Agency is not the same as competence or ability and, indicating that children have agency, is not the same as to advocate that children are entitled to or have the right to participate.

Based on the exploration of the key concepts constituting voice, as described above, we decided to use the concept of *expressions* to operationalize the concept voice. By voice we referred to the verbal and non-verbal expressions, which are produced from a point of view in a specific context (Bakhtin, 1981) with both a cultural dimension (meaning) and a personal dimension (sense). Based on a literature study we formulated possible indicators for the essentials of the concept of voice and young children's attribution of meaning. Indicators, like the way in which and how young children share ideas about what they know, their competences, their needs, what it is that children are touched by, and what choices they make in the light of what they experience (Alderson, 2008; Engel, 2005; Kjørholt, 2005; Mayall, 2008; O'Kane, 2008; Roberts, 2008). These indicators were derived from literature about children's own narratives on experienced childhood and on conversations with children about their perspectives on learning. These indicators were used to decide whether our chosen settings were appropriate for our research in the first place (see chapter 2). Later on we used them as an external, theory-based tool for the content analysis of children's expressions and children's attribution of meaning (see chapters 4-6).

The attribution of meaning and the development of sense occur in a dialogical process, in which the expressions of others resound as well. So essentially all voices are polyphonic. We raised the question whose voice is actually heard when children express their opinions about their education (Bakhtin, 1981; van Oers, 2003). In our research into the content of children's voices, we had to take the specific context in which the children are involved into account, as well as the dialogical character of meaning making.

### **Some complexities in research on young children's voice**

According to Pascal and Bertram (2009), many children - in England - are still not listened to and heard (Roberts, 2008). Researchers are confronted with many struggles and challenges to change the views of adults, who proclaim for instance, that children are too

young to express their voice. This issue of maturity is often related to the inequality in adult-child relationships and the issue of power (Bae, 2010; Einarsson, 2010; Lundy & McEvoy, 2011; Spyrou, 2011). Power with a focus on control by the adult, who stipulates what is and is not permitted in certain (pedagogical) contexts (Bernstein, 2000; Daniels & Edwards, 2009; see also Formosinho & Araújo, 2004).

It seems there are two ways to look at childhood. The first one is the one in which children are deemed individuals to be prepared for becoming part of a society. The second way to look at childhood is the one in which children are seen as already being a part of a society. Corsaro (2000), as well as Rainio (2010) and Ebrahim (2011), consider children as social, active agents. They are seen as key informants of their own lives, who contribute to their own children's cultures and at the same time contribute to the evolution of adult societies. There are even researchers who proclaim that children are "the experts" on their own lives, as children have first-hand knowledge about their lives (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Harcourt et al., 2011), whereas adults have limited understanding of children's lives (Clark & Moss, 2001). Concepts of ownership, autonomy and authenticity are often used in this context (Corsaro, 2000; Ebrahim, 2011; Formosinho & Araújo, 2004; Harcourt, et al., 2011; Kjørholt, 2005). At the same time, Kjørholt, and James (2007) as well, problematized explicitly the concept of authenticity. A concept, that - in relation to children - has to be explored and not assumed, for children are both vulnerable and capable, dependent and independent (Bae, 2010; Kjørholt; 2005; Spyrou, 2011).

Children are not a homogeneous group of people. They have, instead, different perspectives, different voices, partly due to different contexts (Einarsson, 2007) and biographies (McAdams, 2011; Warming, 2011; Wertsch, 2002). For researchers, teachers and parents it is necessary to obtain access to the deeper layers of children's views. Those deeper layers might reveal different contents of voices, sometimes contradictory to earlier expressed perspectives. However, those earlier articulated views are not less authentic or true, compared to the expressed notions from the deeper layers. Although, authenticity is a complex concept, certainly in relation to the polyphony of children's voice (Christensen & James, 2008; Hohti & Karlsson, 2014; Jackson & Mazzei, 2009; Spyrou, 2011). Researching social and cultural reproduction tends to be neglected, as well as the possible influence of the researcher's own views on the collected data. Voicing is social and ideological, and represents, at least partly, the values and beliefs of certain groups. In that sense, children derive their views from the repertoire of perspectives they have inherited from social languages and speech genres within the cultures they belong to (Bakhtin, 1981). When somebody is talking, we may wonder all the time whose voice we are actually hearing. We supposed this is also the case with young children (see for instance Oppenheim and others, 1996).

The issue of the influence of the context was mentioned before. Children participate in cultural places and spaces where adults are often present as well. These adults set their seal on this context too, by (co-)designing it (Clark, 2007, 2010; Kjørholt, 2005) and by visibly and audibly expressing their perspectives. Perspectives, which are expressed by adults either in a constructive, positive way or in a more restricting, negative way (Dockett

& Perry, 2007; Harcourt, et al., 2011; Fabian & Dunlop, 2006; Formosinho & Araújo, 2004). At the same time, the perspectives of the children in their context are often interpreted by these adults with their own values and beliefs, and often from an adult's point of view (Engel, 2005; Kjørholt, 2005; Komulainen, 2007; Spyrou, 2011). Furthermore, although children may be accurately cited by researchers or practitioners, it is still the adult who chooses a text to underline a certain point of view (Hohti & Karlsson, 2014). This is, what James (2007) called, the pitfall of authenticity.

At the same time, children's perspectives, even when they are not directly articulated by adults, are implicitly and explicitly influenced by values and beliefs the children have met in the diverse contexts they belong to (Ebrahim, 2011). For really listening to and understanding children's voice, it is not enough to just hear children's voice, but to explore the nature of their voices: how the voice is shaped and how it is expressed in discourses with others (James, 2007). The questions Einarsdottir (2010) brought forward, after conducting her research on children's expressed experiences after their first year in primary school, could be seen as examples of this exploration of children's voice. She questioned the authenticity of children's voices at the same time. To whom exactly and to what was listened to? Did the reflections of the adults involved in the research really interpret the children's notions and experiences?

Brooker (2011) also asked some critical questions about listening to children, as a principle of (pedagogical) practices. How should this principle - as well as the principle of learning through play and the principle of respecting diversity - be implemented in early education to make them "work"? All three principles are orientations for taking children serious. According to Brooker, it is necessary to pay proper attention to all children, as individuals and as members of social groups. It is also necessary to pay attention to the cultural contexts in which children shape their identities and understandings, and acquire and bring in cultural knowledge and skills.

The literature study we conducted and the complexities and questions we encountered in the work of many early childhood researchers, practitioners and in our own research as well, have directed us to the following questions. What is the content of young children's voice concerning school contexts? Is it possible to determine what belongs to the child himself, and what might belong to possible important others, like teachers, family members and peers, within those contexts? For us, these questions were related to what Brooker (2011) formulated as one of the principles of pedagogical practices: taking children serious. The aim of our study was to gain more insight in the contents of a child's voice by providing a method for listening to and analyzing young children's voices on educational matters. Secondly, we aimed to contribute to the theoretical development of research on young children's voices by providing a heuristic for researching their voices. In our study we focused on children aged 5-6, who were familiar with primary school in the Netherlands already for a period of about two years.

## The research project

Different theoretical perspectives on doing research lead to different choices concerning the appropriate methods for answering the research questions (Harcourt et al., 2011; Lundy & McEvoy, 2011). In line with our dialogical and contextualized view on young children's voice, we grounded our research framework on the (socio)cultural and activity theory (Edwards, 2004; Engeström, 1999; Leont'ev, 1981). First, the cultural and activity theory-approach provided us with the tools to look at activities, expressions and reflections simultaneously. Secondly, this approach provided us with the tools also to study how these activities, expressions and reflections are produced in the dynamic setting of an activity system like school, and - to a certain extent - family and peer culture. The study of dynamics within, as well as between, activity systems show the outcomes of interactions between individuals and in groups, the traditions and responsibilities in those activity systems, and how the resources of cultural contexts of the systems are used (Christopher & Bickhard, 2007; Edwards, 2004; Leont'ev, 1981; Vygotsky, 1994). As a consequence, we decided to conduct qualitative, exploratory research in real life educational environments, with a focus on the developing subjects in activity systems. In such a research, all the participants in the educational contexts – young children as well as their teachers – are considered as *becomings*, instead of considering them as *beings* (Rainio, 2010).

The grounded theory-approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to enter children's worlds and to communicate about their experiences, without having their experiences transformed by the researcher beforehand, or their meanings altered in any significant matter (Grover, 2004; Hedegaard, 2008b; Komulainen, 2007). The contribution to the theoretical knowledge about the phenomenon of children's voice was grounded in the data, which were systematically gathered and analyzed throughout the research process. This was followed by a process of interpretation, which was carried out for the purpose of discovering and organizing concepts and relationships among the data. This in turn contributed to a theoretical and exploratory framework about children's voice (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We started the construction of this theoretical and exploratory framework about the polyvocality of children's voices in chapter 2 and elaborated the framework in the chapters 2-3 and 5-6. In chapter 6 we referred back to this elaborated framework and described all the elements in relation to our research on the content of young children's multidimensional voices, in line with the notions of Hedegaard (2008a) and Hicks (1996).

In our research project we wanted to explore the content of young children's voices with a focus on the meaning young children themselves attribute to the educational contexts in which they participate. We formulated the research question for this project: *Is it possible to identify the content of young children's own, personal, voices in relation to their own school contexts?*

As we proclaimed that all voices are essentially polyphonic, we first had to raise the research question whether it was possible to identify which correspondences could be

found between expressed meaning making by young children in school and those which are closely related to these children, that is, their teachers, their parents and their peers.

We formulated this first research question with two sub-questions:

- 1.1 What meaning do young children ascribe to their education with regard to:
  - a. the different (kinds) of activities they encounter in school;
  - b. the ways these activities are organized; and
  - c. the roles of the teacher?
- 1.2 What meaning do the teachers and the parents/caregivers of the young children ascribe to (their) children's education (the different activities, the way they are organized and the roles of the teacher)?
  - a. What are the similarities among children, their teachers and parents/caregivers with regard to ascribing meaning to education?
  - b. What are the differences among children, their teachers and parents/caregivers with regard to ascribing meaning to education?

After answering the previous research questions, we addressed our main research question:

2. Is it possible to identify, from what is voiced by the child, what belongs to "to himself" concerning the meaning the young child attributes to the school context in which he participates?

We expected no universal answers, but situated, personal answers of the children and adults involved in the research. On the one hand, we expected comparable and corresponding answers among the children, and between the children and the adults in our research. On the other hand, we expected personal answers of the children without correspondences in the answers of others involved in the research. At the same time, we expected to develop a method for researching children's voice in relation to other voices, that would be useful and appropriate for our own research and beyond. Our aim was to develop such a method to analyze the content of young children's voices, as well as to distinguish different kinds of correspondences between children's voices and the voices of the one's they are closely related to.

## Methods

Our qualitative study was conducted with the case study approach to gain more insight into the social phenomenon of young children's voices about their educational contexts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This phenomenon was studied in its natural context (Hohti & Karlsson, 2014). The case study method allowed us to research the meaningful characteristics of a complex social phenomenon as children's voice, in which questions were posed on how, where and when, as well as the conditions under which children's voices were expressed (Yin, 2009).

The study is built on five sequentially ordered case studies. The scale of this multiple-case study arrangement was too small to assess statistically. However, the case studies provided all raw, authentic data, which were highly informative and had social significance.

They reflected the lived experiences of the children, and not on how children were supposed to feel, or expected to interpret the experiences. The researcher was not looking for confirmations of predictions, but was present to listen to the children, adding another dimension to the picture than the (strictly) quantitative dimension. The qualitative dimension of context-bound communication and shared understanding between researcher and children had its own authenticity and validity (Grover, 2004; Komulainen, 2007). The nature of our research demanded a form of mixed methods, combining the different perspectives among the children, and also among their teachers and parents, in a dialogical research process (Schoonenboom, in press).

In each case study one child (“focal” child) was observed in his own natural educational context, that is, his primary school, for a week (see Table 1), interacting with peers and his teacher(s) during regular school activities. In line with the findings of research on young children’s perspectives, we used a range of participatory methods (Christensen & James, 2008; Clark, 2007, 2010; Einarsdóttir, 2007; Harcourt et al., 2011; Komulainen, 2007; Lundy & McEvoy, 2011). In behalf of the research, the teachers had arranged a play area in school as well, where the children were invited “to play school”. We provided the children with a disposable camera and invited them to take pictures, about what they thought was important in school. We discussed the pictures with the children later on. The children were also involved in a semi-structured interview about their “ideal” school. Finally, we posed propositions in which we asked about their feelings on regular school activities, the rules and routines in school, and the involvement of and interaction with their teacher(s) and peers. The semi-structured interviews, the activity with the propositions and the discussions about the pictures the children had taken, organized in small groups of children, were videotaped.

Table 1

*Schematic Program of Research Activities in the Primary Schools of the Focal Children*

Days of the Week	Research Methods	Participants	Recording
Day 1	Observations regular school activities	All children and teacher(s) in class and during outside play	Direct observations of activities; field notes by hand in a diary
Day 2	Tour in and outside class with a disposable camera	Three children, including the focal children	Direct observations of activities; field notes by hand in a diary
	Observations regular activities	All children and teacher(s)	Direct observations of activities; field notes by hand in a diary
Day 3	Playing school in the play area	Focal child(ren) with peers	Video recording
	Observations regular activities	All children and teacher(s)	Direct observations of activities; field notes by hand in a diary
Day 4	Responding to propositions about feelings in/on school	Three children, including the focal children	Video recording
	Observations regular activities	All children and teacher(s)	Direct observations of activities; field notes by hand in a diary
Day 5	Interview about "ideal" school	Three children, including the focal children	Video recording
	Discussing pictures	Three children, including the focal children	Video recording
	Observations regular activities	All children and teacher(s)	Direct observations of activities; field notes by hand in a diary

*Note.* The arranged activities (playing school in the play area, taking pictures and discussing them, talking about propositions, and a semi-structured interview) were flexibly interwoven in the daily activities. Taking pictures was planned in the beginning of the week, as the pictures had to be developed and printed, before they could be discussed. The semi-structured interview and the talking about propositions took place at the end of the week, as the relationship between children and researcher needed time to develop. Playing (school) in the play area could take place at any convenient moment when the children felt like it and were offered the opportunity.

Video recording, with a standing camera, was used in defined settings (playing school in the play area, responding to propositions, talking about the pictures the children had taken, and the interview about the ideal school). The researcher had the explicit role of the interviewer during those activities, besides her role as a marginal observer during playing in the play corner. The researcher wrote down the observations by hand in the situations in school and on the school premises, where the children were moving around as they were used to do. Field notes by hand were made as well about the context and circumstances in which the (video) observations took place. The researcher took the role of a marginal observer of the daily school practices the children were involved in. Data analysis took

place after the week of observations in school. After the period of observations in school in each case study, the teacher(s) and parents of the focal child who was involved in the case study, were interviewed about their perspectives on school activities, the school organization and teacher's roles. These semi-structured interviews were audio recorded. Data analysis of these recordings took place afterwards. The analysis of these interviews with the adults was focused on locating possible correspondences between the opinions expressed by the focal child and his parents and teacher(s), not on finding statistical correlations between, or making causal assumptions about the compared contents of expressions by the focal children, parents and teachers.

The conditions under which we conducted our case studies were quite favorable. We had to make sure from the start that we would be able to gain insight in the phenomenon we wanted to study (i.e. voice). We presumed that if it would not succeed under these favorable circumstances, it probably would not succeed at all.

## Participants

The five children in the case studies attended all a mixed age-group class in a Dutch primary school.

The first case study was conducted in spring 2007 in a primary school in a little village in Limburg (south part of the Netherlands). The second and third case studies were conducted in autumn 2008 in a primary school in the west part of Amsterdam. The fourth and fifth case studies were conducted in spring 2009 in a primary school in a village near Amsterdam.

All the children involved in the case studies, had one or more sibling, except for one child. All children lived with their parents, and they all had a middle class background. The children performed on an average cognitive and social-emotional level, according to the school monitoring systems.

An intake with a representative of the school management in each primary school was organized, in which the study was explained and cooperation was requested. The school management asked teachers in their team whether they were willing to participate in the research. With every volunteering teacher we had a meeting about the study, their willingness to make an arrangement for a play area, taking part in a semi-structured interview, and having a visitor around for a week. The teachers were consulted in deciding which children would participate in the study as they knew the children best. Agreements were made about informing all parents and asking for their consent in line with the policies each school had employed. Information on paper was available for the parents (see Appendix A) and a meeting between the researcher and parents, before the research would take place, was offered as well.

The teachers informed all the parents and after they had given their (written) consent and the parents of the focal children in the case studies also had agreed to a semi-structured interview, the children were informed. The teachers had told them that there would be a visitor in their class for a week, who was professionally interested in what young children were doing in school, and that some children could be invited to interact in



some arranged activities. Visits from outsiders in school were not unusual to the children. Student-teachers, teacher-trainers, counselors and parents, among others, were all regular visitors in the school and in the classes. Recordings like video tapings were familiar to the children as well, and were often used in the practice of student-trainers, with restrictions to the privacy of the children in line with the school policies.

The content of the research during a week in school and the involvement of the children, was explained by the researcher during circle time at the start of the first day.

(...) After mentioning my name I explained to the children that I was also a “schoolmiss”, but in my case I didn’t have young children in my class, but grown-ups. They would like to become teachers in due time, just like their own teacher. For our adult students to become “good” teachers, it is important to be well informed, as well as educated by teacher-trainers like myself, and by teachers in practice. But children are also important informants for future-teachers. Children most certainly know what is going on in school and have their views about what is important and worthwhile in school, and what is not. As they are familiar in what is going on in school and I am not, I hope that they will lend me their “eyes” during this week from time to time, and share some knowledge and ideas with me. So I could take those shared experiences with me to my own school to the benefit of teacher-trainers and future-teachers. That the children were free to cooperate in the research, and they certainly could say no to the invitation if they would not want to get involved (...).

During this introduction most of the children looked in my direction and afterwards some smiled at me, and some children were nodding. A few children pointed at miss M., who was their student-teacher.

Field note, March 2009

## Data collection and analysis

After each research week, all the collected data were transcribed verbatim and the transcribed data were processed in a computer program for qualitative data analysis. Researchers, who are gathering data to insert them into pre-existing adult categorization schemes, which form part of an overarching theory, collect data which are easy quantifiable. However, those adult categorizations sometimes may be inconsistent with children’s views, regarding the appropriate manner in which to analyze and describe their experiences (Grover, 2004). We used the computer program Kwalitan (Peters, 2000; Kwalitan, [www.kwalitan.nl](http://www.kwalitan.nl)) for building our own coding system. Categorizations in the coding system emerged from analyzing the phenomenological data, in line with the grounded theory approach.

Data analysis was oriented to the concept voice taking into account mutuality and multi-voicedness (Wertsch, 1991). A process of creating meaning out of the collected data, challenging the researchers to look at the data from different, multiple and contradictory perspectives on the dynamics of human interaction (Grover, 2004; Komulainen, 2007). First, the analysis was carried out on the individual basis of each case study, paying attention to the different methods and the socio-cultural context in which the data were produced. We considered the data from the other settings (playing school in the play area, responding to propositions, taking pictures and talking about them, and the interview about the ideal school) as complementary to the data we collected in the observations of the regular daily activities. Similarly we used the information about the relationships between the different

activities, and the contradictions and possible tensions (Edwards, 2004) as complementary data. Secondly, after the data analyses of all the individual case studies, we looked across the cases for themes, related to the daily lives of the children in school and how these themes were generated and shared (Holland et al., 2010). The analysis was abductive, oriented on interpretations of the data, the analytical and historical reconstruction of the particular and local contexts, and the possible comparability of the interpreted data in the different contexts (Komulainen, 2007; Rainio, 2010). Children are not a homogenous group of people. They express a variety of voices that have to be listened to, as we have pointed out before (Einarsdóttir, 2007). It was not our intention to make generalizations about the generated and shared data (Holland et al., 2010; Rainio, 2010). The outcomes of the data analysis were used to provide meaningful and understandable models, and arguments contributing to a framework of theoretical concepts, instead of the other way around (Warming, 2011).

### Quality assurance

From a social construction perspective, the data generated in communication with research-participants - like children, teachers, parents, as well as the researchers - were regarded as a product of joint respondent-researcher interaction, and not as a provision of pure information or viewpoints from the participants. This perspective required a specific way of looking at the quality, validity and accuracy of the data collection, taking into account that social institutions and cultures are produced by adults and children. At the same time, social institutions and cultures influence the notions of both adults and children and their relationships (Hill, 2006; Hohti & Karlsson, 2014). Besides, the interpretation of the research results were – at least partly – in the hands of the researcher who was also participating in the research context. The researcher had to scrutinize her own acting and voicing during and after the study by peer debriefing on a regular basis, presentations at (inter)national conferences yearly, submitting manuscripts to peer reviewed journals, and involving external experts in data analyses and data interpretation. Two external experts in the field of early childhood education were involved, as peer researchers, in the data analyses of the recordings of the children's observations and the interviews with parents and teachers. The researcher and the peer researchers had to ask themselves all the time whether they could be sure they reflected on the experiences and expressions of the children, teachers and parents involved in the case studies (Einarsdóttir, 2007).

Independently of the perspective that was enacted, there was a need for explicitness, transparency and consistency about what is reasonable, convincing and coherent concerning the research of a social phenomenon like children's voice (Formosinho & Araújo, 2006; Huberman & Miles, 2002; Lewis, 2010). To establish validity and reliability, we took appropriate measures and followed procedures such as using multiple sources of evidence, creating a case study database, and organizing peer debriefing on a regular basis (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Yin, 2009). Over the years, papers and posters were presented at national and international conferences as well, and the contents were discussed. These

measures and procedures contributed to increase reliability and construct validity (Yin, 2009). However, establishing internal, and particularly external, validity is a more complex process in the light of the limited generalizability potential of case study research on social phenomena like children's voice (Ruzzene, 2012). According to Ruzzene (2012), the focus should be placed more on comparability instead of external validity per se. Case study research lacks representativeness to some extent, because the number of cases in which a general phenomenon is studied, is often limited. When considering comparability among case studies, the need for external validity could be more reliably addressed due to the above measures. As a consequence, an appropriate choice of cases was highly relevant. It was essential that the cases in the study were typical, in the sense of being representative, within the context of the studied phenomenon. In that sense typicality was a key requirement, as well as the criterion of comparability, for establishing external validity. Relevant, identified factors in the case studies needed to be similar, so comparability among the cases was to be expected and external validity could be established. Identified factors were, for instance, children's age, their socio-economic background and cognitive and social-emotional level of development.

The researcher, during the study with the involved children, their parents and teachers, had more than one role. During observations of the regular activities in school and playing school in the play area, the researcher remained the marginal observer. When the children were involved in the arranged activities and other settings, like group interviews, were applied, the researcher was the outsider, the detached or "other" adult. This was also the case when the researcher was the interviewer, communicating with the teachers and the parents of the focal children (Grover, 2004; Holland et al., 2010; Komulainen, 2007; Lewis & Lindsay, 2000). It was impossible to strictly separate the researcher's acting from the participants in this study, which complicates notions of simple truths or validity claims. There is not a one and only solution for solving this problem. Only using reflexive techniques in the exploration of the data collection and analysis, by paying attention to ethics, reciprocity and responsibility in cooperation, and to practice inter-subjectivity, contribute to the possible diminishment of this problem (Komulainen, 2007).

Paying attention to ethics is unconditional in research with children and even more as young children are involved (Ethical Code, 2014). It is often the third party, the adults, who decide whether children are given the choice to participate or not. The parents, teachers, as well as school principals, are the gatekeepers with their own responsibilities towards the children, who had to give their consent as well (Einarsdóttir, 2007; Harcourt et. al, 2011; Lewis & Lindsay, 2000). Children were asked to give their consent at the start of the research, but the permission to participate and share information was renegotiated with the children at a number of points throughout the research, to ensure on-going informed consent (David et al., 2001; Formosinho & Araújo, 2006; Maybin, 2013).

## Outline of the research project

We started our case study research on young children's voice with an exploratory study.

This study was conducted to investigate which methods under which conditions were appropriate to hear young children and to listen to them. We had to take into account that children's views are multiple and changeable, as well as the way in which they express them (Engel, 2005; Warming, 2011). Special attention had to be paid to the context, for children could not be separated from the context. Children are determined by it and influence the context as well (Brooker, 2011; Clark, 2007, 2010; Kjørholt, 2005; Vygotsky, 1994, 1997). In **chapter 2** we have described this first phase of our research project. Based on a literature study, we formulated the essentials of the concepts of voice and attribution of meaning by young children. We tested in our first case study the settings and methods for data collection, mostly based on the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We researched the possibilities to connect the findings of our exploratory study to the formulated indicators of voice and attribution of meaning, and we set the first steps in building a coding system for analyzing young children's expressions.

In **chapter 3** we have described the adjustments we made in our settings and methods of research, based on the discussion and conclusions of our exploratory study. We elaborated our coding system for analyzing children's expressions and developed a first draft of a data coding system in the computer program Kwalitan ([www.kwalitan.nl](http://www.kwalitan.nl)). This program offered the possibility to build a coding system and include codes, definitions and memos, as well as matrices and frequency tables to optimize the transparency of the research process. To prevent the data from being prematurely structured into existing categories of thinking and so to control one's own perceptual and cognitive biases (Grover, 2004), we built our own coding system. We followed the grounded theory approach, in which the characteristics ("properties") as well as the subcategories emerged from the collected data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The main categories in the coding system: school activities, school organization and teacher's roles, were derived from our sub-questions of the first research question, as part of our exploration of the content of young children's voices. The focus of this exploration was oriented to the meaning young children attribute to the educational contexts in which they participate, with regard to the school activities, the ways these activities are organized and the teacher's roles.

We planned and conducted the next four case studies. At this point we had to evaluate our coding system and we had to deal with the issues of validity and reliability, as well as accountability and transparency. An important step in the research procedure was to establish content validity. We had to make sure that children's interpretations of the "scenario's" presented or discussed in arranged activities were the same for all the children involved (Appendix B.1). Initial propositions were included (as well as examples by the children themselves) in the activity in which we communicated about children's feelings in and on school, to check whether children understood the propositions and what the emoticons were representing (Murray & Harrison, 2005).

Two external experts in the field of early childhood went through the same coding processes to analyze the data from two of our case studies to establish intercoder-reliability (Krippendorff, 2004). As a consequence we optimized the procedure of data analysis (Appendix C). The transcribed interviews were read and commented by the parents and

teachers in our case studies. Peer debriefing among the researchers, also for triangulation reasons, was organized on a regular basis and we maintained a chain of evidence (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Yin, 2009). We started a procedure for a research quality trail to increase visibility and comprehensibility throughout our research process (Akkerman, Admiraal, Brekelmans & Oost, 2008; see Appendix D).

The next step in our research project was the exploration and comparison of the content of expressions of the case study children and the way they expressed them. This is the focus of **chapter 4** in which we answered the first sub-question:

- 1.1 What meaning do the young children ascribe to their education with regard to:
  - a. the different (kinds) of *activities* they encounter in school;
  - b. the ways these activities are *organized*; and
  - c. the *roles of the teachers*?

The data were first analyzed on the individual level of each focal child in interactions with peers, then followed by cross case analyses (Creswell, 2007). Specific attention was paid to the social and cultural context in which the data were produced, and to establish ecological validity (Edwards, 2004). Generalizability on children's expressed experiences was not the aim, but gaining insight into what these case study children articulated, developed and enacted in their daily (school) lives, extracted from a richness of data (Geertz, 1973; Holland et al., 2010; Ruzzene, 2012). Consistency and content validation were issues, which had to be considered in the interests of all the participants. Transparent procedures, relevant and unambiguous questions and adequate themes presented to children and adults, as well as reflexivity on the part of the researchers had to be taken into account (Formosinho & Araújo, 2006; Hohti & Karlsson, 2014). Reflexivity by researchers is approached as a process of self-analysis, which is achieved through detachment, internal dialogue and daily scrutiny of the research process, mainly at the level of interpretations of field experiences.

We analyzed the data from the interviews of the teachers and parents of the focal children the same way as we did with the collected data from the children, so we could answer the second sub-question of the first research question:

- 1.2 What meaning do the teachers and the parents/caregivers of the young children ascribe to the activities in education, the way they are organized and the roles of the teacher?

In **chapter 5** we interpreted the analyzed data from the interviews with the adults to compose their individual narratives, regarding the specific situations of the parents and teachers involved, the content of the shared information, and the way they were interacting in the interviews. By cross case analyses we compared all the narratives of the adults, looking for similar and contrasting themes, views and beliefs. For paying attention to consistency, two external experts in the field of early childhood went through the same process of narrative analysis as the researchers. Then, we contrasted, as part of our dialectic, hermeneutic approach, our findings with the data we gathered in the research settings with the children

(Rainio, 2010). For reliability and triangulation reasons, the two external experts also went through the same process of analysis, looking for corresponding and rival interpretations of themes in the narratives of the adults (Appendix E.1). Based on the found corresponding themes in adults' narratives by internal and external researchers, we composed lists of leading (returning and/or outspoken) expressions by parents and teachers, which we compared with children's leading expressions (Appendix E.2). This process of comparing adults' and children's expressions made it possible to answer the two underlying questions of the second sub- question:

- 1.2.a. What are the similarities among children, their teachers and parents/caregivers with regard to ascribing meaning to education?
- 1.2.b. What are the differences among children, their teachers and parents/caregivers with regard to ascribing meaning to education?

At this point, after answering the previous questions, we arrived at answering our main research question:

2. Is it possible to identify, from what is voiced by the child, what belongs to "to himself" concerning the meaning the young child attributes to the educational context in which he participates?

In **chapter 6** the main results of the research project are discussed and integrated, including the role of peers. The limitations of the research project are also discussed. Reflective remarks on the use of our research methods, in relation to the aim of the research and the research design, are made and complexities in conducting research on young children's voice are addressed. Finally, our contribution to a framework of theoretical concepts, implications for further research and the possible impact of the research findings on early childhood education are presented.

The chapters 2–5 were published in or submitted to different international peer-reviewed journals, so some repetition of content in these chapters was unavoidable. At the same time, the content of these chapters in this dissertation is (slightly) adapted for reasons of readability and cross-referencing within the dissertation. Advancing insights during the research process led to some – minor - textual re-adjustments.

## Societal relevance

Childhood may be considered as a socially constructed period in the lifetime of children. Childhood as a meaningful concept, adopted by many, is an invention of modern society, and the product of values, discourses and practices (Johansson, 2012; Lowe, 2012). Different cultures create different versions of childhoods, drawing on social, political and economic influences (Ariès, 1962; Edwards, 2004; Engel, 2005; Johansson, 2012; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008).

From a sociological point of view, children's voice is also a social construct. Researchers should be prudent in attributing this construct. Too easily it is presumed that children have rich and meaningful messages, which could be exchanged, as well as have intentions in line with situations which are defined by adults, and which could be researched in an ethical manner. Such an approach denies the multiple and changeable notions of the self, the performative and negotiated personal and collective dimension in perspectives, as well as the influence of the spaces in which the notions are expressed (Edwards, 2004; Hohti & Karlsson, 2014; Komulainen, 2007).

Our western society has developed more and more towards a knowledge society in the last decades and this process is still going on. Participants need a certain degree of moral and intellectual autonomy to act adequately in such a society (Hargreaves, 2003). Education contributes to this process of autonomy-development by focusing, for instance, on children as skilled citizens in a society. At the same time, we see that schools and public institutions, like day care centers and after-school services, often have images about childhood, based on theory and practices, far from the reality children live in nowadays. We live in a society in which constitutional changes take place rapidly, like the increase of all kinds of after-school services, where children spend a great deal of their time – out of sight of their families. So notions considered obvious in former days are undermined, and this causes a sense of insecurity and decreasing control within parents or caregivers (Prout, 2003).

Early childhood educators are supposed to be keepers of the gateway into the normalizing education system. As a consequence, one of the challenges facing them is how to do serious justice to what is called the funds of knowledge of families and communities which have already shaped children's minds (Edwards, 2004; González, Moll & Amanti, 2005). "Funds of knowledge" refers to the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills, like individual functioning and well-being, which are essential for the sustainability of institutions. Educators have to be able to understand the ecology in which a child has developed and they have to be able to think ecologically in the development of their provisions (Edwards, 2004). Children's voices are configured within institutional interactional contexts, expressed in particular kinds of voices (more or less hearable) and which convey different kinds of values (Maybin, 2013). By "echoing, borrowing and appropriating voices" (Maybin, 2013, p. 386), children reproduce the authoritative voices of education, popular culture and parents, as well as appropriate various degrees of commitment to these voices. Schools are resistant to change to a great extent and classrooms are dominated by the voices of the educators (Hohti & Karlsson, 2014; Valentine, 2011). In this way, children often help to induct each other into institutional practices, repeating or rephrasing the authoritative voices (of the teacher, of the curriculum) that direct their activities. Children could be seen as objects in the structure of social reproduction, including the school system. It could be considered the paradox of pedagogy: education for freedom (child's own autonomy and agency) within the necessary constraints of the school system (teacher's control on the use of freedom in a good way), according to Rainio (2010).

There are educators who proclaim the non-existence of this antithesis between children and adults, and that, on the contrary, children show to a large extent autonomy in speaking and behavior. Children are, just like adults, capable of self-socialization, expressed in personal choices and perspectives, and so they may be deemed competent and socially skilled agents in education; more beings than becomings (Baraldi, 2008). Children's own perspectives are thus considered the starting point in education and teachers ought to follow children in their development towards emancipation. This view on education was, for instance, the foundation of the Reggio Emilia-approach (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998).

Here we see two, almost opposite, views on children's characteristics and appropriate learning environments. Differences in views on child development and the necessary requirements to contribute to this development, have resulted in schools grounded in different educational philosophies, attributing different values to the nature of the child (being versus becoming) and to educational systems.

Despite the different views on children's autonomy-development and authenticity in relation to education, it is necessary to gain insight in children's perspectives. For teachers' responsiveness to children's needs to become skilled citizens in society, was and is considered an important starting point for education (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2011). So, if we want to do children justice, we have to raise the question: to whom are we actually listening when children express their opinions, and is it possible to identify children's own voices? We will get back to this issue at the end of this dissertation.



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