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Exploring the Content of Young Children's Multidimensional Voice Related to School Contexts

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Research Article

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ABSTRACT

Background: School is one of the environments children are engaged in from an early age. For a better understanding of how this specific environment affects young (aged 5 to 6) children's learning and development, it is important to know children's personal ideas about this environment.

Objectives: We raise the following question: what is the content of young children's 'voices' related to school?

Methods: Our research consists of five case-studies. We considered each case-study as a separate unit of investigation, enabling us to investigate the dynamics of the specific context in which each child is involved. Children's utterances are interpreted as windows on the content of their voice and attribution of meaning.

Results: It is evident that not all children's expressions are school-related. Secondly, when we concentrate on the school-related expressions (regarding school activities, school organization, and teacher's roles) key messages can be read in the case-study children's expressions that characterize the patterns of their expressions about school. For instance: a school as a place that is strongly adult led and rule governed.

Conclusion: We found that it is possible to identify main ideas in children's expressions that may be interpreted as contents of their voices, as well as the possible explanatory value for the understanding of children's perspectives on school.

INTRODUCTION

School is one of the environments children are engaged in from an early age. In order to promote children's learning in school, teachers build learning environments for (young) children that take children's characteristics (such as learning prerequisites and personality traits) into account. Besides teachers, children also have their images about the aims in schools, what they can or have to do, and what is and is not allowed. It is important for children's further development to understand how the specific school environment affects their learning and development, as well as to gain insight in children's personal ideas about the learning context itself, and their perspectives on school [1]. Moreover, the 'Convention on the Rights of the Child' [2] states that every child, who is capable in forming his own views, has the right to express his opinions freely in all matters affecting the child.

The potential value of the study is to contribute to teachers' insights in children's voice. A deeper insight in the content of children's voice (their expressed views on their educational contexts, their feelings and beliefs, meaning and sense-making, as well as the "hidden texts" in their (non)-verbal expressions) could contribute to teachers' understanding of children's educational needs and do justice to children's human rights.

It is important for children's further development to understand how the specific school environment may affect their learning and development, as well as to gain insight in and how children contribute to these educational practices [1].

Ways in which individuals speak and act out their personal views on reality are understood in this article as expressions of persons' voices. Bakhtin pointed out that a voice is always populated by voices of others, and meanings acquired by someone, at the same time have traces of both cultural content and meaning of others [3]. A child's voice refers to the child's personal potential (both ability and attitude) to express his/her view in a highly personalized way.

In our research about young children's perspectives, we have raised the following question: What is the content of young children's voice concerning school contexts? In this article we share the first results about what the children in our study have expressed, exchanged and discussed about their views. In the last section of this article these results will be discussed. The exploration of these elements of voice content offers us a direction for our to be our continued research on the content of children's voice in the next phase of our study.

From a Vygotskian/Bakhtinian point of view [4] we report upon how children's perspectives about school can be characterized from an outsider's perspective (researcher, teacher and parent). Especially by focusing on their voice as expressed in their everyday utterances and actions. We will answer our research question by exploring (analyzing and comparing) young children's expressions concerning school contexts. We focus on children, aged 5 to 6, who have already made their entrance into school. To explore the notions as well as the underlying meanings of young children's expressions in a transparent, consistent and reliable way, we have to interpret their utterances expressed in situations that make sense to them. For this purpose we developed our own and validated coding system and we formulated theory-based indicators of young children's voice [5,6].

Our research consists of five case-studies. Each case-study comprises one individual school-child – interacting with peers –, his/her parents, and teacher(s). In this article we describe first one of these five case-study children, to look for the typicality of our studied phenomenon, in relation to other comparable or contrasting phenomena within this case [7]. This 'focal' case is chosen, as it shows the most variation in the different settings and roles, as compared to the other four cases. The results of the other case-study children are then briefly summarized in relation to this 'focal' case. We will discuss the outcomes and their value for the understanding of children's voice, and provide some conclusions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Vygotsky [8] once pointed out, that environments are not objective settings exerting their influence on children's actions and development. The role, meaning and influence of the environment change during the different phases in children's development, depending on the emotional experiences children lived through, as well as their understanding of the sense and meaning of situations, and events in these environments. Children perceive their school environments through the prism of their emotions [1,8] 'perezhivanie', p. 339. Hence, an educational environment in the school-context is always the environment as interpreted by the child. On the basis of interactions with others, children create their own personal meanings of activities and learning in school, and consequently develop personal voices about school.

A voice is a social construction, multidimensional and always subject to change [4,9]. Opinions or perspectives acquired by children have a personal dimension (sense), connected with each child's own life history, and a collective dimension (cultural meaning) constructed in social interaction [10]. On the one hand, there is the cultural (conventional) meaning, which defines the shared cultural content of the terms we use in generally accepted ways, like 'the most important thing in school is learning'. On the other hand there is also the personal sense, based on the personal values of someone. This sense is based on a person's values ascribed to objects, actions and goals, in the light of personal motives and interests. For example, a young child may express about school: '[I would like to have a school in which] the classrooms are round and have strawberry red walls]' (p. 26) [11]. Both, cultural meaning and personal sense, are appropriated in interaction with others. An important difference between conventional meaning and personal sense, according to Leont'ev [12], is that conventional meaning can be transmitted by instruction, whereas sense develops gradually as a result of interactions, experiencing, and personal interpretations. Both are integrated in a person's voice. Attribution of meaning and sense are always partly shared with others. Hence, from a cultural-historical perspective, we assume that the expressions of young children cannot be attributed only to the opinions or voice of young children alone, but have to be partly attributed to the voices of others as well: their parents/caregivers, teachers and/or peers.

Consequently, if somebody is talking, we must always wonder whose voice we are actually hearing [13]. Therefore, in a content analysis of young children's voice we must be aware that we may be hearing to some extent the resonance of the voices of others as well.

We focus on attributions of meanings and senses by young children in situations, and events in school, as can be seen and heard in their acting and speaking in interactions with other children and adults. Each individual child is conceived as a 'speaking personality', using language as a personal way to express him/herself [3]. At the same time we must also take the context into account in our research, for children can never be isolated from their contexts if we want to study them and their voice in an ecologically valid way [14]. For this reason, the socio-cultural context of the children in which teachers, peers and parents/caregivers are important others, is part of the research as well.

RESEARCH METHOD

In our research, we studied young children's voice in real life situations, and according to Yin [15], case-studies are particularly

appropriate for empirical research of contemporary phenomena in meaningful real life contexts. We used a qualitative-interpretative approach in a flexible design, with multiple sources of evidence [16]. This design, consisted of multiple case-studies, provides a methodological approach, which made it possible to study speaking, as well as acting, but also the social-cultural context in which the children are involved. We considered each case-study as a separate unit of investigation, enabling us to investigate the dynamics of the specific context in which each child is involved. Children's utterances are interpreted as windows on the content of their voice and attribution of meaning.

Analysis

We used cross-case analysis as a technique to look for the extent of possible generalizability of findings, as well as for the conditions under which those findings occur [17]. As our research consists of five case-studies, generalizability in this sense is expected to be limited. At the same time we do expect our case-studies to be representative for the phenomenon we want to study, by looking into the typicality, as well as the comparability of the studied phenomenon [7], using a theory-based description of voice characteristics as a reference. We looked for patterns, repeated and ordered structures, in the (non)-verbal expressions of each child in different settings [17]. After this individual pattern analysis, we carried out cross-case matching [15], looking for similarities and differences in patterns among the different children to describe the individual and inter-relational components in their expressions.

Most activities of the 'focal' children are carefully observed and videotaped during a week in school:

• their play in the play area (an area designed, together with the children, to play 'school', but the children were free to choose whatever they wanted to play);

• their talk and behavior during semi-structured interviews about how their 'ideal school' would look like;

• their expressions about their feelings in and on school. Questions about how they felt about school, were answered by the children by choosing a picture (glad, neutral or sad emoticon) which represented their feelings best, and children often commented their choices;

• photographs the children have taken and were discussed afterwards in response to the researcher's question: 'Can you show me what you think is important here in and around school?'

These four settings were especially arranged for this study. Other observations were made during the regular school activities [5].

The collected data were transcribed verbatim. Qualitative data-analysis software was used for the ongoing comparative qualitative data analysis. We followed the basic assumptions of the grounded theory approach. By means of this approach we identified concepts, building blocks, for systematic data analysis, through organizing, classifying, and relating the data [18]. Thus we built a coding system for analyzing young children's expressions with categories, subcategories and properties, and we dealt with the issues of consistency and reliability. Two independent coders went through the same analyzing and coding processes. We compared the outcomes of the independent coders with the results of the researcher, looking for similar and rival interpretations in coding. We met our standard of an 80% agreement among the two coders and the researcher in the coding processes [5].

We formulated sensitizing concepts in line with theoretically identified elements of the school context, and labeled them as the three main categories in our coding system: attitude towards school activities, school organization, and teacher's roles **(Table 1).** Then we attributed subcategories to our main categories. We labeled affect, cognition and behavior as the three subcategories of category 1: attitude towards school activities. Adoption of rules and routines, and modification of rules and routines as the two subcategories of school organization (category 2). And we distinguished several teacher's roles: the teacher as instructor, facilitator, educator, and cultural mediator as four subcategories of category 3. After labeling the categories and subcategories of our coding system, we defined properties (verbs) as aspects of the subcategories, so we could code elements of the young children's (non)-verbal expressions. Examples of these properties are: preferring, rejecting, and demonstrating. At the same time, we were able to add elements of conation (thinking, feeling and wanting) to the different properties in our coding system. These elements are related to the personality of a subject, and play their part in the acting person.

In addition to this formal system, we also needed another, external, theory-based tool for the analysis of voice content. We formulated characteristics, or indicators, as possible manifestations of young children's voice within the school-context [1,19,20]:

1. expressing feelings and choices

2. sharing ideas about competences and needs

3. showing knowledge by pointing out, investigating, confirming, opposing

4. intending to gain something related to others [5].

We assumed that if we were able to connect specific sets of codes to each indicator, as well as elements of conation (thinking, feeling, wanting), we would be able to analyze and compare children's school related expressions, and the way they express them, in a systematic and transparent way, and to explore voice content.

In choosing our cases we had to make sure that they actually would open a window on the phenomena we wanted to study. Relevant criteria as accessibility, geographic proximity, and the willingness of the teachers to make some special arrangements for the research, were also taken into account for the selection of our cases [15].

Participants

The children in the five cases were aged 5 to 6, and performed on an average cognitive, and social-emotional level (as documented in the school's student monitoring systems). Their social economic background was middle class, and they all lived in a family setting with both their parents. Four of them had siblings.

The 'focal' case-study concerned Bernadette, whilst Tom, Irfan, Margareta, and Lennart participated in the other case-studies. Irfan and Margareta attended the same school and the same class. Lennart and Bernadette did so as well, but at a school in another town. All five children were grouped in school classes with peers, aged 4 to 6 (mixed-aged groups). Each school had two or more of such mixed-aged groups, besides year groups for children from 6 till 12 years old.

We will describe Bernadette's expressions and the expressions of the children in the other case-studies on three, separate, aspects (the main categories in our coding system, see **Table 1**): school activities, school organization and teacher's roles. In addition to these aspects, we will discuss some of the corresponding, and some of the diverging results on the basis of cross-case analysis.

Table 1. Coding system with main categories, subcategories and properties.

Category	Subcategory	Properties (and relations)	P/F/O	(N)V	C
1.(Attitude towards) School activities	01.Affect	Suggesting			
		Preferring			
		Rejecting			
		Assigning			
		Revealing			
	02. Cognition	Demonstrating			
		Commenting			
		Questioning			
		Narrating			
	03. Behavior	Collaborating			
		Postulating			
		Showing			
2. Classroom organization	04. Adoption	Following			
		Accepting			
		Imposing			
	05. Modification	Ignoring			
		Adjusting			
		Opposing			
			i / r / a		
3. Teacher's roles	06. Instructor	Obliging			
		Learning			
		Adding			
	07. Facilitator	Initiating			
		Assisting			
		According			
	08. Educator	Mediating			
		Attending			
		Complimenting			
		Correcting			
		Passing on			
		Care taking			
	09. Cultural Mediator	Conveying			
		Exchanging			

Note. A relational component or a combination of relational components can be added to all the properties: P (peers) / F (Family) / O (Other, but not the own teacher of the child). The kind of the child's expression, in relation to his teacher, is added to the properties in category 3 by: i (in interaction with), r (in the role of) or a (about, without the teacher's presence).

We started each case-study by informing the parents about the research and asking for their (written) consent for their children's participation. All names of the children in this article are pseudonyms. Children participated on a voluntary basis and their (verbal) consent was requested for the use of whatever they wanted to share with the researcher at the start and at the end

of all the organized activities, including the use of video or taking pictures of their drawings, for instance. We took care that the children in the studies felt as comfortable as possible, by organizing activities in a small group of children [21,22]. The researcher explained to the children that they had every right to withdraw from the organized activities whenever they wanted to [23,24].

Reporting

In the following section we will illustrate the main findings in the case-study of Bernadette, by examples from the coded data. The chosen examples provide 'rich' data abstracts with a variety of properties in different categories (see **Table 1**). The examples are presented as tables from the verbatim transcriptions of the observations in the four different arranged settings, as well as the regular school activities **(Tables 2-8).**

Table 2. Bernadette's involvement in daily activities of free choice (setting 1).

	Setting 1: Regular school activities		C	P / F / O	SC	Properties	
(1)	Teacher C.	Let's take a look in another classroom		P	06	Adding	i
(2)	Bernadette	((returns with Erna, holding a large box together))		P	03	Collaborating	
(3)	Bernadette	((takes out the pieces of a jigsaw floor puzzle))			02	Demonstrating	
(4)	Bernadette	(to Erna): Now, get aside!		P	01	Assigning	
(5)	Bernadette	((and Erna start making the frame and they lean over each other, trying to fit pieces in))		P / P	02 / 03	Demonstrating / Showing	
(6)	Bernadette	((and Erna are laughing)		P	01	Revealing	
(7)	(...)						
(7)	Bernadette	((and Erna show teacher C. the cover of the box))		P	04 / 08	Following / Attending	i
(8)	Bernadette	We have already finished, miss!		P	02	Commenting	
(9)	Teacher C.	You are much too good in doing jigsaw puzzles!Just take another one in the classroom		P / P	08 / 06	Complimenting / Obliging	i / i

C: conation (thinking, feeling, wanting)
P: peers
SC: subcategory
i: in interaction with the teacher

Table 3. Bernadette's involvement in playing school (setting 2), proclaiming the program of activities.

	Setting 2: Playing school		C	P / F / O	SC	Properties
(1)	Bernadette	And now, put it in a file. You have to put your name on it. Where is your work?		P	01	Assigning
(2)	Linda	I am also miss				
(3)	Bernadette	Noho, one miss. Molly is miss		P	01	Rejecting
(4)	Bernadette	Now: at the table!! And work!		P	01	Assigning
(5)	Bernadette	(to Linda) I am going to draw a triangle and cut it. And then you are going to color it and very nicely		P	01	Assigning
(6)	Bernadette	And not just a bit, for I am going to do a little round. Okay?		P	01	Suggesting
(7)	Molly	We are strict teachers				
(8)	Bernadette	Have you heard? Play!		P	01	Assigning
(9)	Bernadette	This afternoon: play, seal and this. Moon. Mooooon ((shows the letter case))		P / P	01 / 03	Assigning / Showing

Table 4. Bernadette's involvement in playing school (setting 2), referring to school rules.

	Setting 2: Playing school		C	P / F / O	SC	Properties	
(1)	Bernadette	((sits down on the teacher's chair, where Linda is sitting already))			03	Postulating	
(2)	Linda	((gets up a bit later and sits down at the table with Molly and Barbara))					
(3)	Bernadette	You are now the oldest. You are allowed to use the felt-tips		P	04 / 07	Accepting / Initiating	r
(4)	Bernadette	You have to work in a minute		P	06	Obliging	r
(5)	Bernadette	Which color? You are allowed to choose		P	07	According	r
(6)	Bernadette	Not just like that... First ask, then take, Molly		P	04 / 07	Imposing / Correcting	r

r: in the role of the teacher

Table 5. Bernadette expressing feelings about playing school and teacher's roles (setting 3).

	Setting 4: Semi-structured interview		C	P / F / O	SC	Properties	
(1)	Researcher	Is there something you would like to do, which you can't do in school now?					
(2)	Bernadette	((nods))	x	O	03	Showing	
(3)	Researcher	What would you like to do, Bernadette?					
(4)	Bernadette	To play school	x	O	01	Preferring	
	(...)						
(5)	Researcher	What is so nice about playing school?					
(6)	Bernadette	That I am the teacher and then you may tell what they'll have to do		O / P	01 / 06	Revealing / Obliging	r

O: others (here: researcher)

Table 6. Children's expressions about school activities (Category 1), connected to the four indicators.

Indicator		Category 1: School activities	C	P/ F/O	SC	Properties	Extract
1	Bernadette	[I would like] to play school	x	O	01	Preferring	4
	Lennart	((shows the letter case)) This is really grade 3. It's fun!		O	01	Revealing	
2	Tom	((Nico says he has made a mistake)) Again? Then you'll have to start all over again.		P	02	Commenting	
3	Margareta	I know what it says ((points at a book title))		P	02 / 03	Demonstrating Showing	
	Irfan	((children have to trundle the hula hoop)) Yes, I can do that!		P	02	Demonstrating	
4	Bernadette	Now, at the table!! And work!		P	01	Assigning	2
	Tom	You are not allowed [to take sand from the sandpit], for I am in charge!		P	01	Rejecting	

Table 7. Children's expressions about school organization (Category 2), connected to the four indicators.

Indicator		Category 2: School organization	C	P/ F/O	SC	Properties	Extract
1	Margareta	We have to perform our weekly task. And I think, that's sad!	x	O	04	Accepting	
2	Irfan	((offers a helping hand when a child has dropped a bottle with beads))		P	04	Following	
3	Bernadette	You are now the oldest. You are allowed to use the felt-tips		P	04	Accepting	3
	Lennart	All children have to sit first, and listen to the teacher first		O	04	Accepting	
4	Bernadette	Not just like that... First ask, then take, Molly		P	04	Imposing	3

Table 8. Children's expressions about teacher's roles (Category 3), connected to the four indicators.

Indicator		Category 3: Teacher's roles	C	P/ F/O	SC	Properties		Extract
1	Lennart	((children who have finished their drawing about a story book, may copy the book title)) I would like to write also, where is the i?	x		06	Adding	i	
2	Irfan	((has to cut a paper teardrop)) I can't, I can't, I won't!	x		07	Assisting	i	
	Tom	((wants the teacher to clap her hands, so he can show the children how to trundle the hula hoop)) Can I?	x	P	08	Mediating	i	
3	Bernadette	((and Erna show the teacher the cover of the box with the finished jigsaw puzzle))		P	08	Attending	i	1
	Margareta	((rubs polystyrene on the ground)) Look, miss, snow!			08	Attending	i	
4	Bernadette	That I am the teacher, and then you may tell what they'll have to do		P	06	Obliging	r	4
	Margareta	((has to do two pages in her workbook)) Okay, one page!			06	Obliging	i	

As already mentioned, expressions of children are always multidimensional, and polyphonic [3]. Therefore we assumed that a form of 'thick description' was necessary to present our findings [25]. By analyzing the whole of a cultural (school-) context, as well as its constituent, meaningful elements, a researcher develops a 'thick description' about the verbal and non-verbal expressions of people within that certain culture. At the same time the researcher gives an interpretation of the expressions of the people involved, as the researcher is not part of the cultural context that is being studied.

By taking the context into account as well in our research, we aim to explore, and interpret those expressions of our case-study children in context in an ecologically sound, and valid way.

RESULTS

Bernadette as a Paradigm Case

Bernadette shows a variety of daily school activities, often with peers, and in interaction with her teachers (setting 1). Bernadette chooses to play school in the play area (setting 2) several times and adopts different roles, as a teacher as well as a school child. She is also actively involved in the three other settings. Information from those three settings (talking about feelings, interview, and taking and discussing photographs) is meant to support the findings in the first two settings (regular daily activities, playing school in the play area) as a form of data triangulation. The following general pattern in expressions (summarized in the title) can be distilled from Bernadette's expressions in different settings:

Bernadette: 'As a teacher you can tell them what they'll have to do.'

Background

Bernadette is 5;7 and attends a primary school in a suburban city. She has an older half-sister, who is living with her own mother. Her father runs a local business. Her mother has an academic background.

School Environment

Bernadette's primary school has eight parallel classes for young children (aged 4 to 6). The classes for the children aged 10 to 12, are accommodated in another street, nearby the main building.

Interpretation of Bernadette's expressions in relation to school activities (Category 1; subcategories 01-03, see **Table 1**):

In general, Bernadette shows involvement in obligatory school activities, as well as in activities of free choice (setting 1: regular school activities). She volunteers to take part in activities, offered by the teacher, like cutting and gluing a daffodil, answering teacher's questions or willing to make a name tag for the new play area. When she is allowed to choose activities herself, she chooses drawing and coloring, jigsaw puzzles (**Table 1**, lines: 2-8), and sometimes Lego.

During the interview about her 'ideal school' (setting 4) Bernadette also mentions 'pricking' and 'working' as favorite activities. To the researcher's question: 'Are there things, you would like to have removed from the classroom?' Bernadette answers: 'well, the block play area and the home corner [may be] removed, for they are a bit childish'. On the other hand, the new play area, where children are allowed to play school, is a favorite place to play.

Sometimes Bernadette can hardly wait to put her name on the board to opt for favorite activities, referring to the new play area, and shouting: 'who is going to be the teacher? I am going to be the teacher!' She mentions Molly as her favorite classmate (setting 4: interview). Whether or not she is playing the teacher herself or decides that Molly is going to be teacher, it is Bernadette who proclaims the program of activities, and the rules which should be followed (**Table 3**, lines 1 – 9).

Most of the time Molly and Linda follow Bernadette's instructions. Sometimes they come up with alternatives. When Bernadette is playing school with Eliza, Lennart and Jan in the playing area, she chooses to act as a school child.

Bernadette is positive about going to school: 'I feel glad' (setting 3: about feelings in and on school). Outside-play, thinking about school, or talking about school at home is, 'mwah, mwah', according to Bernadette. Going home after school instead makes her 'glaaaaad'. Important things for Bernadette at school are the art works on the wall (setting 5: taking and discussing pictures), particularly with her name on it. According to Bernadette the play area for playing school, some peers in other classes, and her teacher are also special. It would be fun if her family, her cat and Molly's family would visit school too (setting 4: interview). It would also be nice if her school would be beside her house, then she would be able to, 'up you go', straight to school.

Interpretation of Bernadette's expressions in relation to school organization (Category 2, subcategories 04-05, see **Table 1**):

Bernadette is well aware of the school and classroom rules, and most of the time she acts accordingly. This is also the case when she is playing school in the play area (setting 2), and instructs other children what to do and how (**Table 4**, lines 3, 4 and 6).

In class she sometimes corrects children as well (setting 1: regular activities). She calls to Linda: 'the other way around!', and then shows her how to hand over a pair of scissors. In response to a proposition about feelings towards school rules (setting 3) she says she feels glad. Sometimes Bernadette neglects rules, e.g. when she continues coloring even though it is time to tidy up, or when she starts a new activity, although the teacher is not yet satisfied with the results of the first one (setting 1: regular activities).

Interpretation of Bernadette's expressions in relation to teacher's roles (Category 3, subcategories 06-09, see **Table 1**):

Bernadette requests, invited and uninvited, for activities proposed by the teacher. She is keen to show peers, but most of all her teachers, what she knows and is able to perform. She likes to show results of finished activities (setting 1: regular activities).

'In school you have to work', at least that is the opinion of the teachers, according to Bernadette (setting 4: interview), but

'you don't have to do everything they tell you to do'. Bernadette says she feels happy when the teacher is listening to her, and when she has the opportunity to show her something (a necklace, for instance). When the teacher 'has time to help you out, or when you are allowed to decide yourself what you would like to do', then Bernadette feels glad as well (setting 3: feelings in and about school).

Our analysis of Bernadette's expressions in the various settings allows us to draw a few intermediate conclusions. First, it is evident that not all expressions are school-related. Secondly, when we concentrate on the school-related expressions (regarding school activities, school organization, and teacher's roles, see **Table 1**) a key message can be read in Bernadette's expressions, that characterizes the pattern of her expressions about school, as a place that is strongly adult led and rule governed. The title of the case referred to this: 'As a teacher you can tell them what they'll have to do' (see **Table 5**, line 6: the teacher as instructor, see **Table 1**). On the other hand she is sometimes also strong enough to resist the rules.

Comparison Among Cases

We described the background and school environment of all the case-study children, and analyzed all the expressions of these children, the same way as we did with Bernadette's expressions. We now summarize what we found in the four remaining case-studies, concentrating on expressions directly related to school issues.

Tom (6;5) – Irfan (6;0) – Margareta (5;6) – Lennart (6;6)

School Activities

Tom, Irfan, Margareta, Lennart, as well as Bernadette, are actively involved in school activities: such as during circle time, in small group activities, and during outside-play. In this school-context all children feel free to express their personal interests, like play, handicraft, and language and numeracy activities. Like Bernadette, Lennart prefers to play with Lego and jigsaw puzzles. Lennart is keen to show what he prefers and knows, like the other 'focal' children.

Asked about school (setting 3: propositions about feelings in and about school), Lennart expresses that everything in school is fun, except for playing and working alone. Unlike Lennart, Margareta feels glad when she is allowed to play or work without peers, 'so it is possible to work quietly for a while', although in class and outside she plays with several children. Asked how he feels about school (setting 3), Irfan says: 'nasty?' When the researcher replies that she can't know how he feels, Irfan is laughing: 'you know, but you won't tell. Yes, you know, you made up the game!' Eventually he decides: 'I'll go for glad.' Tom mentions that some things in school are difficult (setting 4: interview), but 'that is quite good. That is what learning is about.'

All children, besides Bernadette, like playing outside on the playground very much (setting 4: interview). Irfan, Margareta and Lennart would like to climb trees, if it were up to them: 'to the top' (Margareta), and 'like a monkey' (Lennart). In class and on the playground Tom often takes the lead, telling other children what to do and how: 'you are not allowed [to take sand from the sandpit], for I am in charge.' Margareta states she does not like going to school, at least not very much (setting 3: propositions about feelings). When she is allowed to choose activities herself, she feels glad, like Bernadette. On the playground she discovers a piece of polystyrene (foam), and starts to rub it on the ground: 'miss, look, snow!' This activity is performed every time outside during the next days (setting 1: regular activities).

School Organization

All children are well aware of the school and classroom rules. Tom, Margareta and Lennart sometimes correct peers, like Bernadette, about how to tidy up, for instance. Irfan offers children a helping hand several times, such as when a peer accidently drops a bottle filled with beads. Irfan raises his voice when he explains that at school they are supposed not to hit other children, nor going into the barn and the bushes outside (setting 3: propositions about feelings). Margareta, as well as Irfan, expresses that those rules make her feel sad. Lennart, on the contrary, says he feels glad about those rules, just like Bernadette.

Although Lennart is not performing as a teacher while playing school, he is strictly acting to the classroom rules. He is arranging what has to be done in what way, saying several times: 'you have to.' Tom, like Bernadette and Lennart, also instructs peers during playing school (setting 2: playing school): 'clapping your hands, when the clock says 12, means tidying up.' Tom also takes the lead when a peer is playing the teacher, telling him what to do and how, just like Lennart, and – sometimes – Bernadette do.

Teacher's Roles

The children raise their hands many times when the teacher is asking questions. They often respond, invited and uninvited, to subjects brought in by the teacher. According to Lennart, a 'teacher wants you to work', which makes him feel glad, and, like Bernadette, he says: 'but you don't have to do everything they tell you to do' (setting 4: interview). Irfan also says that teachers 'tell you what to do' (setting 3: propositions about feelings). Like Bernadette, he expresses that it is nice to tell the teacher something personal (setting 3), and he is enthusiastic when he is chosen to be the teacher's assistant for a week. Irfan opposes once, when he has to cut a teardrop: 'I can't, I can't, I won't.' When he is assisted at the start, he continues the activity on his own, without any complaint (setting 1: regular activities).

Margareta sometimes negotiates the amount of work she has to fulfill. When the teacher-assistant is telling her to do two

pages in her workbook, she says: 'okay, one page!' She once brings in a bag with autumn leaves, found on her way to school, and which she wants to take home. The teacher insists on using the leaves for a creative activity, insuring her the leaves will remain undamaged. Margareta tries to prevent the teacher from taking the leaves, and eventually she starts to cry. It takes some time before Margareta settles down, and participates in the activity.

Tom likes to show his peers and his teacher, what he knows and what he is capable of, and asks the teacher to clap her hands so he can demonstrate peers the hula hoop. During playing school (setting 2), Tom acts as a teacher who is instructing and organizing. He sometimes raises his voice, just like Bernadette, in his role of a teacher during circle time: 'There! Get work! It is your turn. Which day was it the day before yesterday?' Like Bernadette he says it is fun to play a teacher, 'for you can tell children what to do.'

We analyzed the expressions of the four case-study children, and the following general patterns in expressions (summarized in an overall expression as a key message) could be distilled:

'Can I show it?

According to Tom schools are places where adults should offer children opportunities to show their school competences.

'You know the answers, but you won't tell'.

According to Irfan teachers confront children frequently with school issues, formulated as questions while these adults have the right answers already.

'Working without peers is nice, for then I am able to work quietly'.

According to Margareta schools are places where children have to perform in a proper way as instructed by adults.

'All children have to sit first, and listen to the teacher first'.

According to Lennart schools are strictly adult led and rule governed (see also Bernadette).

Linking children's expressions to indicators of voice content

What is the relationship between school related expressions as described above and our research question on the content of the children's voice? We return to our four formulated indicators of children's voice within a school context. We assumed that those theory-based indicators were helpful in exploring patterns of expressions and distinguish related unities of voice content. It proved to be possible to connect certain codes from our coding system (see **Table 1**) to the four indicators of voice content. For example:

1. expressing feelings and choices: preferring, revealing

2. sharing ideas about competences and needs: demonstrating, collaborating

3. showing knowledge by pointing out, investigating, confirming, opposing: commenting, exchanging

4. intending to gain something related to others: rejecting, assigning

Expressions of the children (see **Table 6–8**) related to the four indicators are used to show examples of voice content on the categories: school activities, school organization and teacher's roles.

School Activities

All the expressions in **table 6**, connected to the four indicators, are obviously related to one of the three subcategories (Affect, Cognition and Behavior). Expressions linked to indicator 1 refer to playing school and to grade 3, and showed to be relevant for children like Bernadette and Lennart, for these items were mentioned several times. Demonstrating capabilities (indicator 2), like being able to read or to perform certain skills is shown by Irfan and Margareta in **table 6**, but are often expressed by all children. Tom and Nico (peer) are both busy on a numeracy activity with beads, when Tom reflects on Nico's performance (indicator 3), and advises Nico to start all over again; an instruction given by their teacher on several, comparable, occasions (in the voice of the other). The utterance of Bernadette (indicator 4) is expressed, while she is playing the teacher in the play area.

School Organization

All the examples of expressions in **table 7**, connected to the four indicators, are related to properties in subcategory 04: Adoption of rules and routines, and none to subcategory 05: Modification of rules and routines (see **Table 1**). This is in line with what we found in all the analyzed material. The 'focal' children go along, mostly, with the rules and routines in school, even if they do not really approve (see: Margareta expressing her feelings, indicator 1). Lennart is expressing his key message about school by focusing on the rules and routines in school, as well as on teacher's roles (indicator 3). Bernadette's expressions in **table 7** on the adoption of rules and routines are also related to category 3: teacher's roles, as she is playing the teacher here.

Teacher's Roles

Though not exclusively, children's expressions, connected to indicator 2, are often linked to subcategory 08: the teacher

as educator or to subcategory 07: the teacher as facilitator in **table 8.** Children's expressions, connected to the indicators 3 and 4, are often related to subcategory 06: the teacher as instructor or to subcategory 08: the teacher as educator. Bernadette is expressing her key message (indicator 4) indicating the teacher acts (mainly) as instructor (see also **Table 5**, line 6). She is telling peers what to do, for 'as a teacher you may tell what they'll have to do' (see also **Table 5**). In her voice we probably hear the echo of the voice of the other: (the interpretation of) a teacher [23].

Bernadette's key message is in line with Lennart's key message (see also **Table 7**, indicator 3) and what the other children reflect on as well: 'a teacher tells you what to do'.

Looking at the **tables 6-8** we see that expressions, connected to indicator 1 are often related to elements of conation: thinking, feeling or wanting. Peers are often involved or referred to in the expressions of the 'focal' children, certainly in expressions connected to indicator 4. Taking the nature of indicator 4 into account, the relationship between 'focal' child and peer could sometimes be described as hierarchical (see Tom in **Table 6**, Bernadette in **Table 6-8**). Tom's and Bernadette's acting could be described as taking part in an authoritative discourse [3]: their opinion is the only one that matters on those particular moments.

DISCUSSION

We explored contents of young children's voice related to their school contexts. We found, that the children are quite outspoken in what they prefer to do in school, and in what they do not like. They accept most rules in class and outside, and act accordingly, even when they do not approve of certain school rules. The children describe and appear to accept a number of teacher roles. Whilst playing a teacher in the play area, or instructing a peer to play a teacher, most children refer to a conventional image of a strictly governing teacher. Most children prefer being in charge in the play area to some extent, telling other children what to do. On the other hand, it is probably also a more rewarding role: playing a leading teacher requires a more visible and active role, than playing a teacher who is (purely) acting as a facilitator. All the children accept – although their appreciations differ to some extent – that they have to go to school, and that education is considered important.

We were able to distinguish patterns of expressions for the children, summarized as characteristics. Those characteristics refer to the importance of own capabilities or performances (Tom and Margareta) or the role of teachers with an own agenda (Irfan, Lennart and Bernadette). The children reflect on school activities, school organization and teachers' roles from time to time, indicating that they have or take some freedom in what they (want to) do or do not, and how. In those reflections they show elements of voice content in the way they express their feelings, share ideas, show knowledge and - sometimes - compete with others.

The precise content of children's personal voice is, however, different for each child, due to the diversity of personal interests and emotions that function as a prism through which children perceive a seemingly constant educational environment. Those school contexts influence children's perspectives at the same time. Our analyses show that the objects and subjects in these school contexts here and now have their influence on children's expressions [20]. The educational philosophies children encounter in their own school contexts do so as well [10].

Another reflective remark, is about our research method. Our research comprises five cases, so it is impossible to generalize the outcomes of our research for all young children. As we wanted to study young children's voice in real life situations, we chose an empirical, qualitative research approach with a limited number of cases, with a researcher participating in the real life school contexts of the children. Our research method proved to be reliable and consistent for studying young children's voice in those real life school contexts in these five cases. A larger study on exploring the content of young children's voice could probably benefit, in the future, from the outcomes of this research.

Although our research outcomes show similarities in children's expressions in our cases, they show variations as well. Unanswered is the question how we can explain these variations. In the next phase of our research we want to explore to what extent the voice of young children correspond to the voices of others [23], like the children's teachers, parents and peers.

When the children express that they have to go to school, and that education is considered important, we probably see perspectives, acquired by children, in their own (cultural) context. Children's reflective expressions about school, shown in the way they express their feelings, share ideas, show knowledge, and, in particular, compete with others, refer - most probably - to children's personal meanings or sense [10,12].

It proved to be complex to determine to which extent children's expressions really reflect their own personal perspectives, for children develop perspectives on their circumstances too through the values and beliefs they receive from birth on, inside as well as outside the school contexts [8,26]. In the expressions of the children in our cases we assume possible correspondences with the values and beliefs in the voices of the others [23]. Those other voices can perhaps explain – partly – the variations we found in the voice of the five young children in our research.

CONCLUSIONS

We raised the following question: What is the content of young children's 'voice' concerning school contexts? We started

our research out from a paradigm case (Bernadette) and through our cross-case analyses, we arrived at the following answer on our research question: through systematic analysis it is possible to identify main ideas in children's expressions that may be interpreted as contents of their personal voice.

What we hear children expressing in and about their educational context has relations with theories on child development as we have noted before in the theoretical framework.

As a situated phenomenon, 'voice' may have explanatory value for the understanding of children's current perceptions of school. We have to take into account, that children develop their views on school, even before they enter the school system, through their interactions with proximal others. We found that the content of voice content differs for each child, probably partly due to the different influences children encounter in their lives. The diversity of personal interests and emotions that function as a prism through which children perceive a seemingly constant educational environment, is also an explanation for children's differences in content of voice [20]. This is precisely the working of what Vygotsky called 'perezhivanie' [8].

Though we have identified elements of voice about school issues in our research with the case-study children, we still have to explore the ways in which those voices are related to different participants in varying contexts, to gain more insight into young children's voice. This multidimensionality of voice, and the possible echo of the voices of the other [8], make it necessary to study more closely the notions of the parents, the teachers and peers regarding school in the future, and to look for explanations of variations and corresponding notions of the case-study children, and proximal others in their educational environments.

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