# Do my words convey what children are saying? Researching school life with very young children: dilemmas for "authentic listening"

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# Do my words convey what children are saying? Researching school life with very young children: dilemmas for "authentic listening"

This article presents some of the challenges that arise in research aimed at listening to children under three years of age in order to improve everyday school life. The article is based on research carried out over several years in schools and funded by the Spanish Ministry responsible for Research and Development (R&D). Drawing on a multi-case study in early childhood schools, various methodological dilemmas relating to how to access the voice of children are discussed. The choice of complementary ways of listening and eliciting the children's voices, and of approaching the processes of giving meaning to their ideas in a respectful way, are analysed based on the research cases. The conclusions underline the need to diversify the research "listening strategies" and to pay attention to the power imbalance between different children and between children and adults in the research process. The conclusions aim to shed light on some epistemological and ethical concerns about the authentic participation of the youngest children.

Keywords: participatory methods; mediated strategies; research with children under three; ethical issues.

**Introduction**

This article aims to present the challenges emerging from research carried out with children from birth to three years of age based on a critical perspective of Student Voice (Arnott, 2017; Blaisdell et al. 2018; Susinos, 2020; Ceballos, Calvo and Haya, 2020; Ceballos, Susinos and Saiz, 2016; Fielding, 2004, 2011). We analyse two cases from two different Early Childhood schools in Cantabria (Spain) in which proposals for school improvement arose from an organised process of listening to the children. These cases are part of a larger research project funded by the Spanish Ministry responsible

for research and development (R&D)[1].

In Spain, in line with a global trend, there is a growing interest in including children's voices in the research process (Ceballos, Susinos and Saiz, forthcoming; Susinos, 2020; Sierra and Parrilla, 2019). However, there is little work that presents methodological reflection on research with children under three. This article aims to contribute to this debate initiated by various authors (Brooker, 2011; Dockett and Perry, 2005; Einarsdottir, 2005; Clark, Moss and Kjørholt, 2010; Alderson and Morrow, 2020; Palaiologou, 2014, 2017; Minnis et al., 2019). In order to do this, our research project is based on inclusive participation in schools which is conceived as an ordered process that allows children to deploy their capacity to influence, intervene and provoke material and/or symbolic changes in the common space. This capacity to improve their shared world is essential in order to conceive children's participation as an agentic process and also to prevent participation from being reduced to a mere consultation or a rhetorical debate among children with no transformative purpose (Susinos, 2020).

In this article we explore some key elements of the research process with children under three, which we consider to be fundamental in order to safeguard authentic listening. We also raise questions about the choice of our methodological strategies for eliciting children's voices and the process of interpreting and giving meaning to children's ideas.

Various authors have drawn attention to the so-called "child-friendly" methodologies (Punch, 2002; Fraser, 2004; Christensen and James, 2008; Fay, 2017). They have raised debate around whether similar methodological positions and strategies

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should be adopted in research with both children and adults or if, conversely, it is necessary to develop a specific methodological corpus for children. In this article we maintain that including the Other, in this case the children under three, implies not considering them as a group with the same characteristics as adults and adopting an adult-centred position. Previous research has shown that the voice of children is provisional, multiple and dynamic (Arnott, 2017; Ceballos, Calvo and Haya, 2019; Fielding and Moss, 2011; Murray, 2019; Wall, et al., 2019). The strategies employed will, therefore, only be valuable and meaningful if they are in line with the experiences, interests and day-to-day life of specific children (Christensen and Prout, 2002). We refute the belief that listening is fundamentally based on verbal exchanges (Clark, 2005), and propose expanding the range of methodologies in order to access other forms of communication. In our research we access the ideas and experiences of children through multiple creative social research strategies (Blaisdell et al., 2019) and languages (Clark and Moss, 2011; Ghirotto and Mazzoni, 2013; Ceballos, Susinos, and Saiz, 2016). In this way we aim to achieve genuine listening with the participants, especially with "non-verbal children". These methodologies also allow the creation of spaces characterised by reciprocity, reflexivity and intersubjectivity between adults and children (Murray, 2019). Our position is based on choosing strategies focused on promoting the participation of children, and understanding that this is a broad and heterogeneous process, since children do not have a single and homogeneous voice. The emphasis must, therefore, be placed on identifying strategies that allow children – with their particular needs and characteristics – to participate, which Fraser (2004) refers to as the participant-friendly approach.

We recognise that eliciting voice is not an intrinsic quality of all approaches to research, rather it depends on how the research is conducted in practice and on the imbalances of power between the researchers and between participants themselves (Alderson, 2000). In an attempt to try to minimise such imbalances, researchers should adopt a reflexive approach, giving consideration to the relationships and interactions between researchers and participants as well as the choice and implementation of research methods. A definitive critical and reflexive positioning for "authentic listening" in the processes of interpreting ideas, especially with non-verbal children should also be adopted (Wall, 2017). In order to do this, researchers must be attentive to accommodation processes, and ensure that assumptions are not adopted because the researcher believes they know and understand children, or, conversely, the researcher does not reject children's ideas that do not conform to the researcher's own preferences or constructs (Punch, 2002). This reflexive positioning is essential to understand how children's voices are constantly being mediated by adults, especially in research with children who cannot contradict the conclusions drawn by adults (Spyrou, 2011).

Finally, opening up spaces for dialogue can be reduced to a figurative practice if it is not accompanied by action and some changes to the physical or symbolic space (Bourke and Loveridge, 2018; Fielding 2004, 2011; Lundy, 2007; Rudduck and Fielding, 2006). From an ethical position (Palaiologou, 2014), we cannot ask children to engage in a dialogue process about improving their school if their proposals are not taken into account and treated as relevant ideas.

**Methodology**

This research is framed in the inclusive-qualitative research paradigm (Nind, 2014) which promotes participatory research processes that are carried out "with" children not "on" or "about" them (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell, 2015).

Our research question is: What are the challenges of conducting participatory research with children under three years of age? More specifically:

- Do the selected research strategies make it possible to listen to all children under three years of age?

- What challenges are presented when putting these strategies into practice?

- How can situations of power imbalance between children themselves and between children and adults be addressed?

- What dilemmas are encountered when interpretating children's voices?

The entire research process over the last six years has included numerous projects in Early Childhood School (five in total). This article will focus on two of these proejcts (as a multi-case study) with children under three.  These projects have been selected because of the thought-provoking analysis that accompanies the research activity.

In table 1, summarises relevant characteristics of the two schools involved *(Naranjos School* and *Robles School*) .

Table 1. Relevant chareristics of the two schools in which the research was conducted  [2] and overview of data collected

|  | *Naranjos School* | *Robles School* |
|---|---|---|
| Project | Improvement of the school garden in line with children's preferences. | Transformation of the school playground in line with children's preferences |
| School | Nursery school. Children from birth to three | Early childhood (children from two to five years old) and primary school |
| Type of school | Privately funded | Publicly funded |

[2] Although the schools have given permission for the use of their names, we have chosen to use pseudonyms to refer to the schools and participants to preserve their anonymity.

| Area | Urban | Urban |
|---|---|---|
| Student participants | 30 students from four months to three years old | 13 three-year-old children |
| Adult participants | Teacher, Infant School Assistant and Headteacher<br>2 University Researchers | Teacher<br>1 University Researcher |
| Research strategies (multimodal) | Group conversations during assembly (children two years old)<br>Informal conversation in playgroups<br>Playground observations<br>Strategies mediated with families: Open-ended questionnaires mediated with families. | Elicitation Tour with children<br>Shadowing of children<br>Peer-mediated consultation |
| Data | 12 set of field notes of observations<br>Photographs of games in the playgroups<br>Audio records and transcriptions of child conversation<br>12 open-ended family questionnaires | 7 audio recordings and transcriptions of dialogues during tour<br>32 photographs of space of the playground<br>5 field notes of shadowing observation |

*Background to the schools prior to conducting the research*

The *Naranjos school* is attended by apoproximately 52 children from four months to three years old (Morning timetable: 9 babies, 15 toddlers and 16 two-years-old children. 12 children in the Evening timetable[3]). This school has a Visions and Values document based on the pedagogy of Reggio Emilia, in which listening to children is one of the key principles. For some years, the team of nine teachers have reflected on the school's outdoor space, viewing this as a space that offers opportunities

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[3] The morning and evening timetables involve two different groups of children. One group attends school in the morning and a different group attends in the afternoon.

for play that are not possible indoors, as well as space for direct contact with nature. Consequently, it was decided to explore how the children use and interpret this space and how to improve it, taking into account the needs and preferences expressed by them. We conducted research over two academic years which aimed to improve the school's outdoor space in line with children's preferences. As part of this, participative strategies with children were adopted, including: a whole group conversation with deliberative scope during a school assembly; informal conversations with children in play groups; observations of children playground activities by the teachers; and strategies mediated with the families (open-ended questionnaires).

The *Robles school* is a public school for early childhood (2-6 years) and primary education (6-12 years) in an industrial town in Cantabria. Prior to the commencement of this project, the school's outdoor space was an area of concrete, organised into different play areas according to the educational stages of the children. There were no materials or resources for playing (except for the two-year-olds who had motorcycles and a plastic slide). There was a small area of grass of about 30 square metres. In order to improve  the school's outdoor space, the school undertook research with the aim of transforming this space, taking into consideration the views of the entire school. The three-year-old children made their contribution to the project through different methodologies such as elicitation tours, child conferencing using image elicitation, shadowing, and peer-mediated consultation.

These two case studies involving children under three years of age were conducted using a wide variety of participative methodologies that provided a significant volume of multimodal data: the elicitation tours generated audio recordings that were transcribed, as well as photographs and field notes that were converted into diaries. Shadowing strategies provided a wide selection of photographs and field diaries

completed by the teacher. Informal conversation in playgroups, assembly and during peer-mediated consultation were documented through audio recordings(later transcribed) and the researcher's field diaries. Observations by teachers were carried out through observation grids created by them which were transformed into diaries. Finally, the questionnaire with open questions, an example of strategies mediated with families, provided written documents, while the dialogue with the families was recorded through the researchers' field diaries. The data obtained were coded thematically using specific categories and codes that were created by means of inductive and deductive processes. These codes were then classified usiung concepts which emerged from the collected data (Flick, 2018). The MAXQDA qualitative analysis program was used to facilitate the categorization of the data.

These projects were conducted taking into account the ethical codes of EECERA and the approval of the Committee on Ethics in Research of the University of Cantabria. The conducting of research with children presents enormous challenges that require a constant assessment of our ethical and reflective positioning (Palaiologou, 2014). Both case studies involved a process of informed consent. The project, its purpose and the strategies were presented to the children and, in order to do this, the content and mode of presentation was adapted to suit the needs of each group of children participating in the research. Furthermore, although this consent is usually given at the beginning of the research, when conducting research with children, it must be constantly reaffirmed (Arnott et al., 2020). With this in mind, the researchers were constantly attentive to instances of children demonstrating their wish not to participate during the conduct of the project. Efforts were made to choose methods and instruments that are respectful of children. The researchers constantly questioned whether the strategies allowed all voices to be heard and how power was exercised. Finally, processes of data collection,

analysis and dissemination that maintain a commitment to children's rights were used (Sommer, Pramling-Samuelsson & Hundeide, 2013). In this matter, it was necessary to adopt an "empathetic imagination" in the interpretation of actions, gestures, babbling and actual words.

**Results: The controversial choice of "listening strategies" in the early years**

*Strategies based on dialogue.*

The *Naranjos school* project started in the classroom for children aged 2-3 years. They held a daily class assembly, which is conceived as a space for dialogue and deliberation. During the assembly, the teacher asked the following questions: "What would you like to play at in the garden?" and "What materials and toys would you like to have?"

> Teacher: "What do you like to play at in the garden?"
> "With the plants," says V., and children begin to talk about the plants in the garden, monopolising the conversation.
> Teacher: "Besides the plants?"
> "With a ball," says C.
> "When we ride the bikes," says E.
> "With a red tractor," says V.
> Several children begin to say "tractor" in unison.
> Teacher: "With tractors? But are there tractors?"
> "With cars," says L.
> "And with balls," says N.
> "And when there are no balls or tractors, what do you like to play at?"
> "Balls, bicycles, cars ..." say several voices.
> The conversation revolves around the proposal of two children: tractors and balls.
> The rest of the children adopt the answers of their classmates and repeat them.
> (Observation diary_assembly)

As the above extract demonstrates, the teacher posed the questions to the whole group (16 children) hoping to promote an orderly dialogue. However, despite being

familiar with the strategy, some children dominated the conversation, while others did not find a way to contribute. We also found that the response of those with a greater language proficiency ("red tractor") were accepted and adopted by the peers. Thus, using school assembly as a space for dialogue tended to favour certain voices over others, with some children remaining silent.

Because of this, we decided to hold informal conversations in the garden with the children. During playtime in the outdoor space, the teachers, in an effort to adopt a more inclusive approach to eliciting children's voices, initiated conversations with the children about their play and activities. Respecting their play groups, the teachers began what was intended to be a more genuine dialogue with the children since the interaction was taking place in small groups and within the space and activity we are trying to talk about (Formosinho and Araújo, 2006). Unlike the assembly, this was not an activity that "we usually do with the kids, so they felt very awkward" (tearcher interview).

> The teacher has been observing two children who are playing with the soil in a corner of the garden for a while and she decides to approach them. She asks them about what they are doing. The children continue their game and do not respond. The teacher insists. A girl replies: Eating. The teacher asks another question and the girl's gestures show her discomfort and she turns her back to the adult (Research diary)

As we observed, the interrupting of their playing and conversations to ask them the "questions of interest to us" was considered by the children an intrusion into their play space, and they showed obvious signs of discomfort (Palaiologou, 2014).

Attempts to elicit voice during the assembly led to some children dominating the conversations, and informal conversations in the playground resulted in children demonstrating an unwilliness to participate. Reflecting on this, we concluded that it was necessary to use elicitation methods that were not intrusive and avoided the

exclusive prevalence of oral language, it being clear that children whose oral language was not well developed were not being listened to with the required complexity (Landsdown, 2010; Robinson, 2014; Ceballos, Susinos and Saiz, 2016).

*Adult Mediated listening strategies: teachers and families*
At the *Naranjos school*, multiple strategies were employed, including some that could be considered "adult mediated listening strategies". In what we call "mediated" strategies, adults (or, as we will see later, other children) become spokespersons for the needs and preferences of those children who cannot express their ideas through words. Therefore, different "child-oriented" strategies are employed in which the mediator interprets the children's actions, responses, and vocalisations. Although in a strict sense a complete understanding of the experience of children may be inaccessible, these mediated strategies seek to get as close as possible to the understanding of children's perceptions through the adults who are closest to them.

First of all, we employed a process of systematic observation of the outdoor space. Observation and documentation processes are common listening strategies in this school. The observation strategy, in line with the pedagogy and research tradition, seeks to understand the capacities, needs and interests of young children (Clark, 2005, 2010; Salomon, 2015; Formosinho and Peeters, 2019). For several weeks, the teachers made structured observations in the garden using an observation grid based on the questions: What activity are they doing?, in what space are they doing this? and what materials do they use? The prolonged observations allowed us to get closer to the child's experience, especially that of the babies and toddlers, through their body expressions, babbling and movements. Interpreting the actions, responses, and vocalisations of younger children requires "empathic imagination" (Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson and Hundeide, 2013)

and an ethical commitment that reduces the risk of misinterpreting or misrepresenting the observation (Palaiologou, 2014).

To complement this, a space for dialogue was opened up with the families of children so that they became mediators of the voice of their children. Two questions were put to them which they were invited to respond to in writing: What do you think your son or daughter would like to play at within the school garden? And, what materials or toys do they request? Families responses to the questionnaire was quite high. ? Over half the families responded to the questionniares (18 out of 32). However, a critical incident arose in the process of analysing the ideas.

The analysis and interpretation of the ideas arising from the different strategies (assembly, child conferences and mediated strategies) resulted in four proposals, suggested by children, for improving the outdoor space: "things to fetch and carry" (boxes, buckets and materials for carrying things); materials to transfer things; natural objects; and logs to climb up and down.

A workshop was held with the families in order to seek help in providing these objects and resources. The workshop began by presenting the four proposals that had emerged. However, a new space was opened for dialogue with the families:

> The meeting is attended by six teachers, the headteacher, eight families and two researchers. After presenting the proposals extracted from the analysis of the different strategies, a space is opened up for the families to corroborate or challenge the ideas and to qualify and complete some of them. […]
> In the dialogue, the families present new ideas. I have the impression that the ideas that have come out of the conversations and the mediated consultations are only vaguely represented. It seems more like the ideas come from the families. (Field diary_meeting with families)

This meeting led to a reformulation of the initial proposals as: the creation of a sandpit; a table with wooden stools; and objects hanging from the fences and interaction

panels. In other words, the proposals for improving the outdoor space were far removed from the ideas emerging from the various listening strategies employed with the children. It is important to be careful during the reinterpretation, or spontaneous generation of, ideas, and to remember that the ultimate purpose of the research was to listen to the authentic voice the children. Therefore, as reflected, some of the new proposals arose from the adult perspective and not as a result of a reflexive, slow process that was attentive to the needs of the children. This demonstrated the bias that can be introduced by reason of  the power difference between adults and children in the selection and prioritisation of ideas (Wall, et al., 2019).

*The importance of the processes: the role of dialogue and shared power.*
In the *Robles school*, the strategy of the elicitation tour (Clark, 2010) was adapted, taking into account the age of the children and their number (13 participants). The children led the walks around the playgrounds, deciding where to go, what to highlight, and what to explain to the teacher. Consequently, the teacher accompanied, documented and encouraged the conversations. These started with the question: "Can you tell me the places where you like to play?" Both the initial question and those posed during the walk were designed to be open enough for the children to begin their narration without the answer being conditioned. In order to document the conversations, audio recording was carried out and photographs were taken of the indicated spaces.

      A key aspect was how the children were divided into groups. Five groups of three students were arranged, under the premise that a small number favoured dialogue. The distribution was based on the different needs and characteristics and on friendly relationships. All of this was done in order to reduce the existing differences in power (Lodge, 2005; Willumsen, Vegan and Studsnod, 2014) and to ensure all of them feel at

ease and are confident to put forward their ideas. In these groups, the children found an opportunity to narrate their experience of play, although incidents also occurred.

> The teacher asks V.: Why do you like the place where you have brought us?
> M., a classmate, responds: Because there are many.
> The teacher asks him to let V. answer.
> V. says: Because there is a little kitchen. (Transcription_Walk005)

In this example, a boy uses his classmate's turn by answering for her. V. was making use of the time available to think about her answer, to construct it before sharing it, when her classmate occupied this space of hers. For this reason, the teacher intervened so that V. had her opportunity to share her idea.

During the walks, the teacher established a respectful dialogue with the children, avoiding asking questions that would influence or condition the answers. However, at times she interfered in what the children said. For example, she made use of the fact that it was a father of one of the children at the school who built the little kitchen to redirect her questioning.

> Teacher: So, V., did you see the really nice little kitchen that we've put here?
> V.: Yes.
> Teacher: Is there something in the playground that you don't like and would like to get rid of?
> A.: The little kitchen.
> Teacher: Don't you like the little kitchen one of the dad's has made? How can you not like it! What a surprise! You don't like the little kitchen. But you don't play in that area, do you?
> A.: A bit. (Transcript_Walk003)

This led us to conclude that the choice of a participative strategy (such as this elicitation tour) does not guarantee authentic listening if it is not accompanied by an adult ethical commitment to thoughtfully attend to the voice of the children. Looking

beyond strategy, we must analyse how the strategy is implemented and what dilemmas and challenges it poses in a democratic context (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008; Bergold and Thomas, 2012).

*Inclusive participation. How do we listen to all the children?*
The commitment to inclusive participation requires a careful review of the research strategies and the mode of interaction with children in order to listen to all the children without exception. In the *Robles school*, there was a child whose oral language skills had not developed and for whom a large part of the school day was spent with a SEN teacher.

   The elicitation tour is a methodology based on a combination of physical movement and oral explanations. This strategy was clearly not sufficient to achieve inclusive listening as it was not accessible for this child. For this reason, shadowing and peer-mediated consultation were carried out. Shadowing is a qualitative research strategy, rarely used in research with children (McDonald, 2005; Hognestad and Bøe, 2016) that involves the teacher accompanying and observing the child during outdoor play. In this case, the teacher did not interact with him, but observed and took notes of his actions, games, gestures and sounds. At the end, she had an extensive data set that provided her with a detailed and multidimensional image of the observed child's playing. Given that, the observations and notes made by the teacher could not be discussed with this child, so a "peer-mediated consultation" was carried out with the classmates.

   Teacher: Where does A. like to play?
   N.: Here (he runs towards the entrance area where there is a small garden). When they get there, A. is playing.
   Teacher: What does he like to play?
   M.: Digging.

L.: Throwing soil in the air.

M.: Playing with the soil, that's right.

S. He pulls up the flowers and they tell him off.

(Transcript_Walk 008)

We do not assume that it is easier for children to access and understand the experiences of their peers than it is for an adult (Hammersley, 2017). However, this child shares time and games with his peers, which makes them authorised informants with expert and valuable knowledge about their classmate and his playing preferences. This is the remarkable value of their ideas: the knowledge created in shared experience.

*The process of interpreting and giving meaning to children's ideas*

In the process of listening to children, it is important to analyse how adults receive and interpret their voices while the adults remain vigilant of their own prejudices or the temptation of over-interpretation. In the *Naranjos school*, an excerpt from an interview with a teacher about "family-mediated strategy" serves to illustrate some of these difficulties.

Teacher: Asking the families the question was also very interesting. There we also found that what the families answered was what they see their sons and daughters doing at school.

Teacher2: And what they would like to do.

Teacher: And what they would like to do. In fact, they tell us either what they see their children doing or what they, as adults, would like their children to do, but not what they think that their children like doing.

(Final interview)

These words from the teachers summarise what happened in the interpretation process. They remark that the responses of the families represented what they would have liked to have in their own childhood or what their children were already doing in school, but not what the children in fact needed/wanted. This evaluation meant that less

value was attached to the ideas contributed by the families than those derived from their observations. In consequence, a double process of interpretation and mediation occurred: first, the mediation of the children's needs by the families and, later, the teachers' reinterpretation of the proposals of the families and the decision to discard them (Ceballos, Susinos and Saiz, 2016).

We must be respectful of the suggestions made, specially when mediated consultation processes are implemented (Arnott, 2017; Kellet, 2010; Thomson, 2007). Although mediation processes can involve bias in the interpretation of who intermediates the communication, in no case should this argument be used for the rejection of the proposals and the acceptance of those that confirm our previous ideas.

*Building meanings with children*

In the *Robles school*, a documentation panel was generated with the children's photographs and their words. This provided the opportunity to the children to review their images and ideas (Munnay, 2017). Through child conferences, the panel was presented and a process of dialogue, negotiation and deeper analysis began that allowed a discussion with children about their priorities (Clark, 2010). Child conference is a particular form of informal structured interview (Clark, 2005; Clark and Moss, 2011; Formosinho and Araújo, 2006) that enables children to find a space for dialogue with different degrees of openness.

When we started the dialogue with them, the teacher wrote down their ideas on a panel that was visible to the children and organised the ideas following the schema: activity, materials and spaces. However, the process of dialogue and deliberation between the children did not follow this pattern, which was based on an adult scheme for organising the school experience. For the children this structure of the experience was not significant. They talked about their plays and narratives created and recreated in them.

When the teacher asked them, *What do you play with?* they did not answer with a list of materials. They repeated what was meaningful to them: what they were playing at and with whom. This made it clear that we must develop processes of giving meaning according to children's own framework.

Although many ideas arose during the dialogue, one occupied a major proportion of the time: the rejection of the "car tyres". This puzzled the teacher because she was convinced of their value as an educational activity.

> When we took them out on the walks, they didn't like the tyres. I was quite surprised. How could this be possible? Later, when we showed them the photos and asked again, what they were really telling us was that they wanted to be able to take them somewhere else. They understood that the tyres had to be here and they wanted to take them to where the motorcycles are, with the balls ... to a larger area, to roll them ... and that was not allowed. "I don't like them" has evolved into "I don't like them because I can't move them". (Final_interview_teacher)

If the listening process had ended with the first strategies, it would probably have been concluded that the "car tyres" should be removed. However, more in-depth dialogue with the children offered a new interpretation of their words and their preferences. The rejection was not because of the proposal itself but because of the rules of use. It is necessary to spend considerable time with children in order to gain access to their culture, avoiding the caricature of "lightning research". Listening does not consist of extracting information from children occasionally and unidirectionally, it is a dynamic process in which children and adults discuss meanings (Clark, 2005), since knowledge construction is a process of social interaction between children and adults (Horgan et al. 2017).

**Discussion**

 The aim of this article is to contribute to the critical understanding of, and the debate about, participatory research involving early childhood through a multi-case study (two cases). More specifically, the reflections and conclusions presented have profound implications for researchers working with children regarding the choice of participatory strategies, how to ensure that authentic listening occurs and the process of interpreting and giving meaning to children's ideas. Numerous methodologies have been employed, some based on dialogue with children, such as elicitation tours, assembly and informal conversations, and others mediated by adults (shadowing and  participative observation) or peers (peer-mediated consultation). Using a wide range of strategies allowed us to adapt to the particular forms of communication of the children, although it always entailed some dilemmas and challenges. Participation does not depend exclusively on the choice of a particular strategy with "magical" qualities. Their value as listening strategies is tied to adults ethical commitment to genuine listening.

The strategies for eliciting young children's voices based on dialogue invited us to reflect on how these methodologies are implemented and their possibility for opening up  authentic dialogue between children and adults based on a power imbalance and mutual recognition as authorised voices. They also invited us to address the differences in power relations between the children themselves, to prevent situations in which some children occupy the space and, in effect, exclude their peers. Finally, listening does not consist of extracting information from children occasionally and unidirectionally. An example of this is provided in the vignette from the Robles School where the "misinterpretation" of the (non-)rejection of the car tyres was identified. The process of dialogue and interpretation is a dynamic process in which children and adults discuss meanings, since knowledge construction is a process of social interaction between children and adults.

The commitment to inclusive and genuine participation obliges us to reflect on the choice of strategies that allow us to listen to all the children without exception. In order to do this, methodologies must recognise the existence of multiple languages and avoid the exclusive prevalence of oral language (i.e. the use of the school assembly proved to be a space for dialogue which favoured certain voices while others remained silent). Consequently, it is necessary to broaden the range of methodologies employed. We made use of "adult (teacher and families) and peer-mediated listening strategies" and these strategies demonstrated the need to review the power differences between adults and children in the process of interpretating of ideas presented by children. For example, the prolonged observations and shadowing allowed us to get closer to the child's experience, especially that of the babies and toddlers, through their body expressions, babbling and movements. The fundamental challenge realtes to preventing the adult's point of view and (over-)interpretation being imposed and taking priority over and above the needs and interests expressed by the children. In particular, preverbal children have the fewest opportunities to express, justify and affirm their interests and are often more susceptible to differences in potential power imbalances between adults and children. These strategies require that the interpretation of the actions, responses and vocalisations of the youngest children are carried out based on the principle of "empathic imagination" and an ethical commitment that reduces the possibility of tokenism or accommodation.

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