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Building a method for researching attribution of meaning by children aged 5-6 in school²

Chapter 2



² Based on: Tertoolen, A., van Oers, B., Geldens, J., & Popeijus, H. (2012). Building a Method for Researching Attribution of Meaning by Children Aged 5 to 6 in School. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 20(1), 115-131. doi:10.1080/1350293X.2012.650015

Introduction

In the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) is stated that every child³, who is capable in forming his own views, has the right to express his opinions freely in all matters affecting the child (article 12 and 13). Based on article 12 particularly, children are often consulted and involved in decision-making by local and national projects in many countries (Clark, 2007; Clark, Kjørholt & Moss, 2005; Prout, 2003). Children should be seen, not only as becomings but particularly as beings with their views, opinions, choices, and relations (Clark, 2007; Prout, 2003). Citizenship, giving voice, autonomy, and diversity are key notions, used frequently in this context (Prout, 2003). Children are also seen as participants in a society, with valuable notions about services or institutions they are involved in (Dahlberg, 2005; Prout, 2003).

In educational settings (future) teachers always have to deal with children, who have their own images and judgments about the purposes of school, about what is going on there, what children have to or can do, and what is or is not allowed. Such images can support the educational processes, but in some situations they may lead to problematic interactions when the ideas of children and their teachers do not harmonize. This may also occur when young children are involved and this could lead to problems with adjustments in schools (Fabian & Dunlop, 2006; Kjørholt, 2005).

But what are the opinions of young children themselves about the education they receive daily? What do they think about the activities they encounter in this educational context? How do they view their own teacher? What do they experience in school? What is the meaning of school or how do they value education? What is their motivation?

These are fundamental questions if we want to be responsive to the needs of children and try to stimulate their development. Teachers' responsiveness is an important issue in many contemporary educational philosophies (David, 1996; Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998; Laevers & Depondt, 2004; van Oers & Janssen-Vos, 1995; Prout, 2003). But it may cause a huge problem at the same time: to whom or to what do we adjust when we see the individual child as a starting point? To be responsive means, for instance, not to speak for children, but let children speak for themselves by giving them a voice to express their own perceptions and actions (Hallet & Prout, 2003). But how should children be given a voice and listened to? To what extent are the ideas of young children their own? Is it possible to determine what the original or personal opinions of young children are? And if we could answer those questions, what might be the impact of those answers on education for instance? It is not possible to answer these questions yet. We have to explore the concept of young children's voices first, and so we decided to carry out several case studies looking for the voice of the young child. In order to do so, we had to develop a research framework and build an appropriate coding system. This was the first step in our research project.

This chapter describes how we started our own research project by testing settings

3 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'.

and collecting data, to see if we could connect them with the formulated indicators of the concept of voice and attribution of meaning by young children. The aim of this first phase of our research project is to develop an appropriate structure to analyze elements of the voice of the young child we found in our collected data, according to the indicators we will formulate.

Building a research framework

Our first step was building a research framework. According to Bakhtin, a voice always exists in relation to other voices and any utterance produced by a voice is expressed from a point of view (Wertsch, 1991). Research indicates that meanings acquired by someone, at the same time, have traces of both cultural content and meanings of others. Whatever someone is saying, “the word in language is half someone else’s” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293; Wertsch, 2002). Following Bakhtin (1981), we may define voice as a polyphonic phenomenon, expressed in the diverse utterances of a “speaking personality”. In this definition we see a dimension related with the personality and the complex developmental history of the speaker (see Wertsch, 1991), but certainly with a dimension of contextualization as well, related with the intentions (meanings) somebody wants to express in a certain situation (according to Bernstein, 2000; Daniels & Edwards, 2009). So the voice of an individual can be heard in the utterances a person in a situation wants to express. An utterance, however, also has non-verbal aspects, which may express (part of) a person’s meanings. So in order to include non-verbal aspects as meaningful manifestations of a person’s voice, we use the term expressions, rather than utterances, in which the voice of an individual is revealed.

Opinions children have about all kinds of objects are partly determined by social, cultural, historical and biographic influences, as well as elements of context-related interactions (Bourdieu, 1991; Warming, 2005). Children learn to be a part of a family and learn to be students by participating in certain culturally specified situations (Fabian & Dunlop, 2006). Children cannot be excluded from context; they are determined by it and influence the context as well. The opinions of children, certainly young children, are not unambiguous. On the contrary, they are multiple, dynamic, changeable (Engel, 2005; Warming, 2005).

Listening to individual children is a method to gain insight in the notions and opinions of children. At the same time those children could never be isolated when we want to study them in an ecologically valid way. Hence, the context of the children is part of the research project too, in which not only teachers and parents/caregivers are important others, but the other children around them as well. The question is then which settings, under which circumstances, are appropriate to listen to young children - taking into account also the notion that the perspective of young children and the way in which they express their views is multiple, dynamic and changeable (Engel, 2005; Warming, 2005). Observations, interviews, play, stories and arts are examples of methods and techniques to let children speak (Clark, 2007; Clark et al., 2005; Christensen & James, 2008; Greig, Taylor & MacKay, 2007; van Oers, 2003). Clark (2007) mentions the Mosaic approach: a deliberate use of several methods and techniques with children within the educational context in order to build a picture of a child as complete and reliable as possible. Basically, the Mosaic approach can be seen as a triangulation method in the research with young children. The choice of certain methods and techniques is not only a matter of the children’s age, but also due to the specific context in which the children are asked about their notions of that context and those who are involved on what moments (Clark, 2007; Fabian & Dunlop, 2006; Warming, 2005).

As yet very little is known about how children's voices should be listened to and interpreted. Due to this situation, it is almost impossible to design experimental research projects for scrutinizing the functional details of children's voices. As we want to study phenomena in real life situations in general, and to answer questions about how we can search for the child's voice more specifically, the most appropriate way was to use the design of the multiple case study in our research project (Yin, 2003). It enables us to look into meaningful characteristics of young children's school lives with direct observations of young children in the school context, giving us a more profound insight in the social process of young children's behavior in context and in the way they experience this context (Wester & Peters, 2004; Yin, 2003). We have planned a sequence of case studies positioned in time, a methodological approach, which enables us to study speaking as well as acting, but also the social-cultural context in which the children are involved (Warming, 2005). This results in a so called multiple case study (Yin, 2003) with a qualitative-interpretative approach in a flexible design (Robson, 2002). It enables us to build up a design that develops over time, gaining insight in theory and practice about children's voices and attribution of meaning by those children. Basically, the sequence is carried out until saturation occurs in the found phenomena and patterns (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In our research project we use a qualitative interpretative approach for studying the voices of young children and the way they attribute meaning. Data, collected in social reality and analyzed in a systematical way, can help us to gain insight in the practice and theory about the concept of voice and attribution of meaning by young children, and at the same time ground theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We decided to use the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We started by observing a child in his or her social pre-structured reality of school life with a researcher participating in the observed educational setting. The raw data collected from this setting, had to be ordered in a way that enabled us to discover concepts and relationships by a continuing process of interpretation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Hedegaard, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1984). Hence, after collecting the data, coding the data is the second step by identifying, developing, reducing, elaborating and relating (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Wester & Peters, 2004).

In our research project we focus on voice or expression and attribution of meaning by young children in situations and events in school, as can be seen and heard in the speaking and acting of these children in interactions with other children and adults. Besides the verbal and non-verbal aspects of expressions we look for underlying elements of expression like "thinking, feeling and wanting", which are part of the personality of a subject and which play their part in the acting person (González Rey, 2008). The different elements of our concept of voice and attribution of meaning are shown in Figure 1.

In Figure 1 we show that in our research project the focus lies on the young child in context. In this context the child, the person, is present and acting. He is doing so verbally as well as non-verbally, and so the child is showing visibly and audibly (in the way he is acting) his attribution of meaning to activities he is involved in. González Rey (2008) refers to thinking and feeling as categories of the acting personality uniting intellect and affect. Thinking and feeling can be considered as an aspect of conation, an aspect of mental

processes, having to do with striving or wanting (Reber & Reber, 2001).

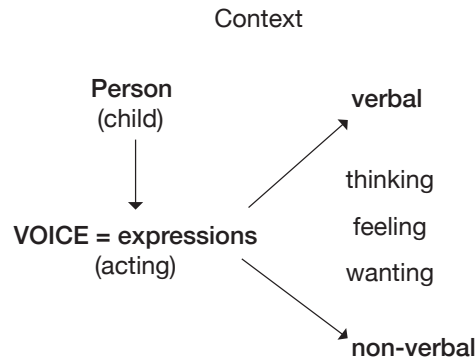


Figure 1. Related Elements in the Concept of Voice and Attribution of Meaning

We define attribution of meaning in this research project as the way in which the young child expresses his notions, verbally and non-verbally, on three aspects he encounters in the context of the daily practice of his educational setting: the activities, the organization in the school context and the roles of his teacher or teachers. By activities we refer to the current classroom projects, consisting of learning contents and educational activities, either compulsory or chosen by a child in school. Our definition of organization is: the setting, measures and requirements in class and school, facilitating the desired educational learning processes to occur. The teacher's role is defined as a set of professional roles and appropriate responsibilities brought in by the teacher and appealed to by others, like children, parents, colleagues, et cetera.

We have to formulate main indicators that will enable us to decide if our chosen settings are appropriate for our research. We decided to use observations of the child in his daily school context, observations of play in a play area, and interviewing this child. We studied literature on children's narratives about their own experiences (Engel, 2005; van Oers, 2003), children telling their own stories on experienced childhood (O'Kane, 2008), children as co-researchers of their own lives (Alderson, 2008), conversations with children, starting from their own experiences and expressed feelings (Kjørholt, 2005; Mayall, 2008), and participant observation as a way to learn about children's perspectives (Warming, 2005). Based on the findings of these authors, we formulated our (preliminary) indicators as possible manifestations of voice and attribution of meaning within the school context:

- choices a child makes;
- sharing ideas by the child about competences and needs;
- showing what a child knows by pointing out, investigating, confirming, opposing;
- expressed feelings by the child; and
- the child's intention to gain something related to others.

In our project we choose for a participating researcher, making field notes of what

is perceptible in the social construction of meanings among child, peers and teacher. Video recordings were made as well. This offers us the opportunity to study the acting and speaking of children from a (micro)genetic approach, whilst also taking into account the social and institutional context in which the children are simultaneously involved (Hicks, 1996). As we stated before, children are always and inevitably involved in a context, and anyone in that context sets his seal on it. So is the researcher, who is around during the research in the school setting. We paid special attention to the interference of the researcher in the school context, while interpreting the outcomes of the collected data. Clark (2007) states, also for that reason, to use several instruments to do justice to the possibilities of young children to be actively involved in research on several occasions in several situations or activities. Her starting point is that young children, even 3- to 4-years-old, are competent and active meaning-makers in their own environment. The Mosaic approach, consisting of a range of methods, was developed to give young children a voice in the evaluation of their own childhood services. Observation and interviewing are the more traditional methods for listening to young children. But the Mosaic approach combines these methods with photography and book-making (on “important things”), tours (around the childhood services, directed and recorded by the children), map-making (2D presentations of children’s photographs and drawings) and the magic carpet (a slide show of familiar and different places). In the evaluation process, the perspectives of children and adults were heard and discussed. The perspectives of the children was seen and used as a fundamental contribution to the decisions on continuity and changes in the early childhood services involved (Clark, 2005, 2007).

Using multiple settings, like in Clark’s research with young children, may also be considered as a form of data triangulation (Yin, 2003) - or at least may reveal different, complementary information about children’s experiences in the school context (Hedegaard, 2008).

We started our research project with a preliminary study testing our settings and building a coding system, looking for elements in our data that may be connected to the formulated indicators of the concept of voice and attribution of meaning by children.

We have deliberately chosen quite favorable research conditions for our exploratory case study. We assumed that the selection of a research subject with these qualities would maximize the chances to find information about our method of data gathering. If it would not work under these conditions, we believe it would not work at all.

Exploratory study

Context

We started this research project with an exploratory study in a primary school in a small village in the south of the Netherlands (Limburg). This school bases its educational philosophy on “Basic Development”, which means a specific form of developmental education for young children based on Vygotskian theory (see van Oers, 2003, 2009). In this primary school young children aged 4-6 are grouped together in a classroom (there are three such classes) and there is one class with young children aged 5-7 (next to classes with older children).

With the board of the school we had a preliminary conversation about the possibilities to make observations in a classroom with young children for a week, and to undertake certain activities with one of the children (and the other children might play a part as well). One of the teachers, with 30 years of experience in teaching young children, was willing to cooperate in the research project and the school decided which focal child should be involved. In advance of the start of the project the school was informed about the desired characteristics of the intended focal child: a child who feels at ease in school, who has enough self-confidence, is verbally rather capable, and feels freely towards outsiders (not too shy or too easily impressed), who would be expected to act in his normal way even with a researcher around, and capable in expressing what he wants or does not want to get involved in. A child also with parents who were willing to cooperate in the research project. The child's parents agreed with written consent on the participation of their son in the research project. This procedure resulted in the selection of a boy, aged 6.5. His older brother and sister were in the same school; a younger brother did not attend school yet. Starting school the boy, called Tom, seemed rather self-centered, but after almost two years in class with the same teacher, he changed into a boy who was, most of the time, social, popular among peers, and had a good relationship with his teacher. Tom was also cognitively doing well at school, though probably not as highly gifted as his sister. He showed a great interest in practically everything that was presented in school and generally he liked attending school, and spending time with peers and adults. Tom's mother also agreed to an interview with herself after the research at school. Tom was explicitly asked if he was willing to do a videotaped interview. The school informed all the parents about the presence of a “guest” during a week in the classroom and the use of a video camera.

Method

Data collection.

We decided to use three different settings in this preliminary study. First, we made observations about everything that took place in the school context with and around the focal child Tom, thus gaining information from the real life Tom led in school, showing the acting, verbally and non-verbally, of the child in context. Secondly, we videotaped Tom with peers in the play area. Playing school in a play area presumably could give us information about the children's perceptions of school, as well as about the activities in school, the organization, and the perceived roles of the teacher. Though the play area was determined as a place where the children could play school, it was up to the children themselves to decide what to play when they attended the area. The last setting was an interview with Tom concerning his likes and dislikes about and expectations of school. By choosing different settings we followed a basic assumption of the Mosaic approach (Clark, 2007) in order to listen to Tom's expressions.

As to the planned data collection, the researcher decided (Spring 2007) to observe Tom during four continuous schooldays during all the occurring activities. It offered the children in the class, the teacher and the researcher not only the opportunity to get acquainted, but also to get familiar with one another and to guarantee to a certain extent that children would feel free to act in a way they would also do if there was no researcher present. By visiting the school context for (about) a week it is possible to take time to get used to each other, and there is no need to rush instantly into some activities planned for the research. Even when children nowadays are used to regular visits of outsiders for several reasons in the school - and after a short while often take those outsiders for granted - we are aware of the possible influence of the researcher on the context. The researcher described which activities were chosen by Tom and on what moment of the day. Notes were made about how long he was involved in the activities, with whom, what he was doing and what he said. We also set down when Tom focused on other matters than the activity he was involved in, whether other children were present and their interference. Finally, notes were made when Tom was in contact with the teacher during the activities and in what way.

In the middle of the week Tom's play with two peers in the play area was videotaped. The children and the teacher called this activity "playing school". The arrangement in such an area, in which the children had the opportunity to be active in play activities, was part of the research design. The play area was organized by the teacher, together with the children, two weeks in advance. During circle time the children and the teacher had decided what such an area should look like, what kind of materials were needed and what you could do there. Before the start of the research the teacher had agreed to offer the children the possibility to play in this area during the week of observations.

At the end of the period of observations Tom had a semi-structured interview, which was videotaped and afterwards transcribed.

Data analysis.

All the observations of school activities, playing school in the play area and the interviews were transcribed word by word. In coding the data we used the computer program Kwalitan (Peters, 2000; Kwalitan, www.kwalitan.nl). This is an appropriate program for qualitative data analysis. The Kwalitan system offers the possibility to include definitions, codes and memos to optimize the transparency of the research process.

In order to make sense of our data, we categorized them first on a theoretical basis into three *sensitizing concepts* that are inherent to schools as historical institutions (activities, organization of the school context, and teacher's roles). With the help of the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we tried to refine the meaning of these concepts on the basis of children's expressions. Following the basic assumptions of the grounded theory approach, we then screened the data in Kwalitan, first looking for topics for preliminary coding. This first process of coding was related to the aim of the research project to find an appropriate method for researching attribution of meaning by children aged 5-6 in school.

The transcriptions were divided into segments, meaningful entities following the school timetable, or the questions and answers in the interview. It offered us opportunities to look for interpretations in context (Hedegaard, 2008).

Starting with a process of open coding, we were looking for acting and/or utterances by the focal child on the three aspects of the daily practice in his educational setting, as we defined before. During a process of open coding we decided to add subcategories to these main concepts or categories: knowledge, skills and attitude to school activities, and rules and routines to school organization. For roles of the teacher, we formulated subcategories like the teacher as educator, supporter or manager, based on the properties we first attributed to the expressions of the child. All these definitions of categories and subcategories are written on code notes and theoretical notes (memos). Finally we attributed properties to the subcategories. Properties in verbs as characteristics of the subcategories, mutually as exclusive as possible, describing the way in which the focal child responded to the daily practice in school, like: demonstrating (knowledge and skills), showing (attitude), accepting (rules) and paying attention to the teacher (the teacher as supporter); see Table 1. The definition of each property was written on memos as well, making it possible for a second researcher to go through the same coding process (reliability).

Dealing with reliability and validity we followed Yin (2003). We used different settings to collect data, the so called Mosaic approach, and we created a case study database, consisting of the data itself and the report of the researcher, available for the peer researchers (peer debriefing). Finally, we also maintained a chain of evidence, which allows an external observer to follow all the steps taken in the research process, and to enable him or her to analyze, independently, the collected data in order to compare the outcomes of these two processes, and looking for similar and rival interpretations.

Results

In Table 1 we show the results of the coding process of data collected within the three settings we used in the preliminary study:

- the observations of the daily school activities;
- playing school in the play area; and
- an interview with Tom.

Looking at the information about the three different settings in Table 1, we see that there are differences in the duration of observations. The interview with Tom took about 10 minutes, playing school in the play area three quarters of an hour, and the rest of the four school days we used observing Tom during all kinds of different daily activities in school. At the same time, we want to stipulate that in this table we only show the occurrence of different properties in the different (sub)categories, not the frequencies.

Looking at the data of the exploratory study, we found a variety in Tom's expressions in general in the analyzed observations of his daily activities in school, the first setting (see Table 1); a variety among the three defined categories as well as within each category. We also found a range of different expressions by Tom looking at the results of the coding process when analyzing the observations during Tom's play in the play area, setting 2. The found expressions are mostly related to the first category, school activities, and some are related to the other two categories: the school organization and the roles of the teacher. The results of the coding and analyzing process of setting 3, the interview with Tom, resembled the results of the observation of playing school in the play area. Again we noticed a range of expressions related to the first category and a small range of expressions related to the third category, the teacher's roles, and looking at the results of this setting we found an even smaller range related to the second category, the school organization.

We also noticed a difference in the kind of expressions (non-verbal, verbal, conation) comparing the results we found in the three settings. We found a large variety of verbal and non-verbal expressions with a small range of expressions indicating conation over the three categories related to setting 1: the daily activities in school. Looking at the results of the coding process in setting 2, playing school in the play area, we noticed a comparable variety of verbal expressions, a smaller range of non-verbal expressions, and again a very small range of expressions related to conation over the three categories. In setting 3, the interview, we found a broader range of conative expressions which is particularly related to the first category, the school activities, and partly to the third category, the roles of the teacher.

Focusing on the first category with its two subcategories, we notice the most variety of expressions in this part of the coding system. We see two properties in the subcategory knowledge and skills and also in the subcategory attitude, showing a combination of (non) verbal expressions and expressions referring to conation in all three settings.

As to knowledge and skills, we are referring to the properties commenting and

demonstrating, which we define now as follows:

- *Commenting.* The child makes a statement in which he expresses his views about a certain activity and the way in which this activity is handled or even completed. For instance, child to a peer: "Look how nicely I have colored the drawing."
- *Demonstrating.* The child expresses his competences by saying or doing something on his own initiative or by invitation. For instance, the child sings a song upon request of the teacher during circle time.

Looking at the subcategory attitude we refer to the two properties choosing and preferring, which we define now as follows:

- *Choosing.* The child selects an activity from a range of possible activities and acts accordingly. He does not explicitly argue or comment the choice(s) he has made to others who are around. For instance, during outside play the child takes one of the shovels, available to the children, and starts to dig in the sandbox.
- *Preferring.* The child shows his views by using expressions referring to preferences. For instance: "I like" or "I want". These preferences could be argued by the child, but not necessarily. For instance, the child expresses: "I want to finish this game first".

The examples, like "I would like to finish this game first", are taken as a cue for deciding which property is most appropriate, looking at the expressions of the child. Nevertheless, the context in which the child acts was taken into account, as a child can never be isolated from a context, according to our opinion (Bourdieu, 1991; Warming, 2005).

In addition to the notions of Clark (2007) and Hedegaard (2008), we have looked at our chosen settings and the first results of our data analysis. The questions were: Are the chosen settings offering the young child in context the possibility to show visibly and audibly his expressions about the activities he is involved in at school? Do we see elements in our data that may be connected to the formulated indicators of the concept of voice and attribution of meaning by the child? Is it possible to build a coding system as a part of a research framework based on the data collection in this preliminary study? We have to answer these questions first in exploring the concept of children's voices and to decide which research framework is appropriate to study children's voices.

Focusing on the four properties that show the most variety of expressions in our coding system in this phase of our research project (commenting, demonstrating, choosing and preferring), we find evidence for specific dimensions of a child's voice in the choices he makes during his days in school (Engel, 2005; Kjørholt, 2005; van Oers, 2003) in setting 1, daily activities in school, and in the interview (setting 3). We give an example of choosing (Table 2) and preferring (Table 3).

In Table 2, Tom is offered the opportunity by the teacher to decide what he wants to do after finishing a previous activity (line 1). He chooses an activity out of a selected range of familiar classroom activities (line 2), together with a peer. The boys do not comment their choices and they take a table, sitting next to each other and they both start to work. Tom shows in a non-verbal way his attitude towards the activity. He seems involved in it, as he concentrates until the puzzle is finished (line 4); apparently, he also enjoys the activity, as

Table 1

Properties in the Exploratory Study: Observations in School, Playing School in the Play Area, and an Interview With Tom, Including the Kind of Expressions: Non-verbal, Verbal and Conation (thinking, feeling, wanting)

Category	Subcategories	Properties	Coding of Properties Exploratory Study (Tom): Including the Kind of Expressions: non-verbal (n), verbal (v) and conation (c)											
			Observations (1049 min.)				Play Area (45 min.)				Interview (11 min.)			
			nv	v	c		nv	v	c		nv	v	c	
1. School activities	Knowledge and skills	Commenting		x										
		Judging		x										
		Demonstrating	x								x			
		Suggesting		x							x			
	Attitude	Showing		x							x			
		Collaborating		x							x			
		Adjusting												x
		Rejecting		x										
		Inviting		x										
		Assigning											x	
		Moving		x										x
		Choosing		x				x						
		Helping		x										
		Persisting		x										
2. Organization	Rules	Postulating		x									x	
		Preferring		x									x	
		Accepting												x
		Adopting		x										
		Stepping over		x										
		Rebelling		x										
3. Teacher's roles	Routines	Following												x
		Confirming												
		Mediating												
		Connecting		x										
		Paying attention		x										
		Assisting												
Manager	Learning		x											
	Obliging													
	Obliging													
Conversation partner	Hearing out												x	

he claps his hands. This illustrates the progress he is making while working (line 3) and also expresses his feelings (Kjørholt, 2005; O’Kane, 2008).

Table 2
Choosing – Observations Daily Activities in School (Setting 1)

Category: School Activities	Subcategory: Attitude	Property: Choosing		
Person(s) Concerned	Comment	nv	v	c
Tom	(1) Has finished making a birthday present and may choose an activity himself.	X		
	(2) Together with Timon (peer) he takes a jigsaw puzzle.			
	(3) Works intensively, claps his hands when he sees a fitting piece.			
	(4) Continues the activity until the puzzle is completed.			

Note. nv = non-verbal, v = verbal, c = conation.

Table 3
Preferring – Interview (Setting 3)

Category: School Activities	Subcategory: Attitude	Property: Preferring		
Person(s) Concerned	Comment	nv	v	c
Interviewer	“Well, we have finished all the questions. Is there something you would like to do now?”			
Tom	“Yes, the drawing!” (He is pointing at the paper on the table in front of him)		X	X

Note. nv = non-verbal, v = verbal, c = conation.

In Table 3, Tom expresses his feelings in a verbal way, by answering a question of the interviewer. Not only he is confirming the question by saying “yes” to the interviewer, showing that he knows what he wants to do, but he also shares information with her about his preferred activity, paraphrasing: “I would like to make the drawing”. He refers to a drawing about a story the teacher told the children before, during circle time, and he is indicating what he has in mind, by confirming, pointing out (Mayall, 2008), and by verbalizing conation.

We also find indications for what is described as a child sharing ideas about competences and needs with peers and with his teacher (Alderson, 2008) in setting 1, observations of daily activities in school, and in setting 3, the interview. In Table 4 and in Table 5 we give examples of commenting.

Table 4
Commenting – Observations Daily Activities in School (Setting 1)

Category: School Activities	Subcategory: Knowledge and Skills	Property: Preferring		
Person(s) Concerned	Comment	nv	v	c
Nico (peer)r	"I've made a mistake again!"			
Tom	"Again? Then you'll have to start from the beginning."		X	

Note. nv = non-verbal, v = verbal, c = conation.

In Table 4, Tom comments on a remark by a peer he is sitting next to at a table. Tom and Nico are both busy making a pattern with beads on a board. Tom informs peer Nico verbally what to do if he makes a mistake, telling him to start all over again. Here he shares ideas, shows what he knows about making mistakes, and uses problem solving knowledge and skills (Alderson, 2008; Mayall, 2008).

Table 5
Commenting – the Interview (Setting 3)

Category: School Activities	Subcategory: Knowledge and Skills	Property: Commenting		
Person(s) Concerned	Comment	nv	v	c
(1) Interviewer	"Who is teaching you all kinds of songs?"			
(2) Tom	"Ehhh... miss Tessa."			
(3) Interviewer	"And what do you think about that?"			
(4) Tom	"Well, that is quite good... And very difficult games." (rolls over felt-tips in front of him on the table)		X	X

Note. nv = non-verbal, v = verbal, c = conation. Miss Tessa is Tom's teacher.

In Table 5, Tom informs the interviewer verbally on a role of the teacher: the teacher who teaches children songs to sing; the teacher as a manager of learning activities (line 2). He is also commenting on that role (line 4). He expresses an opinion by mentioning that he considers it quite good, that the teacher does this, adding a conative element to his expression as well (Alderson, 2008; Kjørholt, 2005; O'Kane, 2008).

On several occasions the child shows what he knows by pointing out, confirming and opposing (Mayall, 2008) in setting 1, observations, in setting 2, playing school in the play area, and in setting 3, the interview, defined by us as demonstrating (Table 6).

Table 6

Demonstrating – Observations Daily Activities in School (Setting 1)

Category: School Activities	Subcategory: Knowledge and Skills	Property: Demonstrating		
		nv	v	c
Person(s) concerned	Comment			
Tom	It is his turn to tell the children and the teacher the characteristics of the day: which day it is today, yesterday, the day before yesterday, tomorrow, which season, the kind of weather and how many times the children have to attend school. He puts the arrow on the picture, showing the first activity planned for today and explains what the program looks like on this day.	X	X	

Note. nv = non-verbal, v = verbal, c = conation.

In Table 6, Tom demonstrates knowledge of orientation in time and space (Alderson, 2008). At the same time, he demonstrates knowledge and skills to the teacher and his peers on the organization of the school day and routines in the school context, verbally and non-verbally, by pointing out and confirming these routines at the start of each school day (Mayall, 2008).

Discussion and conclusion

Though we concluded that we made some useful steps in the direction of the aims of the first phase of our research project, there are several elements we have to reconsider concerning appropriate settings for exploring children's voices, and building an appropriate research framework. Looking at our (preliminary) formulated indicators of a young child's voices and attribution of meaning, we see that we found little evidence for expressed feelings and what the child's intentions are in what to gain for himself related to others (Kjørholt, 2005; Warming, 2005). Nor did we get any explicit insight in direct relationships concerning the child's feelings and motives towards others, such as peers and his teacher (Kjørholt, 2005; O'Kane, 2008). In the interview (setting 3) Tom expressed his feelings or motives several times, when he was asked explicitly about his views (Table 3 and 5). Much of what is expressed by the child about his feelings and his motives seems implicit in setting 1 (observations of daily school activities) and also in setting 2 (play in the play area).

We need to reconsider our used settings and we have decided to add another two settings. We follow the notions of Hedegaard (2008) and Clark (2007) and offer children in research the possibility to express their perspectives by using several settings in context, and thus looking for different and complementary outcomes. And we take care for different settings to do justice to children in research in offering them different methods in communicating. Besides the daily observations in school, playing school in the play area and a semi-structured interview, we decided to give the children involved in our research project a single-use photo camera, offering them the possibility to respond to propositions about feelings and motives in a non-verbal way. Cameras offer children the possibility to respond to the question: "Can you show me what you think is important here in and around school?" Thus asking explicitly the opinion of children on the subject school. The children have the opportunity to answer this question by acting verbally and non-verbally at the same time. The answers consisting of series of photographs are to be used later on to discuss their expressions with the children involved (Clark, 2007). Secondly, we explicitly invited the children to respond to questions about their feelings in school, not only on school activities, but also on the school organization and the roles of the teacher.

We had to adjust our research design as well. In the exploratory study we focused on just one child. We decided to have more than one child involved at the same time. This way, we will be able to get more detailed insight in the way conversations with others might influence the expressions of the child, and possibly give a broader access to children's voices. This will thus involve not only conversations with the parents/caregivers and teachers, but also with peers. In the next case studies we will have two focal children involved, a boy and a girl, seen as individuals in this research project (separately observed) but in interaction with other children. Relations with peers are highly relevant to children and their construction of meanings, as we advocated before, and this issue needs to be more visibly incorporated in our research framework and as a result of our coding system as well.

These adjustments are made to find answers as reliable as possible to the question which methods are appropriate to listen to and interpret the voices of young children. We have to look at the analysis of the new collected data and see if we find more and/or different evidence for our formulated indicators of the concept of young children's voices and attribution of meaning, and to decide if we have to reconsider our formulation. To pay attention to the issue of reliability, (construct) validity and usefulness, we will invite two external observers for analyzing, independently from one another, our collected data. They will use the videotapes of the observations, the transcriptions and the memos with all the definitions of the (sub)categories and properties of our coding system. Comparing their results with ours may lead to reconsidering our definitions or to more specific labeling of our categories, subcategories, and properties. It may reveal omissions as well as the necessity to combine some elements in our coding system, certainly on the level of the properties, which is most detailed. All its elements have to be defined mutually exclusive.

Based on the outcomes of these further steps, we expect to build and expand a useful and reliable coding system.

Looking at the aims of the first phase of our research project, we may conclude that we made useful preliminary steps in developing a structure to identify elements of the voices of a young child in context, in connection to certain indicators we have found in the studied literature about the concept of voice and attribution of meaning by young children. We also made a start in developing a coding system, based on the data we collected in our chosen settings in the preliminary study we carried out. These conclusions are preliminary and continuing research is necessary.

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