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Eliciting young children's 'voice' in low-income areas in England: recognising their mutuality of being

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ABSTRACT

This paper responds to suggestions that the concept of 'child voice' is under-interrogated in academic and grey literatures. It presents findings from data generated with seven mothers in a small-scale qualitative study about young children's well-being in a low-income area in England. The findings suggest a re-conceptualisation of young children as a 'mutuality of being' may broaden the means by which children's voices can be heard and responded to, especially those living in, or at risk of, poverty. The paper highlights some of the possible shortcomings of conceptualising young children as bounded individuals who can be abstracted from their social and material temporal/spatial contexts. The implications of individualising children, prevalent in Early Childhood Education & Care policy in England, are considered. The paper concludes by suggesting that eliciting young children's voice(s) necessitate including other voices, past and present, from the socio-cultural contexts in which they are entangled.

Introduction

In the UK, practices to support (young) children's participation and, following this, to elicit their 'voice' developed significantly after the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (hereafter UNCRC) in 1991 (Lyon 2007). While progress to incorporate the children's rights enshrined in the UNCRC into UK legislation has been slow and patchy, at least within England, the Scottish Government has been working towards full incorporation into Scots Law (Scottish Government 2020). Efforts to operationalise children's rights, and to recognise children as active citizens and capable social actors are championed by a strong lobby (see for example, CRAE n.d.). These efforts are supported not least through the Office of the Children's Commissioner whose statutory remit includes 'understanding what children and young people think about things that affect them and encouraging decision makers to always take their best interests into account' (Children's Commissioner for England n.d.). Nonetheless, progress against this aim in some areas of UK legislation, for example regarding children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (cf. DfE & DoH

2015) continues to be hard fought (Richardson 2020). While children's rights have not been fully incorporated into (English) national law (DfE 2014), schools are 'strongly encouraged to pay due regard to the Convention' (DfE 2014, 2) and provide opportunities for children 'to express their opinion in matters that affect their lives' (DfE 2014, 2). This encouragement could be said to be also visible in Early Childhood Education & Care (hereafter ECEC) policy with expectations to provide 'learning and development opportunities which are planned around the needs and interests of each individual child … ' (DfE 2017, 5). It has been pointed out, however, that these expectations may be at odds with governments' 'school readiness' agenda (Brooks and Murray 2018).

Progress to operationalise children's rights, albeit tentative, has been made in spite of the Convention's ambiguous proposal that 'due weight' be given to the views of children 'in accordance with the age and maturity of the child' (UNCRC 1990, Article 12). This understanding has often precluded young children's participation because of prevailing deficit social constructions of young children as vulnerable only, tabula rasa, adults-in-formation which have informed and continue to perpetuate attitudes to their provision, protection and participation (Caputo 2018, 205; Crivello and Espinoza-Revello 2018, 140).

In addition to this ambiguity, many academics have highlighted the complexities of eliciting children's 'voice' as a means of supporting their right to participation. Such complexities have included, but are not limited to, the recognition and importance of attending to children's silences (Lewis 2009), the limitations of child centrism (Taylor, Pacinini-Ketchabaw, and Blaise 2012), the right of children to be opaque (Cannella and Viruru 2004), and not to be treated as a 'central tool for adult engagement' (Kraftl 2013, 14).

The injunction to provide for 'the needs and interests of each *individual* child' (DfE 2017, 5) (emphasis added) belies another contested social construction of children, and hence, the epistemological implications of eliciting their voice(s). One of the chief criticisms of the UNCRC is that it is predicated on a conceptualisation of children as bounded individuals (Clark and Richards 2017). These scholars, and others, (see for example, Te One et al. 2014; Twum-Danso Imoh 2013) have supported a re-conceptualisation of children as a 'mutuality of being' (Sahlins 2013, 19) whose voices are 'multi-dimensional and relationally intertwined with the voices of others' (Clark and Richards 2017, 136).

In this paper, I present some of the findings from my recent doctoral thesis about young children's well-being in a low-income area in England. Consistent with the scholars mentioned above, my aim is to interrogate understandings of 'child agency'[1] and the means by which children's voices may be heard. To do so, I draw on data generated with seven mothers. The study also involved the participation of 18 children aged two to four years, and the findings from this cohort have been reported elsewhere (Street 2021). However, the focus of this paper is to draw attention to the relevance of m/others' voices to the full elicitation of children's voices, thereby acknowledging their mutuality of being.

The intention is to contribute to the scholarship of children's rights advocates by re-conceptualising (children's) 'voice' as immanent in social and material, temporal and spatial contexts. By so doing, I respond to claims that interest in eliciting children's 'voice', in spite of its popularity, is 'under-interrogated' (Clark and Richards 2017, 127). Following Simpson et al. (2017), I suggest these findings may have important implications for ECEC policy and practice, particularly (but not exclusively) in low-income

areas by foregrounding how a more holistic conceptualisation of children's 'voice' could support young children's educational achievement, especially in low-income areas.

Theoretical framework

In the initial stages of my investigation, the study's theoretical framework was shaped by concepts derived from 'distributive' approaches to well-being which conceptualise children as bounded individuals. These approaches are predominantly influenced by focussing on resource distribution ('havings'). However, the fieldwork surfaced other ways in which mothers conceptualised their children. This prompted a return to literatures foregrounding 'relational' approaches to well-being, drawing from sociology, and foregrounding conceptualisations of people as mutualities of being ('belonging'). The concepts derived from these approaches are summarised in Table 1 (but for more detail, please see Street 2021).

Methodology

Research context

The study was a small-scale qualitative investigation conducted in a multi-cultural and low-income area in a northern English city, usually characterised by its multiple disadvantage i.e. high numbers of children in 'workless' families; prevalence of social housing; high crime; low educational achievement and poor health outcomes. It is an area where many of its residents contend with the less measureable issues of isolation, drug and alcohol misuse, poor mental health and domestic abuse, the latter described anecdotally as endemic.

Participants

Working with Children's Centre Assistants, seven local mothers were recruited to the study. Four of them were White British, two were Black African and one was White Eastern European. Between them, they had 18 children, 10 of whom were under the age of five years at the time the study was conducted. Details of the participants are summarised below, and also appear in Street 2021, 740 (Table 2).

Table 1. Adaptation of a theoretical framework of child well-being.

Theoretical orientation	Social construction of children mainly as …	Key concepts privileged	Concept dimension emphasised
Distributive approach: Primary Goods Theory (Rawls 1971)	Vulnerable only Tabula rasa Future adults	Becomings Havings	Individual/Self defining Distribution of resources to provide equal means to become
Distributive approach: Capability Theory (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2013)	Vulnerable- only Tabula rasa Future adults	Beings & Doings Becomings Havings	Individual unit of moral concern Self-defining Distribution of resources according to self-defined goals that people value and have reason to value
Relational approach: Relational well-being (White 2015)	Capable social actors	Belonging	Mutuality of beings and doings Interdependent with others, and temporal & spatial contexts

Methods of data generation and analysis

Data for this study were generated by use of semi-structured interviews, following the prompt to consider what helps and hinders their children's well-being. Questions were shaped by concepts derived from distributive approaches to well-being, focusing on children as bounded individuals i.e. individual children's 'beings', 'doings' and 'havings'. These interviews were audio-recorded and manually transcribed for analysis.

Data analysis was conducted over two phases: first, during fieldwork and second, after the end of the fieldwork period. Concepts from 'relational' approaches to well-being were introduced in the second phase of analysis. Data analysis was partly deductive and partly inductive in keeping with Constant Comparative Analysis (Fram 2013) as a way of maintaining an 'emic' perspective ('experience-near concepts') with theoretical frameworks that maintain an 'etic' perspective ('experience-distant concepts') (Geertz 1983, 58). This iterative process involved a synthesis of 'emic' and 'etic' concepts, supported rigour and close attention to the richness of the data alongside dispensing with the premise that data are neutral or value free. In both phases of the analysis open codes were ascribed to words, phrases, and sentences, and matched to the concepts they best fit.

Ethics

This study was approved by the University Of Manchester's research ethics committee. Fieldwork included provision of information to participants, the avoidance of coercion by the deployment of agents, the requirement for written consent, adherence to safeguarding measures and the use of pseudonyms to protect the participants' privacy and anonymity. Participants were reminded of opportunities to withdraw from the study at any time. Digital data were stored securely with password protected accessibility.

Findings

In this section, the 'etic' concepts derived from academic literatures about 'distributive' and 'relational' approaches to well-being, are deployed to present findings from the mothers about their children's well-being. The findings are presented in two sections. The first, describes the spatial, social and material contexts through participants' accounts of their local neighbourhood. In the second section, a deep-dive into a couple of the mothers' narratives, surfaces the spatial, social, material and, in addition, temporal contexts in which they and their children are imbricated. In so doing, two

Table 2. Participants.

Participant	Ethnicity	Number of children (under the age of five)	Family eligible for government funding of early education for their two-year old children? (proxy for relative poverty status)
Imani	Black African	3 (1)	Yes
Lisa	White British	2 (1)	Yes
Adenike	Black African	2 (2)	No
Rachel	White British	2 (2)	Yes
Michelle	White British	5 (1)	Yes
Stacy	White British	3 (2)	Yes
Ewa	White European	1 (1)	Yes

new 'emic' concepts are introduced ('being done to' and 'unbelonging'). The latter two concepts speak to the circumstances of families living in one low-income area in England, the consequent impacts on children's (well) being, and the implications for the practice of eliciting the views they might (be able to) 'express'.

The neighbourhood

All participants, without exception, described the impact the neighbourhood had on their well-beings and becomings. Mothers explained that their children loved playing outside because, among many things, it opens their imagination (Imani & Rachel). However, they all felt the area was 'dangerous' in different ways, and that they had to be 'constantly eye watching' (Rachel) when they went out with their children. Their main concerns were other residents (including other parents) and the paucity of local amenities.

Rachel described some of the difficulties she experienced getting her children to and into school. This, she thought, was because she often moved house, a pattern she felt she had inherited from her mother who used to move house regularly when she and her sisters were children. Rachel explained that her mother was an 'aggressive' alcoholic and suffered from depression. Rachel's constant moving was prompted not only by her childhood experiences. She explained that housing, specifically rented accommodation was problematic. It was expensive and, in privately rented accommodation, 'you can't do nothing nowadays': you could only paint with neutral colours; could not mount anything on the walls, including pictures or a television; could not take the carpet up or make any home improvements. Alternatively, she explained that moving into social housing costs 'an arm and a leg' to do the necessary work to make it habitable because housing associations no longer had budgets for decoration.

Alongside Rachel's experience of rented accommodation, she explained she was moving because of her 'horrendous' neighbours. She described one of them as a 'paranoid schizophrenic' who could control neither his children nor his dog and was constantly shouting at them at 'all hours of the night'. This resulted, she told me, in her daughter falling asleep at nursery. Her daughter was also 'petrified to stay in her room' when she heard another next door neighbour 'screaming at his girlfriend' because she thought he was 'coming through the wall at her'.

Lisa mentioned that the police were not as visible in the area as they once had been. The diminution of neighbourhood safety was amplified by Rachel who explained that she was told by the police, following an attempted burglary of her house, that they did not have a car available and her family had been 'pushed down the queue' because they had more important matters to deal with. Imani highlighted that the neighbourhood could be differently dangerous. She explained that she and her children had had stones thrown at them by a group of ten-year old children, paint thrown at her door when she first moved to the area, and that her mother-in-law had been slapped when she came to visit. She did not describe her family as being victims of racism and was reluctant to do so. She told me that if she thought about it too much she would be reluctant to go out, was sceptical about the impact the police could have on these attacks and was resigned to staying because if she moved 'how many houses are there going to be?' Imani was the only mother who described asking her children about their days at school because she was worried about bullying. She had good reason to be concerned. She was

the only parent who discussed the possibility that her children might not be safe at school.

Several of the women described a series of problems with the local parks, which made some of them virtually unusable: broken glass, needles, empty cans and wine bottles were the detritus left behind by disaffected teenagers who no longer had access to out-of-school services of their own. Rachel also mentioned that local parks were crime hotspots, describing a recent stabbing of a teenager to illustrate her point. Unsurprisingly, these issues affected the use of the parks by the families of young children for whom they were principally intended.

There were other problems too. Michelle explained, 'the crime, the drugs everything round here, it's rampant'. Most of these women, and particularly those with older children, were concerned about this. Imani described it as 'frightening' and worried that her children would grow up to think drugs and crime were 'normal'. Not only could children become interested in taking and selling drugs, but the presence of drug taking and dealing in the area, together with people with alcohol addiction, meant that these women felt the area was unsafe, with 'too many random weirdos' (Rachel), 'druggies' (Michelle) and 'bloody convicts' (Stacey) living in close proximity to their children.

All the women explained there was nothing to do in the area. Lisa described the local shop on her housing estate, which her son 'loved', as having recently closed owing, she said, to the owners not being able to afford the structural repairs. She reported this as having an adverse effect on his well-being because he had previously been able to choose and pay for his own sweets. That he had an opportunity to develop his language, and express his views, which Lisa described as being important to his well-being, and to recognise and develop a relationship with a familiar person (they both knew the name of the shopkeeper) was something that was now not available to him.

Lisa

'Being done to'/'unbelonging'

Lisa was a single mother with one child aged three years when I interviewed her. During the course of our conversation, however, she disclosed that she had two sons, but that 11 years previously her first child was removed from her care on the grounds of neglect when he was two years old. Her exposition of the circumstances leading up to this event, and its repercussions, highlighted a number of issues that related directly to her own well-being and potentially that of both her sons. She described a number of events occurring during her childhood that she felt had adversely affected her well-being (and that of her siblings). These included her mother's death when she was a child and her father's inconsistent parenting: his numerous and temporary 'other women', his moving her and her brothers around to evade social services' scrutiny of their welfare and then his 'dumping' of them onto her auntie and uncle when he 'couldn't cope'. She struggled with postnatal depression after her son's birth when she was 17. Her depression was compounded after the death of her father when her eldest son was three months old and when they moved into a 'domestic violence shelter' following her partner's abandonment of them. Lisa explained that as a result of this catalogue of misfortune, she struggled to cope with her baby.

Decisions to remove children from their parents' care are not taken lightly. However, the irony of the neglect she described experiencing during her own childhood and the lack of responsibility shown by her son's father were surfaced by Lisa in our discussion. She stopped short of implicating national/local policy makers/implementers who could/may have provided services to support her, or more importantly her own father, to try to prevent these misfortunes from occurring. In the following extract, her use of passive verbs to describe her predicament and that of her sons' is indicative of her 'being done to':

Interviewer: So now he's adopted you don't see him?

Lisa: I'm not allowed to. It went through family court and they changed his last name. I'm not allowed to know his last name. I'm not allowed to know where he lives. We started off doing the letter-box scheme but they've stopped it because it's voluntary. They don't have to do it so I've not had letters in about three years off them so I've had no pictures or nothing. I still write twice a year and the adoption social workers send it off to them but I don't get anything so I aint got a clue what's going on. But he knows he's adopted.

Lisa's actions (and those of her son) were closely controlled by the authorities' child protection apparatus. He was removed from her care for the rest of (what is considered to be) his childhood and early adulthood because she had not been able, at that time, to meet his basic needs. And these basic needs appeared to be understood as her responsibility alone.

The impact of this on her mental health made her vulnerable to other pressures which affected her 'beings and doings' and, in turn, those of her younger son. Describing various reasons, for example, why she had never taken him swimming she explained the 'main reason' was because she did not have 'a costume body'. Lisa appeared to have internalised the shame associated with being an over-weight woman:

Lisa: It's easy to say you've just got to get over yourself and get on with it but it's hard cos it's all up here [pointing to her head] innit?

That she felt the need to protect herself from this stigma, not only compromised an aspect of her own well-being but also her son's: his physical development and the opportunity to begin to learn how to swim aided by her, had not been available to them.

The fragility of her mental health was further compounded by there being very little to do in the area, and so not much reason to go out. She explained she did not like going out and only did so if necessary. And because she did not go out much, neither did her son. Little wonder perhaps, that he preferred to stay at home too and watch television than go to the park, for example, though once there, she complained that it was difficult to persuade him home again. Lisa mentioned that his wanting to be outside was further compromised by not having any friends to play with, and she described him as 'lonely'. Lisa's (and therefore her son's) isolation was yet further compounded by living some distance away from her family and not seeing them often, partly, she explained, because of poor public transport and money issues. Both their well-beings could be seen to be affected by this separation: hers, because closer proximity to her family might have meant more support and his, because he would have had more people with whom to play and connect. Their mutuality of beings and doings were further impacted by their 'havings' i.e. the resources that could support their well-beings.

'Being done to'/'Not Havings'
Money: personal income

Lisa explained that because she was on benefits, they did not have much money and she had to spend most of it on food and bills. Her life would be easier, she mentioned, if she 'was working and had a good job and had a good pay cheque'. Because she had previously been in debt, Lisa was anxious to ensure all her bills were paid. She described herself as 'lucky' when she realised she had £11 'extra' to spend following her accidental overpayment of a bill. Lisa felt there was nothing she could not afford to support her son. That she only mentioned toys (regardless of whether they came from a charity shop) and not going on holiday, trips to the cinema or theatre, learning to play a musical instrument or specialised clubs that might offer him opportunities to explore potential hobbies and activities he might then have reason to value, did not appear to cross her mind. Some of his toys, she explained, especially his tool kit helped him to develop his fine motor skills but she also complained that he very rarely played with them. Her description of him as lonely may suggest that some of these toys were interesting to him mainly as a means of playing and sharing experiences with others.

Born and raised in Nigeria, Adenike had joined her husband in England to study at a local university 11 years before my interview with her. They had two young daughters. She described England as an attractive country to raise a family: they could already speak English; it was safer away from the 'political instability' in Nigeria; studying in England was a privilege because it was 'the height of education' and they believed she was more likely to find a job. However, she explained at the start of the interview that she had 'various things as barriers for myself not for the kids'. She elaborated that she was unprepared for the different cultural practices surrounding childbirth. In Nigeria, she described that there were 'dozens' of people – extended family members – to help after childbirth. According to her, a new mother 'was in a paradise on her own' as all household chores were taken care of. This was '*entirely* different from this European way of life':

Adenike: … here you are the only one – you and your partner. Your partner has to go to work … so you are alone. That's the thing. That cannot work. I won't use 'depression' but thinking how am I alone, nobody to help. So it [well-being] has to balance to the mother itself gdklfjb not the child.

She recounted her different experience in England, and her isolation from her extended family, as having had an impact on her eldest daughter's well-being. First, she explained that she did not know what to expect of her daughter in terms of her development or what to do to help her. Second, there were fewer opportunities for her daughter to communicate and develop her language, which she felt, was consequently delayed. This would not have happened, she expounded, had she stayed in Nigeria as there were far more people with whom her babies could have bonded. However, Adenike learned about a different cultural norm when she started attending a 'Parent Survival' course at the children's centre, i.e. the expectation that children are attached to one main caregiver, usually the mother. She told me that this course had been a great help to her as a parent. Adenike looked up to England as providing opportunities for a longer and 'better' life. She and her husband came to the conclusion that their children's 'becomings', could be better catered for in England. They appeared to be willing to give up the benefits of being in Nigeria – the support from their extended family – to privilege the resources they believed were available to them in England.

'Not havings': 'personal income'

> Her husband's job meant they were just over the threshold for their children to be eligible for early education funding and they could not afford to pay for it. Adenike felt this was a setback for the development of their daughters' communication skills. She had previously had agency work as a support worker in a local hospital on minimum wage and a zero hours contract before her children were born. Since then, even though she wanted to work, she described at length the difficulty of getting well paid enough work to afford expensive childcare and to balance family life, particularly as she told me, it was culturally expected for her to do all the household chores.

Discussion and implications

These findings have a number of implications for young children's (well) beings (or ontologies) and, by consequence, for the epistemological implications on the practices of eliciting and responding to their voice(s). They suggest that children cannot be abstracted from their social and material spatial/temporal contexts. In spite of the individualisation of young children within early childhood education policy, the participants described their children's individual ecologies as differentially enfolded within those of their m/others and their wider environments. All the mothers either implicitly or explicitly rejected the premise (from which my research questions to them were drawn) that their children's (well) being was separate from their own, or that of their neighbourhood's. Each of them recounted the multiple barriers to their own well-being, getting their own voices heard, and linked these to those of their children. Many of these barriers were prefigured by their own parents' struggles, suggesting inter-generational mutualities of beings: Rachel and her mother, for example, who (had) suffered depression. Lister (2004, 125) describes depression as a 'collapse of agency' and most of the mothers suggested this influenced their children's agencies too, especially if they had no other support. All the mothers spoke unreservedly about the importance of individual and shared material or commodifiable goods as means by which they and their children could achieve well-being. The agential capacities of the mothers (and by implication, their children) were being curtailed by their social and material contexts. They were not only 'beings and doings' in the here-and-now but inter-related 'beings' that were 'being done to' experiencing, or at risk of, poverty ('not-havings') and social exclusion ('unbelongings'). Lisa's view that she could not appear in a public swimming pool without shame echoes Adam Smith (1776, 691) who famously described the need for a linen shirt because working men would be ashamed to appear in public without one. Her inability to appear in public without shame reduced her capabilities and therefore her son's. Many of the mothers were sharply cognisant and critical of the barriers they faced and spoke of their struggles to use their agency against and within the societal systems and structures they inhabited and embodied.

Eliciting children's voices alone, however well-intentioned and sensitive to their present 'beings', may then inadvertently, or otherwise, obscure children's mutualities of being and their interdependence with their social and material spatial/temporal contexts. This study suggests that to address these factors would involve not only recognition of children as capable social actors but also recognition of the impact of broader social and material factors influencing the well-being of young children's m/others and their shared environments. It is suggested that this also requires m/others' recognition as differentially capable agents with adequate remuneration and investment in their well-beings and 'becomings', and opportunities to have their voices heard too. Eliciting

children's voice(s) alone, regardless of the ethical sensitivities deployed to do so, may misrecognise their mutualities of being.

Similarly, Gewirtz cautions that recognition of children against their 'cultural domination' should not result in the creation of another 'special interest group' (1998, 474) but be related to wider struggles for social justice and recognition. In other words, recognition of children's beings and doings, and eliciting their voices alone would not change the wider social and material conditions which children, their families and neighbours in low-income areas have to contend and which impact all their (well) beings. So too, it is suggested that recognition of children alone should not be mobilised to strengthen existing narratives privileging children's 'outcomes' (potentially for instrumental purposes) above that of their carers'.

Crucially therefore, including young children in decisions that affect them is not to say that these views should be privileged. The best interests of the child are not necessarily paramount because children's well-beings, as this study suggests, are interdependent with those of their m/others'. It is suggested that recognition of children's rights to participate, for example, although crucial, should not preclude recognition of their interdependencies, especially with their mothers'. Burman (2008, 180) notes the

> … indivisibiity of the relationship between women and children, the interconnectedness of their conditions and positions and, beyond this the impossibility of separating an intervention for one from that for the other.

However, this 'indivisibility', and by consequence, the practice (and politics) of eliciting children's voices, is 'necessarily structured in tension and contest' (Burman 2008, 177).

Clark and Richards (2017, 128) similarly sound a cautionary note around associated concepts such as children's 'rights', 'participation' and 'agency', and subsequent efforts to elicit their voice(s).

> Like the dominant contemporary approaches to the study of childhood and children's lives, participatory methods have come to be regarded as instrumental in promoting the dictums – participation, agency, and voice – through compliance to a benign and somewhat tokenistic rights discourse. After all, who would challenge that the best interests of children should be central, that the voices of children should be heard, or that their agency should be assured? … The inclusion of such neutral and mostly uncontested concepts … are recognized as evidence of a rights discourse that allows for the comfortable assumption that children's lives are elevated by the presence of such enlightened concepts.

It is suggested that one of the implications of this cautionary note is that early childhood policy makers and, following this, practitioners should not only support practice that elicit children's voices, as they are 'units of moral concern' (Robeyns 2003, 44), but to do so in ways that also recognise their mutualities of being. The findings from this study suggest that perspectives/voices from spatial and temporal contexts need to be included in order to fully hear (and respond to) young children's lives, particularly those who live in high poverty contexts.

Anand and Roope (2016, 833) elaborate,

> The capabilities or skills that young children possess are indicators of what they can do, but it should be recognised that these are essentially 'small world' indicators. They do not tell us much, if anything, about wider issues such as the life chances they will enjoy, stemming for

example from the social status of their family or the human capital they acquire as a result of educational inputs in childhood and beyond. The set of things a child can do by virtue of his or her abilities provides only limited insight into the set of all things they will ultimately be able to do in their life-time.

Consistent with Simpson et al. (2017), the findings from this study suggest that children's wider contexts should be recognised and that the poverty of young children should not be 'organised out' (2017, 184) of ECEC policy and practice. To address this issue, at least in part, these commentators call for a 'pedagogy of listening' (ibid.) that would understand and respect the meso and macro-level influences on the lives of children and their families who live in poverty. I suggest this 'pedagogy of listening' might include a re-conceptualisation of children as relational with their wider socio-economic contexts.

Conclusion and recommendations

This paper adds to current knowledge in two ways. First, it makes a conceptual contribution to the field of doing children's voice work by suggesting that children are mutualities of being whose 'voice(s)' are interdependent with their social, material, temporal and spatial contexts. It is consistent with those who claim that listening to children's voices alone will not necessarily afford new insights into their experiences or well-being, unless adults attend to the relational aspects of our beings, doings and becomings in ways that surface our interdependences (Te One et al. 2014, 1056).

Second, it makes an empirical contribution to the field of children's voice by presenting the views of seven mothers who live in an economically disadvantaged area in England. That said, the small sample size, and study in only one low-income area, are limitations of this study. Nonetheless, this study suggests that individualising children may limit abilities to respond adequately to their experiences. Eliciting children's voice necessitates eliciting the voices, past and present of the social and material contexts in which they are entangled and from which they are hewn. This insight potentiates more holistic approaches to developing and operationalising young children's education provision (cf. Street 2021).

Note

1. For the purpose of this paper, the definition of 'agency' is taken from Sen (1999, 19) who describes it 'as someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well'.

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