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Guest Editors' Introduction: Special Issue: Constructions of "Children's Voices" in Qualitative Research

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It has been a privilege to act as Guest Editors for this special issue of the *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* titled: Constructions of "Children's Voices" in Qualitative Research. This issue compliments an earlier issue of this journal edited by Linda Liebenberg (2017) and titled: *Understanding Meaningful Engagement of Youth in Research and Dissemination of Findings*. Work on the issue was well underway prior to the global pandemic that has dominated so much of our focus in the past few months. However, as papers included in the collection have gone to press, the concerns that prompted us to propose the special issue have become even more pressing. These unprecedented times have led to the imposition of social restrictions that negatively impact some groups far more than others. A spotlight has been shone on a wide range of social inequities and injustices, many of which directly affect children and young people. For example, although it appears that children's physical health is less likely to be severely impacted by COVID19, it is becoming more evident that current social conditions are having negative effects for children's mental health, education and well-being. Further, some groups of children are disproportionately experiencing harms during these times. Thus, it is pertinent to begin this editorial by pointing out that the pandemic underscores an ongoing and urgent need for more research that is focused on children's lives around the world, and informed by their perspectives or, in common parlance, "their voices." This issue brings together a collection of papers that engage with and critique theoretical and methodological approaches for eliciting and representing children's "voices" in qualitative research about their lives.

Child-focused research across a continuum of methodologies, particularly those that focus on participation, has frequently been credited with "giving voice" to vulnerable and marginalized groups. Issues concerning how voice is conceptualized merit critical consideration; however, there are particular implications for research with children who are generally regarded as vulnerable and in need of protection. The term "voice" is ubiquitous in qualitative research but too often it is

not defined or theorized. This is a particular concern in research with children where there is potential for children's "voices" to be represented in ways that serve adult researchers' aims, but fail to account for the situated, relational contexts wherein meanings are co-produced and intergenerational. A growing number of international scholars have critiqued understandings of "the child's voice" and called for more critically reflexive methodological approaches to research with children and youth. The focus of this Special Issue is further inspired by calls for critical conceptions of voice in qualitative inquiry more broadly (see for example Jackson & Mazzei, 2008; Spyrou, 2011). While issues of "voice" for this special issue relate most directly to research with children and youth, the challenges discussed across the collection have implications for the design and conduct of qualitative methodologies with other populations.

Authors across this collection of papers, have engaged with interdisciplinary scholarship and contemporary international developments in child-focused qualitative inquiry. They draw from a range of fields including education, health, and child welfare. In addition to building on and extending theorizations of "voice" in qualitative research with children and youth, the papers consider ethical issues pertinent to representations of children's voices in qualitative research and explicate strategies used to address methodological challenges in eliciting, analyzing and representing children's voices through qualitative research. We are especially pleased that the special issue reflects the international mandate and readership of this journal and includes contributions from authors at a range of career stages, from students and early career authors through to more

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established leaders in this area of scholarship. Across the collection, and using different approaches, the included papers examine ethical implications of researchers' claims to be "giving voice" to children with a view to promoting more critical and nuanced understandings, representations and approaches to "child voice" across academic and public spheres. Each contribution adds to knowledge of how children's involvement in research can be optimized to maximize benefits and reduce potential harms to children.

A total of 11 papers make up the collection. One is a review paper; the remainder can be loosely categorized into three groupings: those that theorize voice explicitly, those that are more focused on advancing participatory methods with young people where "voice" is used as a metaphor for youth participation, and a further paper that does both. While these categorizations were useful to us as guest editors as we considered the contributions of each paper and of the collection as whole; they do not do justice to the insights shared by the authors. In their own way, each paper makes important contributions toward advancing both theory and methodology as these pertain to doing qualitative research with children.

The issue begins with Facca, Gladstone and Teachman's critical conceptual review paper. In *Working the limits of "giving voice" to children: a critical conceptual review*, the reviewed works were found to converge around conceptions of "child voice" as relational, produced through entanglements and as a dialogical co-production of meanings. The review contributes a novel synthesis of key papers theorizing "child voice" and traces common threads across the reviewed theorizations. For example, when viewed through a dialogical lens, the meanings attributed to children's accounts are seen as always situated. Placing emphasis on "child voice" as an inter-generational accomplishment highlights an imperative for researchers to reflexively account for the power relations in which "child voice" is produced. This review paper concludes with a call for researchers to explicitly theorize child voice and attend to the methodological implications of their approach to voice, how data are generated, analyzed and re/presented.

Carnevale's *A "thick" conception of children's voices: A hermeneutical framework for childhood research* follows the conceptual review and is the first of three papers focused on approaches for theorizing child voice. Beginning with case examples, Carnevale illustrates some of the problems associated with *thin* conceptions of voice and sets out to propose a *thick* conception of children's voices that is rooted in an agential view of children. The paper contributes a hermeneutical framework for listening to children's voices in ways that can help foster respectful responses to their experiences and concerns and promote the recognition of their agency. The framework explicates ontological, epistemological and methodological positions that align with adopting a thick conception of children's voices. The author draws attention to common misconceptions that can impede "listening to children's voices," as forms of epistemological oppression, arguing instead, for a thick conception of children's voices, recognizing that children's expressions are relationally embedded

expressions of their agency. Critically, Carnevale contributes not only a hermeneutical framework; he sets specific methods, guiding questions, and ethical considerations for using the framework in qualitative research.

Ingulfsson, Moe and Engelsrud contribute a contrasting theorization of child voice as relational in *The messiness of children's voices—an affect theory perspective*. Drawing on examples from their research on children's movement and physical education in a Norwegian context, the authors elaborate on affect theory to situate children's voices in relation to other children and to their environments. This implies that children's accounts are both individual and collective, messy and plural. In so doing, this paper asks readers to consider how and where children's voices emerge and come into expression, what forms they take and how they shape and are shaped through social and material relations. An emphasis is placed on remaining open to multiple potential interpretations of children's voices and a letting go of researchers' urge to provide a "complete picture" when representing the accounts of children in research. The unique theoretical lens afforded by affect theory, as set out eloquently in this paper, highlights children's competence to express themselves and weigh in on what matters to them in their societies.

Next, in *Beyond voice: Conceptualizing children's agency in domestic violence research through a dialogical lens*, Morris, Humphreys and Hegarty combine hermeneutic phenomenology and moral philosophies of care to propose a dialogical analytic framework for moving beyond notions of giving voice to children toward interpreting the meanings of their accounts. Drawing on examples from an Australian study of children's experiences of safety and resilience in the context of domestic violence, this paper illustrates how the team of researchers applied their framework to conduct analysis that aimed for contextual relational understandings of the data generated with children. Given the increased isolation experienced by children during the current pandemic, the substantive topic of this research has taken on increased urgency. As in the paper contributed by Carnevale, these authors draw on hermeneutical approaches to posit a close relationship between conceptions of voice and children's expressions of their moral agency. A strength of this paper is the way that the authors demonstrate the value added to the study results by explicitly theorizing voice within their analytic framework. This value-adding benefit of using a theoretical lens in qualitative research (see also Eakin & Gladstone, 2020) is evident in the model of children's agency that was developed as part of the study results to guide the design and implementation of domestic violence interventions with children.

Taken together, this first group of papers present innovative new ways of thinking with theory when conducting qualitative research with children. Collectively they compel us to expand the ways we think about not only voice, but children, childhood, agency, affect, and childhood ethics. At the heart of each of these papers is a desire to move beyond notions of "giving voice" to children and an attentiveness to the inseparability of individual children from the social relations and conditions in

which they are immersed. We move next to introducing a paper that, from our perspective, presents both an approach to theorizing child voice and a discussion of the methodological implications of that particular theorization on the research.

Spencer, Fairbrother and Thompson take as a starting point, the rapid expansion of children's participation in qualitative research in an effort to "give children voice" on matters that affect them. In *Privileges of Power—Authenticity, Representation and the "Problem" of Children's Voices in Qualitative Health Research*, they interrogate the privileging of voice, bringing together theoretical and methodological critiques of voice to argue that when particular ways of knowing are favored in research (only) some children's lives seem to matter. Spencer and colleagues draw on examples from two public health studies with different age groups of children to focus on challenges related to analysis, reporting and dissemination. In this critical reflection on voice the authors challenge claims to authenticity by considering the epistemological tensions and power relations embedded within the production and legitimation of particular voices as representing "correct" ways of knowing about health. They consider how research intentions and decisions about method contribute to this problem, reflecting for example, on how adult frames of reference shape the analysis of child voice; and on the value of silent and dissenting voices and other modes of expression, as instances of resistance to adult-led health agendas. Spencer and colleagues show how adult/child power relations are (re)produced within and across research spaces when particular young voices are mobilized, or pathologized, through research processes. They highlight new directions for qualitative inquiry with children that require methodological reflexivity to consider important questions about whether or not our methods produce socially sanctioned, or dissenting voices, to consider what children say, in relation to what it is possible for them to say in any given context—or what it is possible for us as adults to hear them saying.

In *Extending Youth Voices in a Participatory Thematic Analysis Approach*, Liebenberg, Jamal and Ikeda focus on an important dimension of youth engagement in the research process. The paper adds to recent advances in thinking about childhood studies, and Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) approaches, by moving beyond a preoccupation with the research design, data generation and dissemination phases of engaging young people to consider the process of data analysis in relation to issues of "child voice" and knowledge production more broadly. They share their "step-by-step" approach to participatory thematic analysis in the *Spaces & Places* research project, a PAR program with Indigenous youth in three rural and remote communities of Atlantic Canada using visual elicitation methods. Study exemplars show how adult researchers conducted participatory data analysis with young people. An overriding concern was to facilitate an approach to coding transcripts that did not remind youth of the sedentary and "boring" activities they described in interviews associated with school, while also ensuring scientific rigor of the project. The authors address critical questions about the extent to which young people engage in data analysis and how this impacts the

positioning of their voices in the study findings. Finally, they consider the degree to which engagement strengthens or limits the platforms from which young people share findings in a dissemination process, particularly with those in positions of power.

Rather than "giving voice" to young people, Woodgate, Tennent and Barriage advocate for the creation of spaces for youth voice in the context of recent shifts in thinking about representing youth voices in research. "Giving voice" is particularly problematic because the concept negates young people's agency and diminishes their autonomy, implying that adults must make young people's perspectives known and validate their experiences. Drawing on several empirical studies using a variety of methods across all phases of the research process, these authors show how they gained insight into the ways youth already have a voice and they use it in everyday life. In *Creating Space for Youth Voice: Implications of Youth Disclosure Experiences for Youth-Centred Research*, the authors describe how the topic of sharing personal information was important to young people because they raised this as an issue in the context of experiencing chronic illness. Woodgate and colleagues go on to demonstrate that voice is not something adults "give" to young people by engaging them in participatory data collection and dissemination research methods. In foregrounding the centrality of youth agency, Woodgate and colleagues are asking other (adult) researchers to think differently about "voice" and the implications this reconceptualization has for how we think about and do youth-centred research.

Pincock and Jones also advocate for creating spaces for youth voice, by engaging young people who "tend to be left out" in research that also affirms their capabilities rather than reinforcing marginalization. In *Challenging Power Dynamics and Eliciting Marginalized Adolescent Voices through Qualitative Methods* there is an explicit connection between the concept of "voice" and participation, with respect to youth participation in research but also in the context of international development in the global South. The premise of this paper is that adult researchers are responsible for creating these spaces to facilitate youth voice because adults have power over "regimes of representation" and are therefore accountable for listening to and acting on the views of young people (see also Lundy, 2007). The focus here is on eliciting the voices of particular young people, adolescents who are considered less visible and more marginalized in lower- and middle-income countries, and those who experience "multiple vectors of marginalization," such as disabled children and young people "out of school." Drawing on exemplars from a 9-year longitudinal program of research on gender and adolescence, Pincock and Jones aim to open up meaningful opportunities for youth to use their voice, employing a variety of appealing and flexible research methods for research with diverse young people that can challenge the power dynamics that lead to exclusionary structures and norms within communities-at-large.

In *Too Vulnerable to Participate? Challenges for Meaningful Participation in Research with Children in Alternative Care and Adoption*, Garcia-Auiroga and Agoglia locate a complex

construction of “child voice” in children’s rights to participation. They challenge us to see the right to protection and the right to participation as inseparable, particularly for children who live in alternative care arrangements where adult-centric perspectives on protection and assumptions about vulnerability function to exclude children from participation in research. Instead, participatory research design is considered an ideal method for fostering children’s decision-making capacities because young people involved in protection systems are considered both “doubly” vulnerable (being children and in need of protection), and agentic (capable of expressing their views and experts on their own experiences). This point is made more salient in the context of the authors’ research because actively involving children in research is comparatively rare in Latin American countries. Through a multi-level analysis of individual and institutional challenges they encountered, Garcia-Auiroga and Agoglia provide readers with practical examples and methodological principles for moving toward greater degrees of child participation in research that ensures their rights to be informed and listened to and to have their views taken seriously on topics that affect them.

Caldairou-Bessette, Nadeau, and Mitchell in *Overcoming “You can ask my Mom”: Clinical arts-based perspective to include children under 12 in mental health research* argue that researchers need to expand the methods they use to provide children adequate opportunities to express themselves in research. They share examples from their own empirical research to describe arts-based research methods that are able to transcend what children can express using verbal language alone. This evocative paper highlights the potential for clinically based knowledge and skills to inform approaches for accessing layers of meaning embedded in children’s research accounts. The authors point that researchers are necessarily implicated in the construction of children’s voice in research. Thus, they advocate adopting a posture of genuine engagement and humility.

Rounding out this issue, in another paper from the global South, Ritterbusch and colleagues call for a democratization of the research process; to counteract extractive research approaches and take children’s agency seriously, creating participatory spaces that include children in the research process. In *Pushing the Limits of Child Participation in Research: Reflections from a Youth-Driven Participatory Action Research Initiative in Uganda*, the authors describe a study of violence against children in which they worked with domestic workers and street connected- and sexually exploited children in Uganda. Most of the research evidence available for Ugandan policy makers, who have asked for urgent action on this topic is primarily quantitative in orientation and does not include children in the research. The authors make concrete recommendations for including children throughout key phases of the research process and they reflect on the implications for study design based on their own learning during a multi-method child- and youth-led participatory action research (YPAR) project in Kampala. They conclude urging childhood scholars to create sustainable (rather than rehearsed or

tokenistic) spaces for YPAR, in academic and policy arenas, and design participatory initiatives that prioritize knowledge produced by children and for the improvement of children’s lives globally.

In closing, we would like to thank all those who helped realize our vision for this special issue. We appreciate that the journal editorial staff and our reviewers were open to the option of using a group peer review process whereby research trainees were enabled to develop peer-review skills alongside more experienced reviewers (see Teachman et al., 2017). As critical qualitative researchers who are often working in settings dominated by more positivist approaches to appraising the quality of research, we value the opportunities for developing a community of practice that this type of peer-review model can offer. We are also pleased to share that this special issue is part of a larger knowledge mobilization project *Beyond Giving Voice: Advancing theory and methodologies for qualitative research with children*. Some of the papers presented in this special issue can be augmented by viewing recordings of authors’ symposium presentations within the journal’s website. We are grateful to SAGE and the *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* for their support of this project, along with our other supporting partners: The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), Centre for Critical Qualitative Health Research, University of Toronto; Centre for Research on Health Equity and Social Inclusion, Western University; School of Occupational Therapy, Western University.

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