Voicing the child? A case study in Finnish early childhood education
Maarit Alasuutari

Childhood published online 20 June 2013
DOI: 10.1177/0907568213490205

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://chd.sagepub.com/content/early/2013/06/18/0907568213490205

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:
Norwegian Centre for Child Research

Additional services and information for Childhood can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://chd.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts
Subscriptions: http://chd.sagepub.com/subscriptions
Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav
Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

>> OnlineFirst Version of Record - Jun 20, 2013
What is This?
Voicing the child? A case study in Finnish early childhood education

Maarit Alasuutari
University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Abstract
Contemporary Nordic early childhood education and care takes as its starting point the individual and ‘competent’ child and emphasizes the aim to take account of children’s views. It is also common in educational settings that the child’s views are documented and thus transformed into contexts in which they are discussed between the adults. In light of a case study of 22 parent–teacher meetings in Finnish early childhood education and care the article discusses the position of the child’s voice in this context. The theoretical framework is based on a relational view of childhood and the child’s voice, on theories of face-to-face and institutional interaction and on discursive psychology. The article highlights the multifaceted relational processes in which the child’s participation is embedded in adult-led institutional practices.

Keywords
Child’s voice, competent child, documentation, early childhood education, parent–teacher conference, participation

Introduction
Contemporary Nordic early education is characterized by a rhetoric that takes as its starting point the individual child who is understood as worth listening to because of her/his competence to express her/his wishes, interests and inner moods in rational ways. This rhetoric, inspired, for example, by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and by the sociology of childhood, has become an integral part of various didactic and pedagogical developments in the field of education. Concurrently, the ‘competent’ child is understood as having the right to express her/his views and to be involved in decision-making on issues concerning her-/himself (Kampmann, 2004: 137–148; Kjørholt, 2005; Vandenbroeck and Bouverne-De Bie, 2006).
It is also increasingly common in present-day early education – as well as in other social fields – that the child’s participation is aimed at by recording her/his views. The child’s works and doings may be documented and collected in a portfolio or in the process of pedagogical documentation (see Dahlberg et al., 2007: 144–158), the child’s learning may be assessed in learning stories (Carr, 2001), her/his daily activities may be reported in a home–school booklet, and the child may be interviewed for special purposes, such as developmental talks (see Markström, 2009), etc. In several ways, the competent child’s expressions can become a part of, or an ingredient in institutional and professional documentation practices. Consequently, by documentation the child’s voice is also transformed into contexts and situations in which the child her-/himself is not present.

In this article I consider an example of the abovementioned transformation and study how the child’s voice is approached and given the floor in parent–teacher meetings in Finnish early childhood education and care (ECEC). In the meetings the parents and teachers draft an individual educational plan (IEP) for each child using a specific form. The IEP is a fairly new practice in Finnish ECEC and a prime example of the abovementioned notion of the competent child. It was first introduced in the National Curriculum Guidelines on ECEC in 2003 (Stakes, 2003) as a practice that concerns all children in day care. Besides emphasizing the individuality of the child, the IEP is guided by the underlying value of Finnish ECEC to ‘give due weight to the views of the child’ (Stakes, 2004: 13, 2005: 12). In this article I study what happens to the notion of the competent child and to the child’s voice when they are introduced into the IEP discussion through documentation.

The article draws on naturally occurring data on parent–teacher meetings. The children are not present at these meetings but they are invited to participate in them through a set of specific questions in the IEP form. These questions are addressed to the child and hence can be understood as mediating the child’s voice to the meeting. The parent is expected to present the questions to the child and document her/his voice on the IEP form before the discussion with the teacher. The article examines from a discursive perspective how these questions and the answers to them are negotiated in parent–teacher interaction. The specific research questions are the following: (1) How are the questions to the child and the answers to them positioned in the parent–teacher meetings; and (2) what are their functions in the interaction; hence, how do the questions and the answers to them affect the discussion between the parent and the teacher?

By analysing the parent–teacher interaction, the article aims to discuss the complexities of listening to children. However, it does not consider the methods of listening to children per se, but highlights the multifaceted relational processes in which the child’s voice and participation are embedded in adult-led institutional practices. Even though the study is about early childhood education, it is also pertinent to other social contexts. Children’s participation is also topical in other educational settings (Wyness, 1999), in child welfare policies (Bessell, 2010; Cashmore 2010) and in planning and decision-making in general (Bessell, 2009; Kjørholt, 2002; Mannion and I’anson, 2004; Wyness, 2009).

The next section presents the theoretical underpinnings of the study after which follows a description of the methodological approach. The results are presented in three sections depicting the different ways of approaching and receiving the child’s perspective in the research context – taking it as secondary, appreciating it and refuting it.
Finally, the contradictory discursive fields regarding listening to children’s voices are discussed.

**Theoretical perspectives**

In this article the child’s voice is used as a generic concept to refer to the child’s views, understandings, etc. which are, in turn, understood as a relational and contextual discursive accomplishment (Gergen, 2009). This approach is comparable to Warming’s (2005) position. Ontologically, she doubts the existence of children’s experiences and views and defines them as contextual (like adults’ experiences). Epistemologically, she underlines the perspectival nature of knowledge. The assumptions of this article are also akin to Komulainen’s (2007) ideas. Applying a discursive approach, Komulainen cautions against excessively simplistic usage of the term voice and underlines the demand to consider the dynamics of human interaction when analysing children’s voices. She notes the social nature of communication and argues that it is adults who ultimately construct and interpret children’s communication and voices. Spyrou (2011) is also critical of the notion of the authenticity of children’s voices and the missing reflexivity of the contexts in which children’s voices are produced. Additionally, several researchers have pointed out what a multifaceted and challenging issue it is to listen to children and to act in ways that are responsive to their perspectives in society (e.g. Cederborg, 1997; Dockett et al., 2011; Kjørholt, 2002, 2005; Komulainen, 2007; Mac Naughton et al., 2007; Mannion and I’anson, 2004; Moss et al., 2005; Sinclair, 2004; Wyness, 2009).

Generally, this article looks at childhood as a thoroughly social and fundamentally relational phenomenon (Alanen, 2001, 2009). The concepts of childhood and the child are produced in interaction and through a complex set of social processes that are interdependent with the concepts of the adult and adulthood in a particular society. Their interdependence means that they stand in a relation of mutual constitution. Hence, childhood and adulthood are produced and reproduced in the interactions taking place between members of existing generational categories, in other words, in intergenerational practices. Additionally, at any point of time and place the principles of social order entail that there is an arrangement of these practices and hence, of relations between generational categories (Alanen, 2009). This arrangement – the generational order – traditionally assumes a power and competence asymmetry. The child is usually understood as a minor and in the state of becoming (Prout and James, 1997).

The parent–teacher meetings comprise a setting in which the intergenerational relations are negotiated. These negotiations and the constructions produced are, again, productive: they determine the educational institution and the pedagogical work undertaken in it (Dahlberg et al., 2007). Consequently, the notions of the educator’s, the parent’s and the educational institution’s positions are intertwined with, and produced by, the understandings of the child and childhood.

Additionally, the nature of parent–teacher discussions as face-to-face interaction is underlined. In the interaction the participants apply specific premises – situational frames – to interpret the ongoing activity. In framing the activities, they can apply diverse frames. In addition, each activity can be framed in several ways (Goffman, 1986: 5–45). For example, a game can be framed both as a competition and play. Similarly, the IEP
discussion can be understood both as information exchange and as an early intervention (see Alasuutari and Alasuutari, 2012).

‘Face work’ is also an important aspect of the interaction (Goffman, 1967: 5–45). According to Goffman (1967: 5), in contacts with others a person tends to act out a line – ‘that is, a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which he expresses his view of the situation and through this his evaluation of the participants, especially himself’. This line or ‘face’ can be intended by the person or merely assumed by the others. Essential for face is its positive social value. Hence, face as a concept refers to an image of self presented in terms of approved social attributes. Face work again is about the maintenance of face in an encounter. It is a condition of the interaction, not its objective. Face work is also a collaborative endeavour: besides aiming at the consistency of his or her face, a person typically acts in support of the other party’s face. Hence, the mutual acceptance of each participant’s face seems to be a basic structural feature of interaction. At the same time, the versatility of face-to-face interaction makes it also liable to face-threatening expressions and actions. As Goffman says (1967: 33), ‘there is no occasion of talk in which improper impressions could not intentionally or unintentionally arise’. To prevent an occurrence of a face threat, a person can try to avoid, for example, risky topics or actions in the interaction. In the case of a threat the person can again try to correct its effects in various ways, for example by changing the framing of the talk from serious to a joke (Goffman, 1967: 15–23).

In an institutional encounter, face work can be seen as an important means of reproducing the institutional roles of the participants. A disruption of the institutional relationship that could potentially be caused by unanticipated and unintentional interactional events can be prevented by mutual face work (Goffman, 1967: 41). For example, different ways of accounting for responsibility and of fact construction can be applied as its resources (see Potter, 1996).

Overall, the article is based on discursive psychology that understands discourse – talk and text – as constitutive in social life. Discursive psychology is founded on constructionist thinking and treats the mental and social worlds as objects that are depicted and invoked in the course of particular practices. Its main interest is in the action orientation of talk and writing (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996; Potter and Hepburn, 2007b). Thus, it studies discourse for its performative quality rather than using it as a pathway to events and objects in the world or to a person’s inner world (Potter, 2010). Accordingly, the parent–teacher discussions in this study are not approached from the perspective of cognitivism as a reflection of the adults’ (fixed) attitudes about the child’s views or as mirroring their inner thoughts about how a child should be related to, but rather as talk that is situated and contextual. First, the talk is situated sequentially. The primary environment of an account is what is said before it and the account again sets up but does not determine what will be said after it. Second, the talk is situated institutionally. It is embedded, and often constitutive of institutional practices. Additionally, it is rhetorically situated. That is, accounts are often constructed in a way that counters relevant alternatives (Potter and Hepburn, 2007b: 277). The framework of discursive psychology entails also the disruption of the familiar micro–macro distinction as well as the distinctions between action and structure. What is often understood as a macro-level issue or structure is studied as a practical issue in interaction. Hence, the examination of micro-level interaction is assumed
to illuminate how, for example, the rhetoric of children’s rights or childhood as a social ‘structure’ can be brought alive in different social activities (Potter and Hepburn, 2007a). Finally, the perspective of discursive psychology is consequential on the choice of data. Often, the naturalistic data are preferred (Potter, 2010).

Methodology

This article uses data from an ethnographic research project on the implementation of IEPs in Finnish ECEC. The data were collected in 2006–2007 in three day care centres in a municipality with 28,000 inhabitants. The data gathering has followed the ethical rules and principles of social scientific investigation. The research collaboration was first negotiated, and the day care centres were contacted through the heads of the regional ECEC service provision. Research approvals were applied for from the appropriate authority of the research municipality. The staff at the centres were personally informed about the project and all the parents were given a letter about it. The participation of the day care centres, individual teachers and parents was based on their voluntary decisions. All the participants were asked to sign an informed consent. All the informants had the right to withdraw from the study at any point (see Christians, 2000: 138–140).

The data comprise the IEPs of 22 children and the tape-recorded parent–teacher meetings in which the IEP is drafted. The recordings were made by the teachers and transcribed verbatim. In all, there were 14 teachers, two of whom males, having discussions with the parents. In every discussion the child’s mother was present; the fathers only attended discussions in the case of five children. The age of the children varies between one and six years.

Before the meeting the parents had been given the IEP form to be completed at home. Besides minor differences, the forms used in the three institutions were similar. The forms, consisting of six or seven pages, were developed by the local ECEC authorities, which is a typical practice in Finnish ECEC. They included questions concerning the child’s daily care, family values and parenting practices, the child’s development and the parent’s expectations concerning ECEC. They also included three to five questions for the child to answer. In including questions addressed to the child the forms issued by the research municipality are somewhat exceptional in national comparison; IEP forms do not generally elicit children’s views.

In the IEP forms the questions to the child were either under the heading ‘Child’s feedback’ or ‘Child’s expectations of day care’. The specific questions are listed below. The variations in their formulation are shown by slash mark.

- Tell about yourself in your own words: A photo chosen by the child, a story or a drawing by the child. / What does the child want to tell about her/himself?
- What do you expect and wish for from being in day care? The child’s own story or a drawing. / What does the child expect or wish for from being in day care?
- Is there something that you do not like in day care? / Is there something that makes you anxious, bothers you or annoys you in day care? / Is there something in day care that makes the child anxious or bothers her; is the child being bullied, what makes her laugh?
• What else would the child like to tell? Are there still other issues in day care that concern her?
• What do you like to do in day care? Whom do you like to play with?

The analysis focuses on the interaction episodes in which the questions to the child and the answers to them are discussed. When analysing the interaction episodes, the IEP forms have been used side-by-side with the transcriptions and recordings and approached as agents in the interaction. Hence, they are considered as producing ‘turns of talk’ in the process of IEP planning and therefore influencing the interaction between parent and teacher (Gubrium, 1989; Prior, 2003: 1–29). In the analysis the reception and the consequences of the turns produced by the IEP forms – thus, their discursive effects – are examined.

Following the theoretical assumptions above, the answers to the questions to the child are not approached as objective information about the child’s thoughts and ideas. Instead, they are understood as text that has been produced by an adult and that is fundamentally interactional. How well the text reflects the meanings that the child’s responses had in the actual parent–child interaction cannot be known. However, in this article the questions to the child and the responses to them are denoted by the term ‘the child’s talk’, as they are approached in the parent–teacher discussion.

Following the perspective of discursive psychology, the interaction episodes of the parent–teacher discussions are studied as situated and contextual (see Edwards and Potter, 1992; Hepburn and Potter, 2004). In the analysis each turn in the talk is examined in its immediate discursive environment assuming that its meaning is constructed by its sequential position in the interaction. The discussions are also approached bearing in mind their institutional context. However, the institutional context is studied by looking at how contextual features are produced in the course of the interaction. Additionally, the rhetorical means applied by the speakers when negotiating the child’s talk and, for example, constructing it as factual or as invalid are examined (see Hepburn and Potter, 2004; Potter, 1996).

Results

In all, there are 83 questions to the child in the 22 IEP forms. As Table 1 shows, about half of them are answered while the other half are unanswered. It is also much more typical that the answers are missing when the IEP meeting is about a one- or two-year-old. As the analysis will show, however, a missing answer is not always associated with the child’s skills or (lack of) maturity. The youngest children might be expected to be able to give an answer to the questions.

When the question to the child is answered, the answer is often written as a verbatim quotation of the child’s words. This is shown in the phrasing of the response and in some cases also by the use of quotation marks. However, answers more adult in style are also common. The number of questions to the child with responses suggests that fairly often they ‘give a voice’ to the child in the IEP discussion. They also become topical in all but one parent–teacher meeting: the questions are usually mentioned, whether they are answered to or not. However, these observations do not permit any conclusions on the position of the child or of her/his talk, as will be shown in the following examination of the interaction episodes.
The child’s talk as secondary

Even though questions to the child become topical in the parent–teacher interaction, it is common that they, and thus the child’s talk, are produced as secondary to the IEP planning. First, this is done implicitly when some of the questions are bypassed without mentioning them. They can be answered or unanswered but they are not discussed at all. When the questions have been answered this happens only after discussing at least one of the written responses. Bypassing the child questions is an interesting phenomenon in the data because generally the teachers seem to follow the form and its order of questions very conscientiously. Therefore, the bypassing implies that the questions to the child are not given the same value as the adult-oriented questions in the IEP planning.

Second, the teachers also construct the questions to the child as not important explicitly. That is, in specific situations they apply terms like ‘not necessary’ or ‘not serious’ when discussing the questions to the child. This takes place especially when the questions have not been answered (see Example 1). This seems to be contradictory: why would the teachers define the child’s views as not important if they are specifically elicited by the institution to be taken into account under the legislation? The examination of the parent–teacher interaction shows that the teachers’ notions may be associated with the positions of the participants in the institutional context and with the regularities of face-to-face interaction. The next example sheds light on this. It starts with a question by a mother discussing the IEPs of her two daughters. Before the question there has been a pause in the interaction signifying a topic change. Additionally, a turn of a page can be heard on the tape during the pause. (The translation of the data examples follows as much as possible the word order of the original Finnish transcription. Therefore, the English language of the examples may seem somewhat awkward. The transcription symbols are explained in the Appendix.)

Example 1

Mother: What is it that kind of empty empty page when (())
Teacher: It was about this if (.) if the child wants [to tell something
M: [Oh yeah well that (.) I didn’t ((answer them)) then cause I did them ((refers to completing the form)) in the night [at work and
T: [Right
M: at work the child was not along [but
T: Yeah

Table 1. The number of answered and unanswered questions to the child in different age groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group (number of children)</th>
<th>Unanswered questions</th>
<th>Verbatim quotations of the child’s answer</th>
<th>Answers adult in style</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1–2 (8)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3–4 (8)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–6 (6)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

M: well (.) and now I didn’t think about ((them)) (.) I would have of course now had time to ((ask them)) from Marianna [now
T: [Yeah (.) it is not so (1) [serious
M: [But awfully little they ((refers to both daughters)) after all actually (1) actually talk ((about day care))

The mother’s question, elicited with a smiley voice and laughter, at the beginning of the example can be interpreted as representing ‘troubles talk’ (Jefferson, 1984). In troubles talk (solo) laughter occurs within descriptions that imply a deviation from the expected picture of the speaker or other issue under consideration. The other participant acknowledges troubles talk by giving a serious response (Haakana, 2001; Jefferson, 1984). In the example, the mother’s question, elicited with laughter, and the teacher’s serious response show that the finding of an empty page and unanswered questions is regarded as a deviation from what is expected from the parent: she should have completed the IEP form before the discussion. Also the mother’s next turns comprising an explanation as to why the questions to the child have not been answered give further evidence for the interpretation that the mother’s talk concerns her falling behind in her institutional role. Hence, finding an empty page in the form threatens the mother’s face in the institutional encounter (Goffman, 1967) and this is also what the teacher’s response is about. By defining the (missing) views of the child as ‘not so serious’, the teacher loosens up the expected role of the parent and thus, saves the mother’s face. Concurrently, she produces her professional position and her rights and expertise in defining what is important in IEP planning. After this the mother still gives another account for the child’s missing view. In all, her talk is framed by the assumption that the child is indeed capable of expressing her views and ideas. However, her last turn implies that there may be problems in interviewing her daughters because of their personal characteristics: they do not usually talk much about day care.

The example above reveals the interactional regularities about when and why the questions to the child are explicitly defined as not important in the IEP planning. This happens when there are no answers to the questions or the parent admits not having discussed them with the child. These situations evoke the institutional roles of the parties. Parents account for the missing answers and hence, do face work (Goffman, 1967) to (re) produce their parental position as ‘acceptable’ in relation to ECEC. Teachers again support the parental face by defining the child’s view as secondary. Concurrently, they construct their professional position in the situation.

In the previous example the parent initiated the discussion about the missing answers to the questions to the child. The same kind of face work can be seen when the teacher initiates it. The following question is typical on these occasions:

Example 2

T: Then there are these ((child’s)) expectations (.) nothing has come up

When initiating the discussion about the questions to the child the teachers do not ask the parent if she/he has interviewed the child or not. The potential ‘no’ answer would challenge the parent’s face in the institutional context and, therefore, the phrasing of
parental agency is avoided. Instead, the teachers pose a question that is framed by the notion of the child being able to give an answer, in principle. However, they do not position the child as an agent in their question formulations (e.g. ‘Tomi has not given any answers, has he?’) but apply either the passive voice applicable in Finnish language or other phrasing that describes the emergence of the answer as somewhat contingent in the specific occasion, as in Example 2. Typically these questions are then followed by the parental explanations why there is no response.

Despite producing the unanswered questions to the child as secondary, the parent–teacher talk usually assumes that the child would indeed be capable of answering. Sometimes the missing answers are accounted for by the child’s characteristics, as in Example 1, but this does not imply that the child is deemed incompetent to answer the questions. Among one- to two-year-olds, the missing answers, however, are sometimes justified by suggesting that they may be too difficult for a young child. This suggestion functions, however, as a means of face work in the interaction.

**Appreciating the child’s talk**

There are two types of child’s talk that are shown consistent appreciation in the parent–teacher interaction. The first of these is responses that describe day care activities, such as playing, singing or being with friends, as enjoyable and amusing for the child. The second includes stories or pictures produced by children. The function of these two types of responses, however, is different in the parent–teacher interaction. The following is an example of the first type of response.

**Example 3**

T: …Here is the child’s feedback [ok
M: [Yeah
T: We sang ((reads the text in the form))
M: =Singing [that’s something she likes
T: [Yeah we do sing every day and they all like it a lot [and always
M: [Yeah
T: ((they)) say that let’s sing let’s sing and…

At the beginning of the example the teacher introduces the questions to the child as a new topic in the discussion by referring to and reading aloud the text on the IEP form. This is followed by the mother’s turn in which she defines singing as something that the child enjoys. Hence, she co-constructs the meaning of the child’s talk and validates it. She also shows her knowledge as a parent about the child’s preferences. The teacher’s two turns at the end of the example present a typical response by the professionals in this kind of episode. The teacher shows appreciation and validation of the child’s talk by generalizing the topic as concerning all children in the group. In some cases the teachers also associate the child’s talk with the programme or curriculum of the class, for example, by explaining how the programme is focused on playing if the child’s response describes play as the preferred activity in day care. Hence, the teachers validate the child’s talk by justifying it on the basis of their (professional) observations of the child group (or the
specific child) and/or by defining the talk as congruent with the educational aims of the institution.

Thus what follows after the child’s talk about her/his preferred issues and activities in day care is a parent–teacher negotiation about the factuality of the talk. The negotiation may be fairly short comprising only a few turns or it may be a long discussion about the child. In both cases, however, an undisputed view is constructed about the talk and it is validated. Hence, the child’s view is given equal value as the adult perspective. The validation is done by referring to the epistemic position of the speaker as an adult who, based on observations and knowledge either from home or from the institution, knows how things are. Hence once again the institutional roles of the parties are evoked. The teacher is constructed as a professional in education and about children in general while the parent is positioned as the one who knows the particular child as a person.

When the child’s talk is interpreted as a story or when there is no written answer but a drawing instead, the parent–teacher interaction follows a very different path, as shown below. In the following example the child’s answer – the multifaceted story – is read aloud by the teacher.

Example 4

T: ...(1) When I sit on the steps at the slide then I fooled about then £the next day was beautiful£ and I walked I tried to say r ((the phone)) £but it didn’t succeed£ ((The teacher and the mother laugh aloud))

T: £then (hh)£ I thought and ran £(hh)£ to the swing board =lovely this story was when we ((refers to the teachers)) read this

Almost throughout the reading the teacher either uses a smiley voice or laughs aloud. The mother joins in her laughter. The child’s story is constructed as amusing the adults and from this perspective, it is appreciated. At the end, however, the focus is on the quality of the story; it is evaluated as ‘lovely’. No attention is paid, for example, to the point the answer makes about the child’s difficulties in pronouncing r, which is an important sound in Finnish.

The evaluation is a regular pattern in the episodes discussing children’s stories or pictures. Either the artefact – a story or drawing – is evaluated, as in the example above, or the child’s skills and abilities are assessed based on it. Usually this is done by the teacher. The child may, for example, be categorized as ‘imaginative’. Thus, the child’s talk as such is not considered but its appreciation leads to constructing the talk and/or the child her-/himself as an object of adult evaluation. The evaluation produces a generational demarcation and underlines the professional position of the teacher.

Refuting the child’s talk

First, it is important to note that the child’s talk is not totally refuted or invalidated in the parent–teacher interaction. This is because it is often taken as being about the child’s emotions and inner self and, thus, about issues in which the child is assumed to be the ‘owner of experience’ (see Peräkylä, 1995). Therefore the parents and teachers do not simply refute the child’s talk. This again suggests that they apply the frame of the
competent child as their interactional resource. What is the most commonly invalidated, however, is the talk about hitting and bullying. These two are often reported as the child’s responses to enquiries about what the child does not like in day care or what makes the child anxious or bothers or annoys her. Typically in these situations, the child’s talk is taken as challenging the idea of ECEC as a well-functioning institution and its professionals as mastering their educational role.

Below is an example of the typical interaction pattern. The discussion is about a three-year-old boy, Matias, and it deals with his answer to the question whether something is annoying him in day care. Before the cited interaction episode, the teacher has read the response aloud – ‘if someone hits me’ – on the form. After this the mother has explained how she, in response to the child’s talk, had asked Matias who hit him and if he himself has sometimes hit other children. According to her, Matias has named another boy, Joni, as the one who hits and admitted having himself also hit. After this the teacher describes the issue from her perspective.

**Example 5**

T: … Joni and Matias play [together
M: [Yeah
T: but then really (. ) both boys are young I mean
M: [Yeah
Father: [Um
T: like the same age (. ) so (. ) very often it’s perhaps like if one isn’t quite able yet to say to the other what one wants and thinks then there can easily become a [disagreement
F: [Yeah
T: situation but (. ) very few of them ((disagreements)) we really have had (. ) but well of course (. ) for the child there doesn’t need to be more than one ((incident))
F: [Um
T: [and it will stay [in mind
M: [Yeah
T: [of course
F: [Yeah
T: but that they are awfully rare so that we don’t [need to here like
M: [Yeah (. ) yeah
T: during the day sort out any disagreements

In her first turns the teacher applies a developmental framework and constructs the disagreements and, implicitly, the hitting as a normal occurrence between Matias and Joni because of their age. This can be understood as suggesting that Matias’s response does not need specific adult attention. However, after this the teacher shows understanding for the response by referring to the possibility that even one such incident can be remembered by a child. Thus she validates Matias’s potential inner feelings but at the same time, by naturalizing the child’s recall of one incident, undermines the importance of his response. Additionally, she accounts for the everyday life in the institution and explains, referring to the staff’s experiences, how few disagreements there are between the children. Thus, the teacher uses several discursive means to show that Matias’s talk does not
merit special consideration, hereby refuting it. In so doing she draws on her institutional position as a professional in child development and early education.

In the example the parental turns consist of minimal feedback tokens which can be interpreted as implying alignment with the teacher’s talk. In all, it is typical that the parents participate in co-constructing the invalidation of the child’s talk. Hence, they show that they do not take a critical stance towards the institution and, concurrently, they reproduce the asymmetrical relationship between the teacher/professional and themselves. In Matias’s case this was already seen in the mother’s first account of Matias’s answer – in her question about Matias hitting other children. Her account gave the impression that for her Matias’s response was not of particular concern. Later in the discussion both parents show they are convinced, based on their observations at home, that Matias is not a ‘victim of any hitting’ in day care.

In all, Matias’s brief response, which does not imply that bullying and hitting are a continuous problem in day care, is received as an implicit accusation concerning ECEC and therefore, counteracted by several accounts. As a consequence, Matias’s response is not considered from his perspective. In none of the parent–teacher discussions do the child’s ‘complaints’ lead, for example, to a discussion about how to deal with the specific child in the case of bullying or hitting.

Refuting the child’s talk implies that the adult’s views are taken as more valid than the child’s perspective. The adults’ views are justified by observations and knowledge from home and day care; hence, by drawing on the adult’s institutional role either as a professional or as a parent. When the child’s talk is refuted, a generational ordering is also taking place. This is done by demarcating the epistemic rights and limits of the child and the adults. By drawing the line between the ‘inaccurate’ child’s talk and the ‘valid’ adult views the child is positioned as minor in her/his knowledge about her/his life. The invalidation of the child’s talk and the generational ordering can be understood as resulting from and being intertwined with the institutional considerations and with the face work (Goffman, 1967). The child’s ‘complaints’ about day care cause a potential rupture in the parent–teacher interaction because they challenge the idea of ECEC as a well-functioning institution. Both the teacher and the parent take part in preventing the rupture by co-constructing a favourable picture of the institution, thereby refuting the child’s talk. In this, both the assumptions related to their institutional roles and the traditional generational ordering serve as workable resources.

Conclusion

This article was inspired by the rhetoric of the competent child which characterizes Nordic early childhood education and is reflected, for example, in the notion of the child being able to express her/his views and having the right to be involved in decision-making concerning her-/himselves (Kampmann, 2004; Kjørholt, 2005; Vandenbroeck and Bouverne-De Bie, 2006). The article presented a case study of parent–teacher discussions about the child’s IEP in Finnish ECEC. These discussions are guided by the principle to ‘give due weight to the views of the child’. In the specific case under scrutiny, the child’s views were recorded on the IEP form. Hence the case represents a fairly common way of listening to children in contemporary societies: the children’s voices are
documented and hence transformed into situations where the children themselves are not present. In the specific case study this transformation was achieved through a set of questions on the IEP forms. The study examined from the discursive perspective the positions of these questions to the child and the answers to them (the ‘child’s talk’) in the parent–teacher interaction. Even though the transferability of the specific findings of this study is restricted, the results reflect more general and conceptual phenomena that can benefit future research related to the notions of young children’s participation and voice.

As mentioned in the introduction, the rhetoric of the competent child reflects transnational discourses and norms (e.g. Vandenbroeck and Bouverne-De Bie, 2006). The present analysis can be characterized as a case study about the ‘domestication’ (Alasuutari and Alasuutari, 2012) of this rhetoric at local and micro level. The concept of domestication refers to the processes by which new transnational reforms and ideas are implemented. This implementation can be characterized as a field battle in which all kinds of counter-discourses are mobilized to defend the existing positions and interests in the changes that the potential reform causes them and to negotiate the form the reform will take. The final outcome of the reform depends on this field battle and consequently, the result may differ a lot from the original ideals.

The questions to the child in the IEP forms show that the demand to take account of the child’s views seemed to be domesticated quite truthfully at the local level in the research municipality. The municipality had established a consultative process for children’s participation in ECEC (Lansdown, 2005). That is, they had set up a mechanism through which to elicit children’s perspectives and use them to influence day care. As mentioned earlier, this is not always the case in Finnish ECEC.

However, the discussion about the questions to the child in parent–teacher interaction gave a more complex picture of the domestication process. Partly, the interaction seemed to follow and align with the questions to the child in their assumption about a child who is reflexive and able to describe her/his inner self and aspirations. In the interaction the child was usually assumed to be capable of answering the questions. There did not seem to be any specific notions regarding the child’s age and responding to the questions if the child had already developed basic language skills (see Kjørholt, 2005). The idea of the child’s competence could also be identified in the talk about the child’s inner feelings. The parents and the teachers assumed the child to be the ‘owner of experience’ (Peräkylä, 1995) and did not challenge the child’s talk when it dealt with emotions or experiences. In addition, the child’s talk about her/his preferred activities and issues in day care was appreciated in the interaction.

However, often the child’s views were also constrained or outweighed by institutional discourses (see Alderson, 2010; Lee, 1999; Wyness, 1999, 2009) and (normative) notions of parenthood that assume a parent who knows her child and acts in cooperation with professionals (e.g. Karila and Alasuutari, 2012). The analysis showed that the child’s views were appreciated when they were in line with the assumptions about ECEC as a high quality and professional institution but refuted if they could be understood as challenging them. In the interaction the adults applied their respective epistemic positions as a professional and as a parent either to validate the child’s talk and, consequently, to take account of her/his views or to refute the talk and to position the child as a minor. When the child’s talk was refuted the interaction was, thus, framed by and intertwined with the
traditional generational ordering (Alanen, 2001) constructed on the notions of the epistemetic rights and limitations of the child and of the adults. For the teachers and the parents the generational ordering gave an important means to position the child as a minor even when they seemed to be paying attention to the child’s views.

Demarcating the epistemic positions of the child and the adults when considering the ‘challenging’ child’s talk illustrates how the institutional discourses themselves can be contradictory. The child’s views and the notion of the competent child were outweighed if they were not in line with the idea of a well-functioning ECEC institution – the idea which is firmly grounded in generational ordering. Thus when the legitimacy of the institution was at stake, instead of the particular child, the consideration focused on general (adult) ‘facts’ about the institution and the children in it (Lee, 1999). This tension between the particular (child) and the generally applicable (in the institution or among children) is, according to Lee (1999), a key aspect in the adult institutions’ inability to decide what status they should assign to children’s views.

Besides institutional considerations and generational ordering, the interactional rules and principles played an important part in outweighing the child’s view. The analysis showed that the need for face work (Goffman, 1967) in adult interaction explained why the child’s talk was undermined in particular situations. The face work was typically linked to the institutional roles and considerations. Therefore, the study suggests that when considering children’s participation more generally the effects of the interactional level should be taken into account. This also applies when educating and training professionals about children’s participation (see Bessell, 2009).

Even though the principles of Finnish ECEC are framed by the idea of the competent child, this study reveals that at the micro level the domestication of the idea is a complex process. The everyday life of ECEC – of which the IEP planning is just one example – can be described as a junction of various discourses which can counteract with ‘giving due weight to the child’ in several ways. Therefore, the idea of the competent child is also partly ‘lost in translation’. Even though it can be seen as a dominant discourse in education at the macro level, it is too simplistic to assume that it is self-evidently a dominant approach in educational practices. Ellegaard (2004) also points out that the concept of the competent child should not be seen as a hegemonic discourse but as competing with a number of other discourses. According to him, the idea of the competent child is practised especially in peer relationships but the social relations between teachers and children seem to be grounded on more traditional discourses and power relations.

In all, the findings point out how profoundly the notion of the competent child and child participation challenge childhood institutions, childhood professions and parenthood (Mannion and I’anson, 2004). Domesticating them demands a de- and reconstruction of the ways of thinking, knowing and acting in education and as an educator. The results also give an idea of the complexity that needs to be taken into account when discussing a theory of child participation (see Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010).

**Funding**

The research was funded by the Academy of Finland (SA116272) and by the Research Collegium of the University of Tampere, Finland.
Notes
1. Public day care is the main institution providing ECEC in Finland and day care is the term that is both officially and colloquially used when referring to ECEC services. All children under school age (0–6 years) are entitled to day care regardless of parental employment.
2. In all, the data comprise 35 IEP discussions but only those for which the IEP form was available are analysed in this article.
3. One of the institutions applied an older version of the IEP form with five questions to the child, one used the latest version with three questions, and in one institution both versions seemed to be in use.
4. The last two pairs of questions are not included in the forms that have only three (sets of) questions to the child.
5. The exceptional parent–teacher meeting concerns a six-year-old boy. In the discussion the IEP form is referred to only twice: a question about the child’s character and a parental report about excessively rough games are discussed. Otherwise, the talk is mostly about starting school and its practicalities. It also seems that the teacher and the mother know each other fairly well privately.
6. In a couple of cases afternoon naps and changes in staff are also mentioned as issues that the child does not like.
7. When there is no answer from the child to the question about bullying or other concerns regarding day care the teachers sometimes ask the parent if the child has talked about such issues. If the parent then reports learning about bullying incidents from the child, the same interactional pattern emerges as with the questions to the child. The bullying incidences are constructed as contingent and as not serious.

References


Appendix: Transcription symbols

T        teacher
M        mother
F        father
£        the use of smiley voice
£(hh)£   laughing particle or particles
(.)      a tiny pause (less than one second)
(2)      the length of the pause in seconds
[        the start of overlapping talk
°        the starting or ending point when speaking with a low voice
=        no pause between the turns of the speakers
…       parts of the talk left out (names, repetition, etc.)
((he))   verbal description or explanation
(()      inaudible word(s)

All names are pseudonyms.