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Article abstract

Childhood studies' long concern with elevating children's perspectives has focused attention on "voice" rather than researcher-participant dialogue, precluding critical attention to the normative adult researcher voice. This article investigates how cocreating comics with children about the COVID-19 pandemic engaged a different researcher voice and produced different representations of pandemic childhoods. Making comics with children aged 7–11, I asked: What does it mean for researchers to speak in speech? I suggest that shifting researcher voices can help researchers recognize the conventions that allow adults to colonize spoken conversation with children, denaturalizing adult voice and allowing us to tell more than one story.

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We Can Tell More Than One Story: Comic Making Locates Researcher and Children's Voices in Co-Representing Childhoods in the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Childhood studies' long concern with elevating children's perspectives has focused attention on "voice" rather than researcher-participant dialogue, precluding critical attention to the normative adult researcher voice. This article investigates how cocreating comics with children about the COVID-19 pandemic engaged a different researcher voice and produced different representations of pandemic childhoods. Making comics with children aged 7–11, I asked: What does it mean for researchers to speak in speech? I suggest that shifting researcher voices can help researchers recognize the conventions that allow adults to colonize spoken conversation with children, denaturalizing adult voice and allowing us to tell more than one story.

Key words: *child-centered methods, voice, representation, COVID-19, comics*

This article is about how we come to understand what matters to children, and how researchers may recognize when the stories we, as child advocates, wish to tell about children do not coincide with the stories children wish to tell about themselves. From the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars globally have remarked on children's underrepresentation within COVID-19 health policy and public discourse (Alwan, 2021; Lomax et al., 2022; Spray & Hunleth, 2020). Seeking to tell the untold story of childhood in the pandemic, I made comics with 26 children in Auckland, New Zealand, about their participation in the COVID-19 pandemic. By visibilizing children as members of the public in "public health," I intended to demonstrate how children and young people have been critical *contributors* to public health promotion, to show that children are worth treating as social actors whose actions matter. While I indeed found that children had made many contributions to public health, I also

found that when given the opportunity to represent themselves in their comics, child participants did not tend to share my interest in representing them as powerful social actors.

Getting children represented in ways alternative to society's conceptions has been core to the childhood studies agenda since the field's inception. Also known as the new social studies of childhood, the interdisciplinary childhood studies field was established to challenge the dominant scientific approaches to childhood; the field critiqued adultist constructions of children as humans in waiting and passive receptacles of adult socialization, education, and care (James & Prout, 1990). Consequently, childhood studies research has focused on telling different stories of childhoods: stories of children's agency, care-giving, competencies—and how overlooking these dimensions can marginalize children. This childhood studies perspective has been particularly important to anthropologists

of child health who have documented the consequences of adult tendencies to underestimate children as social actors in health policies, interventions, and care (Bluebond-Langner, 1978; Clark, 2003; Hunleth, 2017; Spray, 2020b; Sweis, 2021). Such counternarratives and the evidence that support them are important knowledge bases for advocates who work to have children taken seriously in policy and practice as stakeholders and rights holders.

Questions of how to hear and represent children's perspectives have, however, received increasing critical interrogation in childhood studies (James, 2007). Because children were historically excluded from testifying or participating in research, early childhood studies scholars focused on challenging assumptions about children's competence and reliability with emphasis on their "voice" (e.g., Alderson, 1995; Davie et al., 1996), echoing similar humanistic concerns with unsilencing marginalized voices more broadly, including those of women, colonized and Indigenous peoples. More recently, the childhood studies preoccupation with elevating children's voices has been tempered with poststructuralist challenges about how voice is constituted, recognized, heard, recorded, interpreted, represented, and disseminated (Spyrou, 2018). Derived from what Jacques Derrida (1976) identified as the Western philosophical tradition of logocentrism, which assumes spoken language as a fundamental expression of an independent reality, the notion of "the child's voice" is often mistaken for a singular and authentic representation of children's preexisting perspective (Bluebond-Langner & Korbin, 2007). Thus, taken at face value, children's expressions can be romanticized as unenculturated and uncomplicatedly "empowered" expressions of unconstrained agents (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Hunleth, 2011, 2019; James, 2007; Komulainen, 2007; Lomax, 2012; Spyrou, 2011). Drawing theoretically from the anthropological debates on representation of the 1980s, Allison James (2007) argues that children's voices do not preexist, awaiting harvesting by researchers, but are (as they are with adults) *brought into* existence through interaction. When we represent children, we are always partially representing ourselves.

Conversely, when children represent themselves, they are also partially representing *us*. To "voice" their childhoods, children draw on the language and discourses of their cultural inheritance, including ideologies of childhood— notions of bigness and smallness, vulnerability and protection, growing up and taking responsibility—meaning children's expressions must be located within the discursive fields of power that produce them (James, 2007; Spyrou, 2011). It is not always useful, for example, to ask children what it means to be healthy (answers will likely perform narratives about diet and exercise) or how children's needs could be better addressed by politicians (requires deep insight into *what is*, let alone ideas of *what could be*). Children's self-knowledge is not immune to ideologies and power nor is its expression free from narrative performance (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; this also applies to research with adults).

Yet social constructions of childhood do not only mediate the range of ways children can *express* their experiences; they also directly *shape* children's experiences. As Ian Hacking (1986) described, "people spontaneously come to fit their categories" (p. 161), an ontological feedback loop whereby children learn to be and behave as is expected of "children." Children may not recognize their own agency, for example, in a world that treats them as passive sufferers and recipients of care. When children are cloistered within small, "child-friendly" worlds, they are unlikely to locate themselves within national or global relations, *even as* they participate in large collective projects such as pandemic public health promotion. The challenge, then, is one common to anthropology: how to access the emic point of view while also recognizing the socialization, ideologies, and power structures that shape that worldview and reify experiences of that world. Understanding children's perspectives therefore demands a careful dance from researchers: Children are not always who adults assume them to be, but they are *influenced by* whom adults assume them to be.

These influences include adult researchers ourselves. As art education scholar Hayon Park (2021) reminds us,

even as we mindfully attempt to shake off our adultist habitual practices, power, and cultural assumptions, these things still cling to us, drawn forth when we enter a field that expects them. When we speak, we signify the world we belong to, coded through our language, tone, and mode of speech itself. Yet emphasizing children's voices has tended to obfuscate the *dialogical* process that produces voice; foregrounding children's voices has meant backgrounding the voice of the researcher.

Thus, this project led me to ask: What does it mean for a researcher to speak in speech? How else might researchers voice themselves with participants, and with what effects? The mode of adult voice we choose is important because our methods will to various degrees bring forward this paradox of representation: To counter children's silencing we wish for children's voices to be heard, but only when they speak to counter their silencing. In this article I describe how a novel method, comic making, presented a different vehicle for dialogue, prompting me to rethink how adults are written into children's voices.

Are we analyzing voice or interlocution?

Over the last few decades, childhood scholars have contributed to scholarly understandings of voice by detailing the myriad ways voice can be expressed beyond oral speech. Anthropologists of childhood, especially, have attended to children's perspectives voiced through "undomesticated" expressions (Spyrou, 2018, p. 95): screams (Rosen, 2015); proximity (Hunleth, 2017); touch (Spray, 2020a); bodily expression (Das, 1989; Spray, 2020a); role play and theatre (Hasemann Lara, 2022; Hunleth, 2011); imagery and play (Bluebond-Langner, 1978; Clark, 2003; Das, 1989; Hunleth, 2019); drawing (Hunleth, 2019; Mitchell, 2006; Spray, 2021), and silence (Hunleth, 2017; Spyrou, 2018). To elicit these diverse forms of voice, both anthropologists and childhood scholars of other disciplines have innovated an array of alternatives to the traditional spoken interview, including drawing and other arts-based methods, film and photography, and mapping (e.g., Leitch, 2008; Lomax, 2012).

As Spyrou (2018) points out, however, alternative methods alone do not overcome the problems associated with spoken voice and its representation. For example, drawing's popularity as a "child-friendly" method has roots in psychoanalytic thought, where images were conceptualized as direct extractions from the unconscious mind (Spray, 2021). In research, therefore, children's drawings have tended to be viewed as representations of individual psychological realities that precede their expression rather than sociocultural coproductions brought forth in contingent, contextualized moments (Hunleth, 2011). Thus, practices remain attached to notions of voice inherited from the metaphysics of presence as something *there*: something stable, authentic, and present to search for, retrieve, and liberate (Spyrou, 2018).

I suggest part of the problem here lies in the dominance of the voice concept itself, which, even when pluralized and heterogenized, still suggests a notion of participant expression as separate and bounded from the researcher's processes of soliciting, hearing, interpreting, responding to, and representing those expressions. While poststructuralist critiques of voice have thoroughly dismantled the positivist notion that we can study the world separately from our participation in it (Mazzei & Jackson, 2008, 2012; St. Pierre, 2008), the emphasis on participant voice rather than participant-researcher *dialogue* elides critical introspection of the *researcher's* voice.

Yet overlooking the taken-for-granted mode of researcher communication presents issues, not only because humans use a variety of expressions, but because speech is deeply coded by normative adult standards and relationalities. Verbal forms of expression are frequently privileged throughout the academy, an overvaluing of verbal language I have suggested is also aged (Spray, 2021).¹ Children babble before they learn to speak words; children first scribble then draw representatively before they learn to write. Thus, in an adultist and elitist world, verbal communications are often regarded as developmentally superior over many other expressions. Moreover, children's voices are not

inchoate versions of adult voices but productions of their social position as children. In her work in the Marshall Islands, for example, linguistic anthropologist Elise Berman (2019) documents how children are first socialized to fulfil child roles before they are socialized into adult roles—children do not learn to talk like adults; they learn to “talk like children” in relation to adults. Thus the “rituals of speaking” (Alcoff, 2008, following Foucault) that we enact with each other are already laden with power and generational relationalities. Children speak and listen differently to adult researchers than they would with another child, and they speak and listen differently as children than they will as adults, not solely due to the constraints of development or acquisition of experience but because *societies expect children to speak differently from adults*. As anthropologist Elizabeth Chin (2007) reflects on her experiences doing collaborative research where children take the lead,

first children must be convinced that this is a viable dynamic. Most of their time is spent being dictated to and responding “appropriately” which generally means guessing what the adult wants and producing the correct behaviour or response. (p. 278)

Likewise, adult researchers speak differently to children than they would to adult participants, not only because children have had less time with which to acquire complex vocabulary, but because we use our speech to recognize the different, socially defined relationship between adults and children. To understand children’s voices, then, we must denaturalize the normative adult voice and attend to what our adult voices engender in our dialogues with children. When I began drawing with children in research, for example, I challenged the implicit notion that “the drawing is for children, while researchers tend to get on with the ‘real’ business of interviewing or taking notes” (Spray, 2020a, p. 195). A researcher’s choice not to draw is underpinned by a social hierarchy of language that marks verbally expressive researchers as adult and different from visually expressive children (Spray, 2021).

Such intensive attention to the nature of the *researcher’s* participation in data generation has been core to the anthropological tradition of participant observation, which uses researcher participation in everyday life as a tool for data generation with the explicit understanding that researchers shape the worlds we study. Thus, ethnographic representations are typically written as first-person accounts of experiences and interactions with others; highly contextualized *interlocution*, rather than voice, is the focus of analysis (Borneman, 2009). To accomplish this representation, anthropologists employ reflexivity, or focused consideration of how a researcher is socially coconstituting the field in tandem with participants to produce instances of intersubjective interlocution that also suggest participant subjectivities (Ruby, 1982). The misappropriation of reflexivity across fields and into settings where participant voice (as opposed to researcher-participant interlocution) tends to be produced—the interview, focus group, consultation—appears to have resulted in a form of reflexivity that treats the researcher as subtractable from the represented (Barad, 2007). As feminist scholars, particularly, have noted, the intersubjective encounter of an interview tends to be reconstituted as extracted and decontextualized participant quotes, erasing the researcher and transforming interlocution into only participant voice (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012).

Thus, the concept of voice itself may be precluding a truly reflexive analysis of *dialogue*, eliding the degree to which researchers bring their own unexamined voices into knowledge production. More than acknowledging one’s social background, reflexivity demands deep self-knowledge, a lifelong challenge when many of our exchanges are automatic, operating at subconscious levels. For research with children, particularly, it is often challenging to recognize our enculturation *as adults* when we enter an exchange where children comply with their enculturation *as children*. Thus, adult researchers may not recognize how they are coconstituting the exchange when falling into normative conventions of adult-child (and researcher-participant) interaction, leading them to, for example, attribute children’s responses to a developmental deficit in the child rather than an outcome of power and socialization. As I will go on to describe, by adding a new kind of *researcher* voice—by dialoguing with children in an expressive mode that required a novel kind of collaboration—I was confronted with the comfortable weight of

convention that allows adults to colonize spoken conversation with children.

Researching children's perspectives during a pandemic

Our comic making was shaped by the particular context of New Zealand's notable elimination approach to COVID-19 policy. After strict lockdown in March 2020 eliminated the virus from the country, extensive public health measures prevented its reemergence, including a four-tier alert system, border closures, managed isolation and quarantines (MIQ) for returning citizens and essential immigrants, and lockdowns. Due to these measures, Auckland children experienced long periods of near-normal life, punctuated with brief level-3 lockdowns and bookended with the two major national lockdowns at the highest level of restrictions. The elimination strategy was largely successful at both minimizing disruption and forestalling widespread illness and death, but it did not last, and the study period of November 2021–April 2022 marked a turbulent time in New Zealand's COVID-19 response. The long national lockdown initiated in August 2021 had failed to eliminate the Delta variant, and as the Omicron variant took hold, for the first time a wave of cases accumulated. Children I interviewed were encountering new restrictions at school, including mask wearing, cohorting, and half-time attendance to limit numbers.

While representations of children were often invoked in political discourse over the course of the pandemic, children's perceptions of and responses to these disruptions were largely invisible. Part 1 of the Pandemic Generation study² documented children's representation in public discussion via a critical discourse analysis of policy updates, public health communications (press conference transcripts), and media articles (reported in Spray & Samaniego, 2023). This sample reflected a public view of pandemic childhoods represented primarily for political purposes: images of children as cute and innocent that discursively softened severe public health restrictions, representations of children as vulnerable beneficiaries of adult protection that justified vaccination mandates, or children positioned as passive objects of parental control amid growing public resistance to the pediatric vaccine program. My observations of children's public objectification drove my interest in presenting a counternarrative, one where children were members of the public, not public-in-waiting.

Part 2 of the study therefore aimed to contrast these public representations with children's experiences of participating in public health promotion. The study took a critical childhood studies approach, which examines how childhood is socially and historically constructed within and in relation to broader social hierarchies of power and oppression (Alanen, 2011). From this theoretical orientation I aimed to contextualize children's public representations and self-representations within broader generational power dimensions and sociocultural and political constructions of childhood.

I recruited 26 child participants aged 7–11 through personal networks and advertising on community Facebook pages to represent different geographic areas of Auckland, a sprawling region with a history of racist housing policies. Auckland's ethnic, socioeconomic, and urban-rural diversity is generally segregated within geographic areas, meaning that geographic targeting is an effective proxy for representing diverse childhoods. While parent gatekeepers skewed the sample towards middle-class Pākehā (New Zealand European) children, through additional social media invitations soliciting underrepresented children I recruited a sample that was roughly 50% white/Pākehā, with the remaining 50% representing Māori, Pacific, and Asian ethnic groups in equal measure (full details of participants and methods published in Spray, 2022).

Following university health and safety policy, I invited caregivers to decide with their child whether to participate over Zoom or in person. Most (16) chose in-person visits with variable health measures in place depending on current alert level. Ten families chose the online option, and their child and I cocreated comics using Zoom's

annotate feature, which allowed both of us to draw simultaneously over a six-panel template.

At the beginning of the Zoom or in-person visit, I explained to children that I was a researcher interested in hearing children's views because often the adults making decisions for children had not actually talked to any children and they sometimes made mistakes. I suggested that some adults might've overlooked how children helped in the pandemic. Children typically listened to my explanation and nodded in understanding or agreement, without necessarily sharing my sense of injustice.

"So," I would continue, "if you decide you do want to do the study, we'll begin by making a brainstorm of your memories and experiences, and then you can choose what stories you want to tell in your comic. And you can choose to draw your own comic, or you can tell me what to draw, or we can draw it together—it's totally up to you." This range of options was helpful; most children drew all or part of their comic, but some preferred to have me draw (one 11-year-old boy breathed a sigh of relief when I said he didn't have to draw; another was reluctant to participate until he learned I would do the drawing). When children chose to draw their own comic I coparticipated by asking questions or engaging in conversation about what they were drawing, offering prompts ("What would you be thinking or saying in this panel?") and drawing a picture of the child or the both of us drawing. Children who wished to draw together sometimes assigned me a detail, panel, or story to draw or invited me to choose a subject; I would ask questions about how to represent the details.

Thus the major intervention in this study was extending the research visit beyond data generation to its representation. Typically in interview-based research, the participant offers their narrative in response to researcher's questions and utterances. While the researcher may offer some initial representations of what they hear from participants in the form of reflections or summaries, the major representative process occurs later, when the researcher interprets, selects from, and reconstitutes the participant's words to model the social phenomena under study. The individual's narrative, what they see as personally important, is secondary to the story it helps to tell through its relationship to other participant narratives. In making comics, however, this project brought the representation process out of the research institute and into children's homes. Coparticipating in comic making also changed the mode of voice both the child *and I* used to do research, from a verbal interview to a drawn story. Doing so had two implications. First, since I intended for children to have creative control, I was forced to recognize the extent of my inclination to repackage children's expressions into the story I wanted to tell on their behalf. Their representation became a dynamic, dialectical, and sometimes contested process. Second, coparticipating with children in drawing changed the vehicle for our dialogue and, in doing so, shifted our relationship, producing different stories. In the following sections I unpack how changing my researcher voice contributed to a shift in children's representations.

Talking with children about the pandemic

Almost-8-year-old Kitten³ devoured the participant information sheet I'd given her and asked, "Right, when do we start the test?" Laughing, I explained that the interview wasn't a test, but I could quiz her on the information she'd just read if she liked. She liked. "And I get to pick my own secret name," she reported back. She chose Kitten.

After we settled on the carpeted floor, I began our mind map by asking about the people who were important to her. We listed her friends and family and her cat, Amelia.

"Anyway, what's the next question?" Kitten asked.

"Okay, so then the next question is, how have you found it to be living in the pandemic?"

"What's a pandemic?"

“Yeah, let’s talk about what a pandemic is.” I regrouped. “So, when I say the word, when I say the word ...”

“Lockdown,” said Kitten. “So maybe start saying lockdown instead of pandemic.”

Kitten wasn’t the only child unfamiliar with the word pandemic, which caused me to rue the title I’d given the project. Kitten was also particularly assertive, directing me to use lockdown instead. I interpreted her assertiveness as a product of a middle-class parenting style that cultivates independent thinking and adult-child conversation (see Lareau, 2003). But retrospectively attending to my voice in this encounter, I also interpret her expressions as produced through the type of relationality I had cultivated from the first moment her father, an old school friend of mine, had introduced her to me in their doorway. These early moments are where we as researchers, having gained approval from adult gatekeepers, turn to pitch ourselves to prospective child participants to establish our relationship and encourage assent. Because these moments occur before the formalities start and the recorder is switched on, I did not pay much attention to what I was doing with my voice in this pitching process, and I have no record in my field notes. To Kitten, I likely said with a warm smile, as I often do: “Hi! I’m Julie. I’m a very old friend of your dad’s. What did your dad tell you about why I’ve come over?” With my words, I name who I am and any relationship connections and invite the child to share their understanding of my visit, establishing a relationship whereby their knowledge is the foundation we build from together.



Figure 1. Julie’s drawing of her and Kitten making comics.

What I call pitching involves much more than the words I choose, however. Pitching involves crafting a researcher voice—selecting a register of pitch, tone, language, pace, expression—to match how we wish to relate to the participant and who we recognize (or assume) that participant to be. In selecting our pitch and adjusting intersubjectively as the encounter unfolds, we convey messages to the participant about how we are recognizing them and, in relation, ourselves. For a confident child like Kitten, my pitch uses faster pace, expressive faces, and humour to show recognition of their competence and autonomy and convey myself as indulgent and fun. To a shyer child, I pitch with a slow, gentle, high voice to express: “I see you are a small person. I am a big person who sees and cares for those who are small. I like you. I want you to see me trying to help you decide if I am trustworthy.” This pitching process requires special sensitivity when communicating with children in middle childhood, because children’s identities in relation to adults are highly dynamic and easily misrecognized and, because children internalize the age hierarchies of their society, mistakes can be offensive. I have, at times, pitched too young and had to correct my “talking down” when I sensed concealed annoyance from a child who wanted to be recognized as older. Conversely,

while “pitching up” compared to the cultural norm for a child’s age can affirm children’s competency, overpitching can set intimidating expectations, especially when the child does not understand the language we use. Kitten’s instruction that I avoid the word pandemic could therefore be interpreted as signalling she understood how I was attempting to relate myself to her and was offering a helpful correction to a pitching error.

Kitten also made clear that she understood that our mode of dialogue during an interview would involve me asking questions she would answer. Responding to my questions, she described negative impressions of getting a nose swab, masking, and vaccination, and reported her knowledge about the virus acquired from her pediatrician mother. She also articulated political commentary (her positive impressions of the prime minister) and her engagement with news media (she would overhear and thought it sounded “quite boring”). These were all areas of interest to me, elicited through an unstructured set of questions I would ask children during the mind-mapping process. I knew that what interested me, children’s social and political marginalization in health, was often not what interested children and, conversely, that what interested children often came to form a vital part of my analyses. I also knew that children’s apparent lack of interest in some topics was not necessarily a natural product but reflected children’s particular subjectivities, including their political disenfranchisement and exclusion from public discourses about matters that affect them. Hence, part of my approach involved offering children critical ideas they *might* draw on to differently story their experiences. My questions tried to balance between probing areas of my scholarly interest and open-ended prompts that children could take in their own direction. Thus, I included questions that invited stories of the experience of disruption and normalcy (what’s your earliest memory of the pandemic?), social and emotional experiences (what’s one big feeling you remember having?), and children’s participation in public health efforts (what’s something you remember doing differently when the pandemic started?). Using follow-up questions, I would explore whatever children brought up and jot down key words on a sheet of A3 paper to create a mind map of our conversation.

Although I encouraged children to add whatever they wanted to the mind map, placing the paper in front of them and offering them the pencil, somehow I always ended up the scribe. Like Kitten, children waited for the next question to answer and watched me filter their words and write down my interpretation. During these interviews I would track children’s attention and interest to determine when to move from the mind-mapping to the comic-making stage. Often, however, it wasn’t until I suggested moving on that I would hear children’s readiness, conveyed in a sudden shift of energy or a breath of relief. The conversational component of the research, despite my intentions, became dominated by my voice as children slipped into their deferential social roles and the conventions of politeness and I pursued data that could bolster my advocacy. And, while I sensed children were less interested in describing their health care practices than other matters (such as the games they played during lockdowns), I could persist with a line of questioning for some time before children would convey that the questions had become tedious. In other words, the story could have ended here, and I might not have been so acutely aware of just how dominant my voice had been in its construction.

Drawing children’s stories

In this study, however, there was another story to come. Despite our lengthy conversation about all the ways Kitten participated in public health, these things barely appeared in her comic. Instead, her storytelling emphasized the nuances of her social relationships during lockdown, friendships maintained initially over Zoom and then outdoors (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Chapter One of Kitten's comic.

Meanwhile, I sketched out the boxes to her specifications and drew a picture of the two of us, Kitten making sure I accurately represented the details of her clothing (Figure 1). Then, since Kitten was still drawing, I tried representing some of her stories.

“Could I draw, um, maybe a picture of you getting the nose swab?”

“Hmm. You could draw my cat puking on the bed!” said Kitten.

Thus I would suggest an image showing her participating in the pandemic, and she would redirect me to something salient to her, iteratively instructing me on my drawing and adding to hers.

“What should I draw on my next page?”

I read from our mind map: “We’ve got when you hurt yourself...”

“Oh, I hurt myself, I’ll draw me on the trampoline with Daddy.”

“And we’ve got your nose swab,” I added.

“That one I might not include.”

“Yeah, you can choose,” I said. And then, “Are you choosing based on what’s most fun to draw? Or is there a reason you don’t want to show the swab thing? Because the swab thing seemed kind of important.”

Kitten said she was choosing “cool ones to show” me. But, she added, the swab drawing would need to be detailed and would take too long.

“Oh, what about if I drew that one?”

No, said Kitten, because she needed me to draw her another box. Then she directed me to add freckles and steam lines to my drawing of her wearing a mask, because it made her so hot. Eventually, she invited me to pick the topic for my final panel, and after I hedged about choosing the nose swab—“It didn’t seem that important to you, so if there’s something more important...”—she reassured me: “No, go on, I don’t mind at all.”



Figure 3. Julie's contributions to Kitten's comic.

Alternative stories

Kitten and I, it turned out, had quite different agendas for representing children's roles in the pandemic. I, with a view of children's marginalization in health policy, was pushing back against a world that devalued children by emphasizing her unseen contributions to a collective national project. Kitten, on the other hand, detailed the disruption and reconnecting of the social world she had built for herself. Editing my drawings, she emphasized not her participation in health measures but her *suffering*: her disdain for the masks she had to deal with; lockdown's interference in her relationships; cat puke (Figure 3).

Such was often the case in my comic making with children. When I asked during the mind-mapping stage about the things children had done to protect themselves or others during the pandemic, many would list ways they had participated in public health: wearing masks, getting tested or vaccinated. Some also described ways they had helped their family with emotional support or household tasks. When I asked how children got their COVID-19 information, many reported overhearing and interpreting press briefings or seeing the news or advertisements on YouTube. Children clearly *were* active participants in New Zealand's public health efforts. When representing these health practices in their comics (often at my encouragement), however, children tended to draw these as impositions onto their lives or things that had been done *to* them. They chose to represent themselves suffering loneliness and disruption and as recipients of medical intervention and adult decision making. While the comic form invited them to reimagine themselves as superheroes protecting their country, children more frequently drew themselves as victims: bored, frustrated, sad. Or, like Kitten, they drew their social worlds: their lockdown games and activities; lockdown's severing of friendships and their attempts to reconnect. They emphasized their reconstruction of disrupted small worlds, not their contributions to national or global projects.

These representations of childhood make sense. In a world where children have been so alone and invisible, of course children might wish to make their suffering visible. Children, too, may tell their own stories by leveraging the semiotics of an adult culture that uses images of vulnerable children to elicit adult compassion. The pictures of sad children were, I realized, in part for *me*: empathetic witness to their suffering and coping during a time when children have been systematically ignored. Kitten wanted to show me *the cool ones*, for me to see her world. Children mentioned these things in our mind maps, but while I dominated spoken conversations, I could not *hear*

these stories nor understand their importance until we shifted to voicing them through comics. Moreover, I was not fully recognizing my own voice, the extent to which I was drawing upon normative and aged verbal codes, until I switched to a mode that repositioned me as coparticipant, audience, and witness. Drawing changed our relationship because I was now using their language, not requiring them to use mine.

Changing researcher voices

Interviewing children is different from interviewing adults. The transcripts of my interviews with adult participants contain paragraphs-long monologues because adults tend to interpret my sparse questions or reflective summaries as invitations to engage in a verbal process of storytelling, self-reflection, and improvised meaning making. Children, on the other hand, interpret my responses within the framework of adult-child relationalities they have learnt from their experiences of adult questions—as requests for information or tests of knowledge. Our transcripts heavily feature my voice amid a rapid exchange of dialogue: I reflect back what I've heard from children, and if my interpretation resonates, I get nods or brief confirmations in response. This can create a stilted dialogue unique to my research with children. For example, when talking to 10-year-old Fifi about her struggles connecting with friends online during lockdown, we exchanged the following:

Julie: And so, if you're able to talk to friends whenever you want then, why were you bored?

Fifi: Because sometimes they, they weren't active and like, they're not there.

Julie: Ah, so you couldn't always talk to them whenever you wanted because you'd have to have them there as well.

Fifi: Yeah.

Julie: Yeah, yeah, it's a bit different from being at school, where you just kind of see them all day every day, right?

Fifi: Yeah, but I won't like see my other friends because I, not all my friends are in my class. So I will only see one of my friends.

Julie: Yeah. So kind of have to start over a little bit, making new friends.

Fifi nods.

Julie: Yeah.

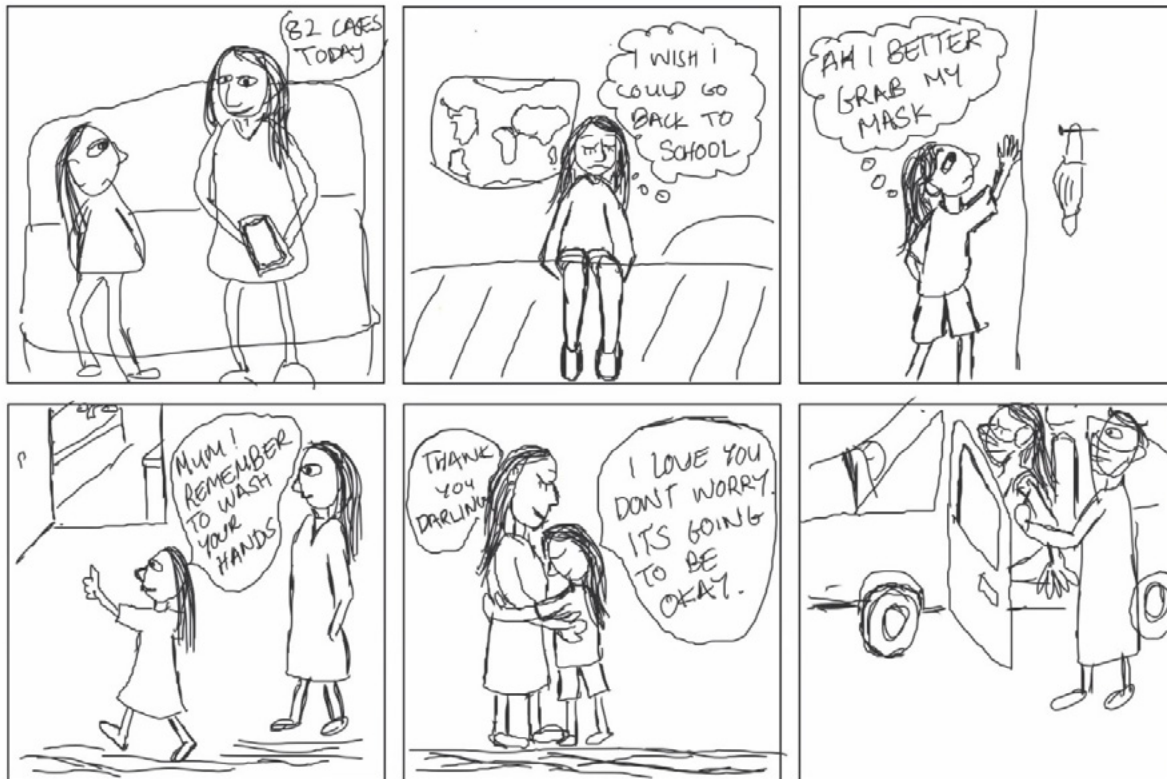


Figure 4. Fifi's comic.

While my verbal reflections during interviews gave children a sense of how I was interpreting them and, theoretically, an opportunity to challenge my interpretation, the way verbal interviewing relationally positioned us meant that, as tentatively as I expressed my interpretations, children were constrained by politeness and deference in how they could correct me. They looked for my next question to direct them rather than taking the space I offered as an adult would. When I drew with them, however, we engaged in a form of story making that did not come preembedded with any dialogical rituals, let alone rituals of adult-child communication. Without the information I needed to represent children's stories visually, I expressed much more hesitancy in my drawn representations than my verbal responses—what Park (2020, p. 37) describes as a “relational ethics of ignorance”—a practice of “intellectual equality” based on a willingness to demonstrate areas of “unknowing” engendering a mutual exchange of expertise. Rather than pitching a voice to suggest who I thought the child was, in drawing I asked them to tell me. Children also interpreted my hesitation differently, populating the space I left with their directions and commentary. Switching from speaking to drawing children's stories thus changed both of our voices in these encounters.

When it came time to select her memories for her comic, Fifi chose quickly. “Wishing you could go to school?” I asked.

“Yes. And lots of cases. And lockdown. Saying I love my family.”

“Here are some squares,” I said, pulling up the comic template into the Zoom window. “Do you want to do the drawing?”

“We can both do it,” said Fifi. Initially, I asked her questions to ascertain setting and dialogue and how characters would be arranged; thereafter she would describe her vision for the image unprompted. “So maybe I would like be sitting on my bed or something. Thinking I wish I could go back to school. So this would be my bed. And then my pillow. Um. Could, can you draw me sitting on it?”

“Okay, so would you be sitting like with your back to the wall or like with your back to the pillow?”

“Probably like facing the square like—no, facing like us.”

“And would you have your legs tucked up like this?” I asked. “Or would you be kind of sticking them out and down like this?”

“Hanging down.”

“Hanging down, okay. Made you a sad face.”

“Okay. And then next to it you could do a speech bubble or something.”

Drawing comics was a new voice for me, as well as for many of the children I worked with. I can speak orally with an adult fluency and poise, seamlessly selecting from a well-rehearsed repository of verbal scripts. I do not have such a wide repository of visual scripts. Drawing as Fifi directed, I fumbled in this space of ignorance, exposing my awkwardness with this unpolished, undisciplined voice. Drawing children’s stories demanded from me a different kind of sensitivity and attunement, a new kind of accountability, because children could see how I was making sense of and representing them in raw, unglossed lines. As with Kitten, this dialogical comic making reset those habituated modes of interrelating, giving a new form and vocabulary for voice that was new to both of us as a vehicle for intersubjective exchange and bringing to the surface the expectations and directives that had largely remained concealed by my adult power in verbal conversations. When I let go of those things, questioning turned into communing, changing who we were to one another.

The interactions I experienced through drawing comics together find similarities with how arts education scholars have described the collective social improvisations and attunements of creative arts, processes that Cristina Delgado Vintimilla and Sylvia Kind (2021) describe as a “sensitive reciprocity, a symbiotic orchestration or movement *with* rather than knowledge about someone” (p. 37, emphasis in original). I felt these attuning processes most acutely in working with 9-year-old Miky, whose attention deficit disorder (ADD) meant that I experienced his unfiltered impulses and responses to me moment by moment. As we worked on Miky’s comic, a story of a trip to England to visit his grandfather who was hospitalized with a serious illness, it became apparent that the act of drawing him was a kind of showing and seeing: a showing *that* we are seeing and *how* we are seeing, with an openness to being shown how to see better.

The importance of this mutual seeing each other had already been underscored when Miky asked to see my face. Pulling gently at my mask, he held my face in his hands and explained, “because I want you to actually *see* me, like—like... I want to actually see your face.”

Then, after he went to get his masks to show me, we exchanged the following:

Julie: I’ve drawn you, is that okay?

Miky: Pardon?

Julie: I drew you.

Miky: Where?

Julie: Right here.

Miky: Wow.

Julie: Who are you, who are you going to be with? Do you—

Miky: —Is that the bones?

Julie: No, that's just your arm. Is it too skinny?

Miky: Yeah.

I invited him to add his muscles, and then he coloured his portrait “skinny colour.” He then gave me detailed instructions about how to draw his gran. “And then she's like ‘come with me’ and then she's saying like, putting her hand out to say ‘come with me, let's go and watch a cartoon’ and then I say ‘okay.’”

Julie: Okay, so, ah, this is you, and this is your nan. And it's just the back of your head because you're on the couch watching the TV.

Miky: Oh, that's so good.

This relational mode from drawing together produced different stories from the ones I was constructing on children's behalf from the mind-mapping exercise. I could bring out the stories of children's contributions to (or exclusions from) public health; Miky and his father talked, in particular, of their difficulty in managed isolation (MIQ) following their trip, showing me how New Zealand's hotel quarantine system was not designed for children with ADD—the kind of story I was looking for as a story that adults would take seriously as evidence that children's perspectives mattered. The stresses of that period of confinement was not the story Miky wanted to tell, however. His comic focused entirely on his experience of England and concluded before we even got to MIQ. In this story, the pandemic structured a young boy's relationships when, unable to see one grandparent due to hospital protocols, he formed a special bond with the other. Miky did not depict the obstacles and difficulties created by the pandemic but showed me the relationships that became more salient as a result. Like Kitten's, Miky's story told me that to children, their immediate relationships were where they invested their care and attention during the pandemic's disruptions. These stories speak to what was erased in public discourse that focused on debating children's vulnerability to infection or using children's representations as political tools. We missed the impacts of health measures on the social worlds children cocreate to support themselves—and the creative ways children attempted to nevertheless maintain or reconfigure those worlds.

Finding the stories within children's stories

While the story I was telling about Miky and Miky's own story had very different messages, I do not mean to imply that through comics I had struck children's “real” story, nor that my stories bore no meaning for children. I also often had to contend with the ways in which children reproduced, rather than countered, the dominant social constructions of childhood. I found, for example, that when I suggested that children might care for others, many children looked disinterested or dubious rather than sharing my indignation that children's care work was so systematically disregarded. Ten-year-old Connor shrugged indifferently when I introduced the study with the framing that adults making decisions about the pandemic might not take children seriously. He had spent lockdowns playing video games and was more concerned with the frustration and boredom of running out of games. In one panel of his comic he drew himself sad and alone on his 9th birthday, escaping into an elaborate

gaming console in a second, and sitting bored on his bed in another (“I should read,” he says in a speech bubble; Figure 5). Connor did not see himself as a caregiver, contributor, or active participant in the pandemic—identities that are likely gendered as well as influenced by social constructions of childhood. Through his self-narrative he expressed a learnt cultural self: His role was to be taken care of by his mother. But he also drew himself hearing about COVID-19 from a friend and watching the pandemic news with his parents. And, he talked about calling his mum to pick him up from school when he was having breathing difficulties that, he later realized, were caused by his mask. “Didn’t want to tell my mum because I didn’t want to make her mad that I pulled her out of work,” he said. He was clearly an active participant in the pandemic, even as he emphasized his story of suffering.

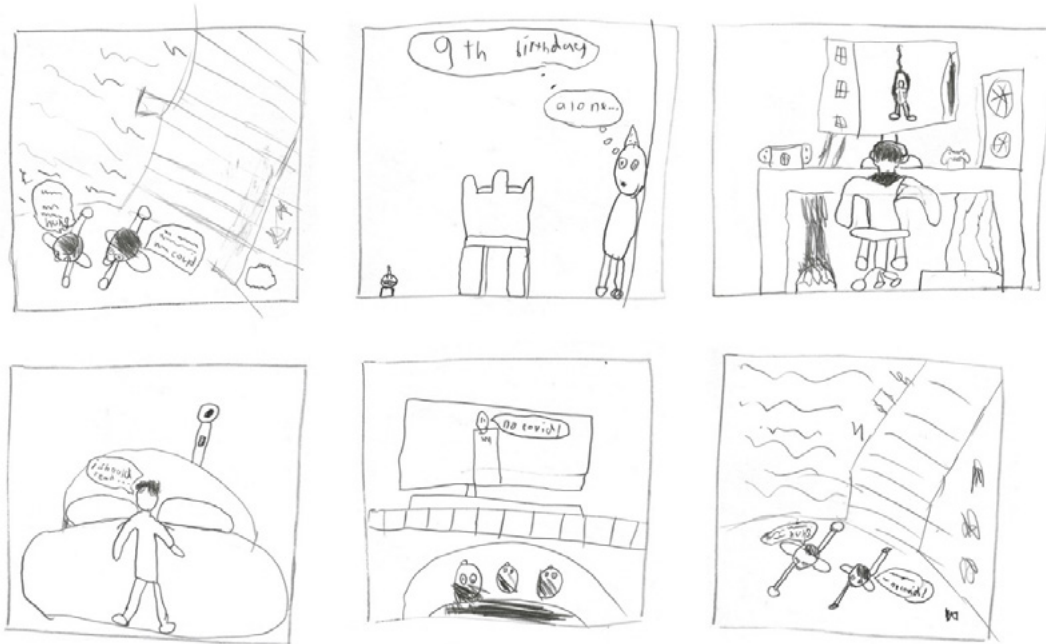


Figure 5. Connor's comic.

While children like Connor and Kitten did not take up the alternative frame for childhood I offered, some children did, and how they chose to construct themselves in response to this new way of thinking spoke to their standpoint and positioning. When I asked 10-year-old Saara if she'd ever heard “them talking about children on the news” she began to build her own critique of children's representation—“She [Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern] just said primary schools are open and then she went straight back to coronavirus”—that sparked a running joke between us. “Also, children, you don't matter to the country,” Saara proclaimed, pretending to be the prime minister. In her comic, she drew herself melodramatically mourning the loss of her beloved cloth mask as Ardern advised from the television screen that cloth masks did not offer sufficient protection against the Omicron variant (Figure 6). Saara may not have encountered critical childhood studies perspectives before, but my critique clearly resonated with her as the government loomed large in her life. Saara's comic still represents her suffering but this time connected to marginalizing structures she had not been positioned to see before. Our comic making reflected the course of our interlocution: our perspectives synthesized into one new story.

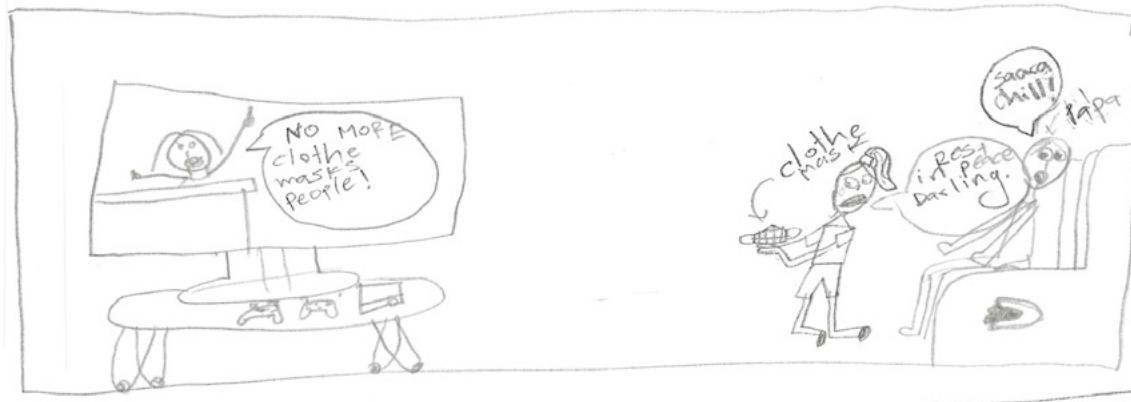


Figure 6. By Saara.

Conclusion: We can tell more than one story

While arts-based research practices typically focus on the art making of participants, my experiences with comaking comics suggests that researchers' coparticipation can offer novel engagements with the divergences between the researcher's socio-politically located understanding of childhood and how children understand themselves. Through making something together, researchers and children may quite literally—in visual, drawn form—coproduce their evolving views of each other, finding synchronies and synthesis along with tensions that point to multiple ontologies.

In asserting value in this process, I respond to a decade of scholars calling for more examination of how “the child’s voice” is produced (James, 2007; Komulainen, 2007; Spyrou, 2011) with a call to equally interrogate our researcher voices as part of analyzing the knowledge produced through adult-child interlocution. How is the researcher participating, or not participating, with children in research? Through what mode of voice is the researcher corresponding, is it the same or different to the child’s mode, and what are these similarities and differences producing? How is the researcher’s mode of voice determining the shape of the conversation? What taken-for-granted relationalities are concealed through normative modes of speaking and listening? How is the researcher using voice to pitch a relationship with child participants, and how do these pitches vary when the mode switches from speech to a less domesticated voice like drawing? I challenge researchers to engage with child participants using forms of voice that are new or alternative for the researcher, to disrupt the heavy layers of ethnocentrism, normative convention, and power that pull us into habituated intersubjectivities. By conversing in a medium that we are not practiced in dialoguing in, that we have not been culturally disciplined into conventions for, we make visible the dynamics of our relationality as we negotiate its awkwardness. We do not throw out the relational frameworks we bring in, but in reconstituting them for a new expressive vehicle, we can become more aware of that which we had been unconscious of. And in doing so, we may find more than one story to be told.

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- 1 Verbal language is also raced/classed/gendered through associations with white male intellect.
 - 2 I was assisted in this project by a summer scholar, Samantha Samaniego, who analyzed political and media discourse and accompanied me on two visits with children.
 - 3 All names are pseudonyms. Most children chose their own.

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