

# Hearing and acting with the voices of children in early childhood

*Penny Lawrence*

*Abstract:* This article responds to David Archard's (2020a) provocation paper 'Hearing the child's voice' from the perspective of early childhood. The delineation of the age at which a child can form a view is the first thinking point. It questions how to value the views of children younger than eight, and presents multimodal dialogue as an important frontier for the enactment of the right to a view. Responsiveness is suggested rather than pre-determined delineation.

The second thinking point explores alternative perspectives to binary thinking: feelings can be conceptualised as not separate from thoughts. Voice can include emotional expression; and, when individual children form and express a view, they remain linked within relationships with others, and the world. The 'in-between' space where dialogical voicing occurs can be world-wide. The think piece contributes original ideas of young children's voices as multimodal dialogues including more-than-human perspectives (such as the environment) beyond delineations.

*Keywords:* Voice, early childhood, dialogue, multimodal, more-than-human.

*Note on the author:* Penny Lawrence is a Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Studies in the School of Education at the University of Roehampton where she teaches play, representation (children's and of children), and dialogical approaches to observation. Recent publications include: Lawrence (2019); Lawrence, P. (2021), 'Two dialogical theorisations of children's encounters in more-than-human worlds involving metaphor', *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*. Her current research examines dialogical processes in more-than-human worlds particularly in the immediate built environment of urban childhoods.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5628-2815>

[penny.lawrence@roehampton.ac.uk](mailto:penny.lawrence@roehampton.ac.uk)

## Introduction

This article responds to Archard's (2020a) provocation paper from perspectives in Early Childhood Studies. This multidisciplinary field values diverse thinking about children and childhoods (Dahlberg *et al.* 2007) typically with a focus on children up to eight years of age (Farrell *et al.* 2015). In Childhood Studies the social construction of childhood provides alternative discourses to biological determination (Prout & James 1990). Children are social actors also constructing their own lives. *Early Childhood Studies* (ECS) examine and largely support agency where it is most contested, with the youngest children (Mashford-Scott & Church 2011; Kalliala 2014; Sairanen Kumpulainen & Kajamaa 2020).

The concept of children's voice can separate the child's voice from that of all other humans in a hierarchy according to age and maturity. It can obscure, as Archard (2020a) points out, the distinction between the individual child and children collectively. Therefore, for the purposes of this think piece, an effective definition recognises children as heterogeneous and adopts a conception of children's voices, in the plural, as 'views of children that are actively received and acknowledged as valuable contributions to decision-making affecting the children's lives' (Murray 2019: 1).

This article is organised into two points. The first thinking point questions the delineation of the age at which a child can form a view by introducing multimodal communication as key to accessing and valuing the views of children younger than eight. A mode is understood as a 'channel' of representation, not always primarily spoken language (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001). More than signs that accompany vocalisations, modes such as gestures, gaze, touch, posture, position and manipulation of objects, are communicative in and of themselves (Goodwin 2016). The second thinking point addresses binary views of feeling and thinking. It also discusses the binary view of a child as separate from others through an exploration of how children are linked within dialogical relationships where the notion of voice extends beyond divisions between humans and environments. In the author's previous work (Lawrence 2019) drawing on Buber, more than any unspecific exchange, verbal or non-verbal, dialogue is a state of encounter, of being with the other in direct, embodied and unmediated 'I-You' relation with the whole, rather than acting on the other in a more instrumental 'I-It' attitude. Seen in this way dialogue depends on the nature of relation beyond the communication focus. Revill (2021) draws on Latour to conceive voice as 'voicing', a collective relational assemblage of human and nonhumans including environments. This think piece turns to more-than-human perspectives that include the environment in early childhood to contribute original views of young children's voices as dialogues beyond delineations.

## **Delineation**

The first thinking point responds to Archard's (2020a) invitation to address the fixed point of eight years of age that a child must attain before she or he can be held to form and express a view. Archard illustrates this through domestic legislation in Norway, and calls for alternative accounts of when to listen to a child's views. This response is in three parts considering: a singular delineation; a range of positions; and no pre-determined position in a process of dialogical responsiveness. It includes further consideration of the case of Norway.

A singular delineation can be seen as 'a threshold of capabilities for equal participation in society' (Terzi 2019: 1). I shall return to Terzi's particular goal. A fixed threshold at eight years assumes capabilities are commensurate with age. This assumption is difficult to separate from the stance that the choice of a mature child would be the same as that of an adult (Archard 2020b). As Jenks (2005) contends, childhood would end when the child behaves like an adult. I propose that the plurality of children's voices, where these may not be the same as adults, is of more interest without the expectation that people of any age are uniform in their choices.

A threshold can function as an ontological division of those who are equal participants in decision-making from those below who are not equal participants. Such delineation can be viewed as a barrier protecting childhood. In previous work, Archard (2020b) notes the existence of binary judgements that children should enjoy being children outside the world of adulthood. Furthermore, the exercise of rights may even prevent children from developing into adults with the capacities needed to possess rights. Such views, identified but not adopted by Archard, would preserve a threshold. Moreover, the threshold could serve an economical function. In a restrictive climate those in the lower level, judged to have insufficient capacity, would not merit the dedication of resources such as time and energy to arrange forums for hearing voice, nor the facilitation of actions based on it. In this way a singular delineation risks the reduction of resources to the youngest and does not reflect the range of individuals and the variability within individual experience.

Alternatively, any allocation of resources could take account of the 'goods' of childhood (Matthews & Mullin 2018; Archard 2020b). Terzi's (2019) thinking, drawing on Sen (2009), focuses on capability in terms of opportunities for good living. Equal participation qualifies as a condition for the well-being of the child. This is important for the child as child and also for the future older person. From this point of view expenditure is valuable below the threshold. In Terzi's work about persons with disabilities, the guarantee of opportunities to all children to participate is 'a matter of justice' (2019: 7), entailing provision for those persons. The case to value all children's voices based on the equal moral worth of each person would include the youngest also. Capabilities identified as essential for the dignity of human life 'should be pursued for each and every person, treating each

as an end and none as a mere tool of the ends of others' (Nussbaum 2009, cited in Terzi 2019: 5). There is a difference between having capacity and pursuing it, but the moral argument here is that it should be pursued. This, combined with the benefits of voice in relation to good living and wellbeing, makes a persuasive case for participation.

The next part of this first thinking point considers a range of delineations. Archard (2020a) distinguishes between the child's right to a view and the greater control of the adult who has the right to make choices. He is convinced of the determinative value of children's views as part of decision-making in addition to the informing 'consultative' value of hearing them (Archard 2020b). An interesting framework in this respect is Hart's influential 'Ladder of Participation' (1992: 8). He devised it soon after the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UNICEF 1989) for the process of decision-making. Hart's model entails several rungs of decision-making, either initiated by adults, or, in the upper echelons, by children themselves.

Hart (2008) has since reviewed applications of the ladder. It is not intended as a linear developmental model of children progressing upwards towards adult functioning. If anything, it is a measure of adults' capacities for enabling children. The highest position is the active participation of children in decision-making, *and their facilitation of others' participation*. For Hart, this demonstrates understanding the rights of others to have a voice and for it to be acted on in decision-making. An individual and collective ethical responsiveness to, and responsibility for, the Other is precisely what Bauman (1993) calls for in adults, and Hart is acknowledging that role for children too. Hart's experience of working with UNICEF in Africa and Asia is that non-governmental organisations realise the collective as well as individual sense of voice and enact this locally, but that generally academia is slower on the uptake. Hart (2008) is surprised how few have critiqued western cultural assumptions of the supremacy of individual self-determination to the detriment of a more collective notion of voice.

The final section of the first thinking point builds on the importance of awareness of the other to emphasise responsiveness instead of delineation. Murray (2019) defines voice in terms of the 'active' hearer as well as the speaker. Archard's (2020a: 9) specification of voice 'that adults will properly understand both as the child's view and in the very terms that are intended by the child' is acutely important in early childhood. However, an understanding of multimodal communication is key for the hearer to access the youngest children's views conveyed in combinations of gestures, facial expressions, and postures. Communication is complex – for example, it is increasingly digital, with concomitant rights to digital literacy and a digital voice (Alston 2020: 15). For the youngest children in particular, verbal communication is not always the dominant mode (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001). Rather than limiting 'non-linguistic behaviours' to the expression of feeling, as Archard does (2020a), adults' understanding of non-verbal modes may extend their own communicative and affective domains as well as the children's, thus encompassing the

complex multimodality of communication itself (Nyland 2009; Dalli *et al.* 2011). People of all ages can make sense of each other directly through their bodies fusing action and meaning (McNeil 1992; Merleau-Ponty 2012). Gestures even may express knowledge that is not expressed in speech (Goldin-Meadow 2003). In philosophy or in education, an emphasis on verbal views and lack of attention to non-verbal modes may be the most significant deficit, rather than the child's deficit of spoken language (Flewitt 2005a). Hackett *et al.* (2020: 14–15) favour 'paying *less* attention to language itself, or at least to words, grammar and meaning, in favour of fostering participation in dynamic, multisensory events'. In short, multimodality is an important frontier for the enactment of the right to a view as expressed in UNCRC Article 12.

Archard (2020a) raises two rationales for listening to children, as of intrinsic value or instrumental value i.e. as a means to other ends. Through children's participation in research, the intrinsic value may act upwards upon the macro political values that impose upon their lives. In this way, the intrinsic value of children's voices, including multimodal communication, could influence the mechanisms that may tend to see voice merely as of instrumental value. Murray (2019: 3) paints a systemic picture, 'findings from such research can produce evidence for policymaking that is based on children's authentic views'. Research ethics processes can engage with children's voices beyond mere tokenism. Lawrence's (2019) and Flewitt's (2005b) research finds two- and three-year-old children respectively are capable of withdrawing assent to recording, and discussion of video clips. Multimodal assent can be manifest in children's turning towards or away from researched activities, confirming or withdrawing participation. The researcher's consideration needs to be continuous, helped by a concept of provisional assent (Flewitt 2005b) that is given by the child on a minute-by-minute basis and not assumed to be present throughout a research session. With multimodal awareness, the adult researcher can respond appropriately to these highly relevant expressions of voice. Instead of age as the starting point, Christensen & Prout (2002) propose 'ethical symmetry'. In this approach the researcher relationship and ethical principles are the same with adults or with children, and any differences arise according to the particular circumstances not 'presupposed ideas or stereotypes about children or childhood' (2002: 484).

What actions can be taken in legal situations? As noted above, Archard (2020a) refers to the fixed point at eight years of age in Norway, after which a child can be held to form and express a view. The case of Norway reveals a complex picture and a possible direction forwards. There, although not invested with decision-making powers, the opinions of children under seven 'who are capable of forming their own opinions [...] must be given weight commensurate with the child's age and maturity' (Norwegian Ministry of Children and Equality 2016: 18). However, when it comes to understanding this right 'there is room for improvement' (11). The work on understanding is enshrined for children aged zero to five in Norway's Kindergarten Act, which stresses pupils 'must learn to think critically and

that they should have a shared responsibility and right to participate' (19). There is evidence that capacity is reached before the age of eight. A Convention on the Rights of the Child Committee reviewing Norwegian court procedure involving a five-year-old found parties to legal proceedings 'should presume that a child has the capacity to form her or his own views and recognize that she or he has the right to express them; it is not up to the child to first prove her or his capacity' (Søvig 2019: 290). There is no use of a threshold to protect childhood in the committee's findings: 'there is not conflict between the best interests of the child (Article 3) and the child's right to be heard (Article 12)' and 'the two provisions are complementary to each other'. The committee also 'stressed that the right to be heard is without age limitations' (Søvig 2019: 290). Therefore, in Norway the right of young children to be heard can be held to be in their best interests.

In addition to childhood research and the law, what would non-instrumental educational practice without fixed delineation look like? In Italy, the world-influencing Reggio Emilia municipal early childhood education and healthcare approach involves children of all ages. Within this Rinaldi (2020: 11) interprets Article 2 of the UNCRC as applying to all children: 'Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind'. Children learn to enact participation individually and within the group from the first year of life in school *Assemblea*, assemblies, that are far more akin to a parliament than a show-and-tell activity, and in community events like photography exhibitions. These are opportunities, frameworks and social spaces for knowing how to have a voice with others such as recommended by Archard (2020a).

There is a role for adults to enable the development of capacities. Terzi (2019) favours additional resources to ensure a threshold level of functionings required for equal participation. This would be a just educational provision for children of all ages, and abilities. In the Reggio Approach participation does not specify a threshold but it is directed to the living of rights. The term 'special needs' is replaced by the term 'special rights' and this shift extends to Reggio-influenced practice in other countries. In New Zealand McAnelly & Gaffney (2019: 1084) report on differently-abled children in kindergarten,

It doesn't matter what special rights or whatever that child might have, they have just as much right to contribute to and make decisions about the things that happen here and the things we do as any other children... we see all our children as capable, competent and expert with the power to change the direction of things.

This closes the gap differentiating children from adults' enactment of rights as questioned by Archard (2020a). Leonardo, in discussion with his five- and six-year-old classmates, explains it thus,

[Participation] also means exchanging ideas because that way other things get formed [...] we're the citizens, right (Reggio Children 2014).

The children are thinking beyond differences from adults, towards what they have in common in making use of their voices. Responsiveness with others is one way in which binary thinking delineating children's participation can be revised.

### **Non-binary thinking: voice as dialogue**

The second thinking point addresses binary views of feeling and thinking, extends to the environment, and attends to the ambiguity that Archard (2020a) identifies in UNCRC Article 12 about individual or shared collective voices of children.

Archard (2020a) privileges propositional thought as content 'about' something, and thereby seeks to eliminate feeling as a view. This raises the question of whether thoughts and views are separate from feelings. Here the work of neurologist Damasio (2004) integrates emotions and feelings as he makes a philosophical and scientific demonstration of the inextricable processes involving them in thinking. In Early Childhood Studies there is a considerable body of work about the emotional and relational nature of children's voice (Reddy 2008; White 2015; Alcock 2016; Gabriel 2017). Notably, emotions often play a key role in adult responsiveness and the observations can perceive infants' 'voice' in terms of emotional responses (Elfer 2006; 2017). Adults need to understand their own emotional responses to hear the broad range of emotional expressions of voice particularly in the youngest children. Hart (2008) advocates for children's engagement on any of the rungs of his ladder according to competence and confidence at particular times. Competency is a powerful discourse in Early Childhood (Vandenbroeck & Bie 2006; Dahlberg *et al.* 2007). Young children's rights would be served poorly by assumptions that they are always or should always be performing at the highest level (Hart 2008). Instead of all or nothing judgements, Kalliala's (2014) research suggests a continuum encompassing both competence and vulnerability of toddlers that may vary dynamically. This allows for differences at different times for a child. At times any person, whether two years or two decades of age, can be competent and strong, but also with needs in varying respects.

Even when not operating in a group, individual children are linked within relationships. These can be with their peers, and with adults. Winnicott (1960: 587) declares 'There's no such thing as a baby', meaning children are always related, not alone. Each child then negotiates what they can consider to be their own views within 'The Great We' of all their relationships (Parker-Rees 2014: 373). Children are part of a whole, even if their views may not always coincide with those of parents and other adults, who may or may not enable their voices to be heard. For Zanatta & Long (2021) children's rights education ought to be mandatory for adults who work with children. Many early childhood professionals place great emphasis on the integrative nature of a pedagogy of listening. Rinaldi (2005: 19) defines '*Listening* as sensitivity to the patterns that connect, to that

which connects us to others; abandoning ourselves to the conviction that our understanding and our own being are but small parts of a broader, integrated knowledge'. For Robson *et al.* (2019) relational listening is an issue of wellbeing resonating with Terzi (2019) and with Archard's (2020a) point that there is an intrinsic value in listening at any age.

Such collective conceptualisations often centre on human experience but can extend beyond. Since the foundations of kindergartens in Froebelian thinking children are connected to adults, community, and to Nature (Froebel 2009). It is a longstanding holistic view of unity and interconnectedness not unrelated to recent waves of new materialist non-binary thinking in which matter is not separated from meaning and culture is not separated from nature (Howe forthcoming). Early Childhood Studies is, like the disciplines of law, geography, medicine and environmental sciences, enlivened by: non-anthropocentric posthumanism (Braidotti 2013); Common Worlds ethics (Taylor 2013); and the study of more-than-human relations (Whatmore 2006; Rautio & Jokinen 2016). The term 'more-than-human' encompasses humans but is neither centred on them nor limited to them. It includes humans assembled with all manner of social objects and forces (Whatmore 2006; Revill 2021) such as children's relations with materials, landscape, weather, rivers, plants, and animals, and reaches the scale of the relationship with the whole planet. It is attentiveness to otherness and multiplicity while voicing environmental matters of concern.

Increasingly children's relations with the more-than-human world are being understood beyond developmental frameworks limited to an autonomous individual child. Participation is not evaluated against linear steps towards adulthood. Children are not conceptualised as separate from adults, materials, or events, but in a collective sense within assemblages. Assemblages are not fixed and are connected and relational constellations of bodies (Deleuze & Guattari 1987). An example would be local polluting human actions and global climatic damage. Can children understand such theorisation? Greta Thunberg's sensibility was in place before the age of eight, when she began to verbalise her shock that adults did not take climate change seriously: 'The main solution however is so simple that even a small child can understand it' (Watts 2019). Her focus has transformed public and politicians' expectations of children's capacities (Thunberg 2019). Events have proved how wrong she herself was at the beginning: 'I thought I couldn't make a difference because I was too small' (Watts 2019). Thunberg highlights decisive action not only opinions, and feelings integrated with thoughts.

Arguably, views are not formed inside the individual but outside, out in the world in the space in-between individuals. Massumi's (2002) view, 'Expression is "abroad in the world"' (cited in Hackett *et al.* 2020: 4) shows how responsiveness, multimodality and non-binary conceptualisations fuse. Hackett *et al.* (2020) explain further that communication is not an isolated act, but a response to events. Rather than pre-formed views emerging, often views only form with the other in the process of emerging (Shotter 1992). The



interplay that is integral in voice should not be ignored. Individual voice is a monological conceptualisation privileging instrumental intentions and thoughts of an autonomous person. My view of voice as dialogue goes beyond thresholds and binaries. I propose that, theorised dialogically, the meanings involved in any individual child's voice are interdependent on other participants' past, present or future within shared events (Lawrence 2019). They are extensively social in origin, derived from experiences, and social in orientation as reactions to and anticipations of others (Linell 2009). For Bakhtin (1986: 43) each utterance is a response to others in 'the boundless world of others'. Therefore, the boundary between children and adults' voices is questionable. Children's voices include the voices of adults, their peers, and the material world. These processes are evident in video observations of two-year-old children's multimodal dialogues with each other and with the more-than-human environment; they are also possible within participatory research relationships with responsive families and educators (Lawrence 2019). Education, research and scholarship should attend further to the co-constituting dialogical processes of multimodal voicing generated in-between more-than-human protagonists in assemblages. The 'in-between' space where dialogical voicing takes place can be worldwide. These dynamic arguments oppose universalism and align with children and childhoods as sociocultural constructs (James & Prout 1997) and with the posthuman philosophy of Braidotti (2019) that we are all in this global scale situation together, but we are not all the same.

## **Conclusion**

These two thinking points highlight how the voices of the youngest children are variable, multiple, multimodal, dialogical, emotional, as well as cognitive, co-constituted and entangled in more-than-human worlds. Early childhood educators and researchers have been represented in particular, although other professionals in law, medicine and health, for example, can review their assumptions and practices. My three recommendations are to take these complexities into account in decision-making processes in responsive ongoing provisional ways and not necessarily with one age-based delineation.

Firstly, multimodality is a key frontier for Article 12 to access the youngest children's views. I contribute original conceptualisations of young children's voices as multimodal dialogues in-between responsive protagonists, going beyond delineation. To properly understand the youngest children's views in the child's terms, adults need fluency in multiple modes. This involves children relating non-verbally as well as verbally, and entails responsive adults in dialogues rather than instrumental communication with children. Adults need to improve their facilitation practices, and children need opportunities to participate multimodally.

Secondly, academic thought needs to engage with the co-constituting processes when voice is generated dialogically. Children have the capacity to think beyond differences from adults, towards what they have in common in making use of their voices, and facilitating the voices of others. Beyond this, ‘voicing’ in multimodal dialogues can be in more-than-human worlds with an assemblage of protagonists, including the environment. The revision of binary thinking requires questioning whether any one child or all children are facilitated, and also how adults and children are integral to each other’s voices. Other is part of voice. Listening is part of voice (Shotter 1992; Rinaldi 2020). Acknowledgement of co-constitution would strengthen dialogical processes in educational practices (White 2015) and in research (Lawrence 2019).

Thirdly, there should not be a fixed delineation that would limit adults’ relationships with children and exclude young children’s voices from decisions being made with and for them. The example of the five-year-old in Norway illustrates this possible future direction. Early childhood is not only a preparatory or marginal stage. The voices of the youngest are important in their own right. Participation is worthwhile for wellbeing and for ‘good’ childhoods before the age of eight. Capacity-building opportunities should be supported. Alongside, there should be responsiveness to children’s varying capacities at different times. Children’s voices and sensibilities can contribute to current challenges if adults understand children in moments of competence and in their moments of vulnerability. This will include working with emotions in professional ways. Consideration of the other’s experience, like consent, needs to be continuous.

This think piece contributes clarity in understanding children’s right to be heard in Article 12 of the UNCRC through more dynamic conceptualisations and engagement with the youngest children and their voices. In so doing adults can enhance the value and extent of relationships as well as improve decisions that affect the lives of the youngest children.

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