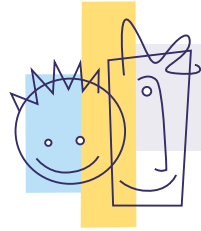




Australian Research Alliance
for Children & Youth



nsw commission for
children & young people

involving children and young people in research



Compendium of papers and reflections from a Think Tank
co-hosted by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth and
the New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People on 11 November 2008

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Foreword

We would like to thank all the participants in the Involving Children and Young People in Research Think Tank; those who have contributed to the Think Tank and compiled papers and reflections to be published as part of this compendium.

The papers demonstrate that there is now a considerable wealth of experience with participatory research in Australia. Together the papers identify the strengths, the challenges, the complexities — and the enjoyment — of participatory research.

The Think Tank provided a unique opportunity for experts from many sectors and from all around Australia to discuss their collective experience and knowledge of participatory research. We hope the compendium is a first step toward developing a collective understanding of how best to involve children and young people in research for their benefit, the benefit of their communities, and for the benefit of research.

Gillian Calvert
Commissioner for Children
and Young People



Dr Lance Emerson
Chief Executive Officer
Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth



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Executive Summary

Involving children in participatory research raises a number of ethical and access challenges, which highlight the need to better understand the nature and impacts of participatory research in relation to children. This compendium of papers delivered at the Involving Children and Young People in Research Think Tank seeks to do just that.

The Think Tank, co-hosted by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) and the New South Wales (NSW) Commission for Children and Young People was held on 11 November 2008. It was organised to bring together researchers and policy makers from many disciplines and sectors to discuss the nature of the experience of participatory research with children and young people. The dual focus of the day was to discuss considerations and issues — both positive and negative — that have featured in this research, and to identify ways of moving forward with these issues in the future.

This compendium is supported by a literature review (Appendix 2) which examines the ethical and methodological contexts in which research conversations have begun around the world in relation to children's capacities to act as protagonists in their own lives.

Major Themes for Consideration

The major themes and considerations that emerged from the discussion and the papers are summarised under three headings: research approaches and methodologies, ethics and consent issues, and implications for practice.

Research approaches and methodologies

Although the nature of the research discussed in each paper differs widely, a number of key operating methodological principles, including approaches and characteristics, are recognised as essential to successfully implementing participatory research. These include:

- Respectful engagement with children and young people
- Trust and relationships
- Choice, flexibility and adaptability in research design, approach and implementation
- Reflexive research designs
- Transparency and accountability in research processes
- Benefits to children and young people
- Strategies for disengaging from the research.

In summary, successful participatory research is respectful, builds trust, is flexible and adaptable, transparent and accountable, and brings benefit to children and young people.

Ethics and consent issues

Ethical considerations are paramount in children's research and management of these considerations can be very influential on the research that is ultimately completed with children and young people. The major issues discussed include:

- Protection and safety versus participation
- The role of ethics committees
- The impact of consent processes.

In summary, negotiating ethics approval and access to children and young people remains a major challenge. More attention needs to be given to facilitating information and understanding participatory research across all groups involved to minimise culture clashes and increase the understanding of the nature of participatory research.

Implications for practice

Participatory research requires research practice that often diverges from the familiar traditional approaches. The major implications for practice discussed include:

- The messiness, complexity and resource-intensive nature of implementing participatory research
- Taking children's views seriously
- Maximising participation and maintaining data quality
- Supporting the participation of children and young people.

In summary, implementing participatory research is messy, complex and resource intensive. It poses a number of challenges including managing the balance between the experience of participation for children and young people and the outcomes for the research; supporting children to participate and maintaining data quality; and, ultimately, having the research findings taken seriously for the benefit of children and young people.

Four major areas for action

As a result of the Think Tank discussion, four major areas for action were identified:

1. Build capacity of children to participate in research by strengthening children's understanding and by their engagement, inclusion and participation in the research process through initiatives such as integrating research with school curricula, training young people as researchers, involving them in the evaluation of the experience of participatory research, and maximising their involvement in any research project.
2. Build gatekeepers' understanding and knowledge about involving children in research by entering into dialogue with them, participating in face-to-face presentations, becoming members of ethics committees, and facilitating the information exchange across all groups involved in the research process.
3. Build knowledge and capacity of researchers by developing training components, documenting the experience of participatory research, developing good practice guidelines, and continuing this discussion about involving children and young people in research.
4. Increase the influence of research, focusing on improving the efficacy with which research findings bring about change in policy or practice in children's lives. This can be done through publishing research findings more broadly, finding new ways and forums for disseminating findings, and developing collaborative research projects which involve groups from several sectors.



Introduction

Over the past fifteen years, there have been shifts in children's research from research which was consistently *on* children to research *with* children, and more recently research *by* children (Alderson 2001; James and Prout 1990; Kellett 2005). Children have gone from being objects of research, to being subjects of research, to being considered autonomous social actors and agents in their own lives (Christensen and Prout 2001).

The desire in the research community to report on children and childhood now runs in parallel with a desire to understand children and young people's lived experiences (Pole, Mizen and Bolton 1999).

The interest in participatory research has developed in response to an increasing respect for children's competence and authority in their own lives, and in their ability to contribute meaningfully to adults' understanding about their lives (Prout and James 1990). The development of the participation movement and participatory research mirrors the increasing visibility of the child rights movement. This culminated in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCROC) in 1989, which sets out children's rights to provision, protection and participation (Lansdown 1994). The interest in children's participation has developed in response to these changes in the social status of children and childhood, and to changes in the understanding of children's rights as citizens to be consulted and heard on subjects which affect their lives (Corsaro 2005; Qvortrup et al. 1994).

The idea of children and young people having critical and unique perspectives on their lives — which are invaluable to our understanding of those lives — has been embraced by many disciplines. While

participatory research has met with resistance because some ethical and methodological aspects are contentious, its value to knowledge and insight into childhood and children's lives is increasingly recognised. This is evident in the rapidly increasing use of participatory research with children and young people. As Fitzgerald and Graham state in their paper in this compendium 'the idea of children and young people as participants in social and political life now occupies a central place in the way we think about them.'

Sociologists and children's rights advocates concur that if we are to understand the implications and impact of legislation, policy and practice changes on children, it is imperative to recognise that the interests and needs of children differ from those of adults in research, as in other areas of life, and to allow children and young people's voices to be heard in research (Thomas and O' Kane 1998).

Participatory research has now been used extensively in communities in many countries, and there is increasing recognition and use of such methods in research with children and young people. There are many benefits to such approaches, including epistemological benefits, where participatory techniques may 'access and valorise previously neglected knowledge and provide more nuanced understandings of complex social phenomena' (Kesby 2000, p. 423). There are ethical benefits:

the reliability and validity, and the ethical acceptability, of research with children can be augmented by using an approach which gives children control over the research process and methods which are in tune with children's ways of seeing and relating to their world (Thomas and O' Kane 1998, p. 336–337).

Most importantly, involving children and young people in participatory research challenges adult assumptions about children's lives, leads to better information about their lives and gives a greater understanding of what may constitute effective action in their lives. The aim of this research is to improve children's lives. For the children who participate in this kind of research, the evidence indicates that there are personal benefits including the development of new skills, personal resources and self-confidence, alongside the benefits that may result from the outcomes of the research project.

There are many challenges too. These research processes are complex — logistically, methodologically and ethically. They pose dilemmas for children and young people, researchers and ethics committees, and other gatekeepers as they challenge the boundaries of conventional practice and understanding. One of the most significant challenges associated with this research is managing the information exchange between all those involved in any research process. Other challenges include negotiating ethics approval, negotiating with gatekeepers, managing consent, redressing power imbalances, and managing how and when children become involved in the research process.

In this collection of papers, many techniques and approaches related to involving children and young people in research are discussed. The interpretation of what it means to have children and young people participate and the level of children's involvement in the research varies greatly between all the reported case studies. Some processes are more complex and more involved than others, reflecting either the methodology or the limitations or circumstances of particular research contexts. Together, this compendium of papers illustrates the diversity of the experience of participatory research and the intellectual, methodological and logistical flexibility required to

complete participatory research. These papers reveal the challenges and demands of completing participatory research; they also reveal the great enjoyment and reward which researchers experience in participating in these projects.

As many of the papers included in this compendium indicate, for children and young people involved in research there are also benefits including positive support for their self-esteem, confidence and personal development, as well as enhancing their connections to their communities. The children and young people quoted in these papers also indicate that one of the most empowering aspects of this experience is linked to their capacity to effect change. This is achieved by having direct involvement in decision-making processes and witnessing this as a result of their involvement in research and other forums for engagement.

Within the research community — nationally and internationally — we have reached a level of experience with participatory research which needs to be synthesised so that the research techniques, knowledge and skills can be shared. As many of the papers discuss, carrying out this kind of research is complex, time consuming to organise and execute, can extend the research process, and can add costs to the project. It also requires skills that researchers do not necessarily have. Its complexity and challenges are methodological, ethical and practical and there is a need to evaluate the experience of implementing participatory research so that its challenges and surrounding issues are better understood and can be addressed more effectively.

The Think Tank brought together leaders in the field who were willing to share their experience to identify what works in practice and what does not when conducting research that is with and by children, as well as about them and for them. Participants included representatives from

health, social science, economics, planning, education and practice, academic, community and policy sectors.

The purpose of this compendium of papers is to provide a summary of the issues raised both in the papers and in the Think Tank discussions, and to highlight the major and continuous considerations associated with the experience of participatory research as identified by the participants. The compendium also identifies ways to move forward and to strengthen the capacity of participatory research to be valuable to children and young people, to the community and to research.


As part of the process of preparing for the Think Tank, each paper was reviewed by two other participants. In the compendium, the two reflections from the reviewers are included following each paper. The final chapters provide an overall summary of the major issues raised in both the papers and the Think Tank discussions and outline the implications for practice, further action and ways forward.

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Papers and Reflections





1. Children's Participation in Program Evaluation — a Case Study from the UK

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Introduction

Participation of program participants in evaluation is more often than not limited to involving them in focus groups, interviews or surveys. As public-funded programs have started to place greater emphasis on the participation of service users in program planning and delivery, this has inevitably filtered through to the evaluation of these programs. Despite this, there is fairly limited evidence about the added value of this increased participation on either the programs themselves or their evaluations.

This paper describes my experience as a researcher on the evaluation of the Tower Hamlets Children's Fund and, in particular, my experience of mentoring a team of young evaluators as part of this project. The paper sets out some context to the project and the methodology that was used for the evaluation. It then goes on to describe my experience of mentoring the group of young evaluators, the challenges faced and the benefits of the approach to the research and the children and young people involved.

Background

The Children's Fund¹ was implemented across England during 2000–08 as part of the UK government's commitment to tackle disadvantage among children and young people (aged 5–13). The program aimed to identify, at an early stage, children and young people at risk of social exclusion, and provide them with the help and support they required to achieve their potential. The 149 local programs were implemented through a partnership of agencies in every local authority in England. The Children's Fund was guided by three underlying principles:

- Prevention — to address the gap in preventative services for children and young people at risk of social exclusion by providing increased and better coordinated preventative services
- Partnership — to take responsibility at a local level for the delivery of the Children's Fund plan by involving partners from the statutory and voluntary sectors, community and faith groups, and ensuring that the views of children and young people were represented
- Participation — the voices of children and young people were placed at the heart of the Children's Fund, with children and young people involved in the design, operation and evaluation of the program.

1. Every Child Matters, Department for Children, Schools and Families, UK, <<http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/strategy/childrensfund/>>.

During 2002, I worked as a research officer on the evaluation of the local Children's Fund project in Tower Hamlets in the East End of London. Tower Hamlets is a culturally diverse, inner city London borough with over half of the population from a non-white British ethnic group. It is one of the most deprived areas in the UK. I worked as part of a team commissioned by Tower Hamlets Council to evaluate the effectiveness of their local Children's Fund program.

The following section describes the methodology we used for the peer research element of the evaluation. This was part of a wider evaluation methodology which involved visits to all of the Children's Fund projects, interviews with project participants and interviews with key stakeholders which were undertaken by the adult research team.

Experience of the Tower Hamlets Children's Fund evaluation

Integrating participation in the evaluation proposal

As a guiding principle of the Children's Fund program, participation was also central to the evaluation both at the national and local level. In our research proposal to the funders we had to clearly demonstrate how participation would be an integral part of our methodology. We proposed training and mentoring a team of program participants as young evaluators to carry out interviews with other children and young people involved in the program.

The first major challenge we faced with this project was to present our proposal — as part of the competitive selection process for the evaluation — to a group of children and young people who were

receiving support through the Children's Fund. As a team we had to draw on our fairly limited creative skills to devise a way of presenting our research methodology which would be accessible to a group of children and young people aged five to 13. It was probably the first time since my childhood that I'd spent an afternoon with papers, pens, stickers and glue to devise a presentation which combined a few simple PowerPoint slides with a colourful and interactive diagram of our research methodology. We presented this to a group of six young children on a Saturday morning who followed up the presentation with some insightful questions about how we intended to involve them in a meaningful and empowering way in the evaluation. We all agreed that it was the most difficult pitch for a research project that we had done.

Our proposal was successful and the feedback from the young people was that our presentation had been interesting and easy to understand. They commented that the combination of PowerPoint and the interactive visual presentation had been appealing to the range of ages in the audience and, unlike some of the other presenters, we had not delivered a patronising presentation. They also liked the fact that we had made them laugh and commented that we were younger than other presenters.

Recruitment and training of young evaluators

We had planned to select a team of eight program participants and train them in qualitative research methods to undertake interviews with a sample of other young program participants. We organised a recruitment afternoon where we explained the project to a group of children and young people involved in the Children's Fund. The group had been selected and asked to attend by their project workers. Interest in the project was much greater than we had anticipated and, consequently,

we agreed to recruit 15 young evaluators (aged 10–13) who were from a range of different Children’s Fund projects. They were given a consent form to be signed by them and their parents setting out rights and expectations for the project and were asked to attend a training session in two weeks time.

All 15 attended the first training session held in the boardroom of Tower Hamlets Council. The group was a mix of age, gender and ethnicity with two from a white British background. A great deal of time and effort was invested in preparing for the training course. This included developing the agenda and presentation for the day and preparing training materials for the young evaluators (which included researcher ground rules and ‘A researcher’s guide to the universe’). Each young evaluator was also given a research diary which they were encouraged to complete at different stages of the research process. These diaries were photocopied by the adult research team at the end of the project for use in the report to funders and the original copies were returned to the young evaluators. All participants also received Children’s Fund branded bags and stationery. The training session included the following:

- An icebreaker where the young evaluators worked together to build the tallest paper tower they could using only newspaper and sticky tape. This proved an effective way of building relationships between the young evaluators who didn’t know each other, which was central to the process.
- An introduction to qualitative research and the evaluation. This was presented in a way which was accessible to the young evaluators, for example by describing the role of a researcher as like that of an explorer and providing them with the 5 Ws and 1 H of evaluation — who, what, why, where, when and

how. The presentation allowed time for the young evaluators to ask questions and practice some of the elements of research discussed.

- An adult researcher conducted a mock interview with a member of staff from the Children’s Fund which proved an entertaining way of demonstrating different styles of interviewing. The young evaluators then had the opportunity to practice interviewing each other about their ‘best day ever’.
- The young evaluators then worked in groups to generate some questions using the 5 Ws and 1 H which they would then use in their evaluation.

It was a very successful day with the young people leaving on a high and excited about the prospect of the research. In their diaries the young people commented about how their understanding of research changed as a result of the session, for example:

My understanding of research has changed in many ways. At first I thought that there was only one type of research where you look through books, in the library or in the internet etc to find out particular things. Now I have understood from the talk that there are many different types of research, not just by looking through things, but also by finding things out through people (qualitative research). I also now know that there can be other researches like through numeracy. I also thought research was simply boring and useless but now I have understood that it can be really fun if you make it fun and that research is very useful and important (Tower Hamlets 2003).

Designing and conducting the evaluation

Following the training day the researchers collated questions designed by the young evaluators and formulated a discussion guide. This was structured around five key themes that related to the objectives of the Tower Hamlets Children's Fund. These were:

- Background
- How good/bad is the project?
- Do projects make a difference to young people?
- Are children involved in making decisions for the project?
- How well do the projects work together and how are people treated at the project?

Care was taken to pitch the language at an appropriate level for the young people involved. Where possible, questions were phrased in the words of the young people and only amended where it was necessary to correct language. The discussion guide was printed in colour, showing probing (secondary) questions in red to remind the young evaluators to wait for an answer to the first before asking the probing question. An introduction was included to remind them to introduce themselves, explain the purpose of the research, tell the interviewee that what they say would be kept private, and to ask the interviewee if they had any questions. Similarly, instructions on how to end the interview were incorporated, with a reminder to thank interviewees for their time.

I worked with four young people during the training and then became their mentor for project visits. We visited three projects including an education project for Somali young people and a Bangladeshi youth group. As a mentor I was responsible for liaising with the young people's

project workers to organise picking them up and transporting them to their project visit, briefing them prior to the interviews and debriefing with them after the interviews. Most evaluation visits were undertaken during term time after school or on Saturdays. It was certainly a new experience for me picking up the young people from school and taking them to and from the project visits. We often went to projects on foot and it was interesting to hear the young evaluators talking about their neighbourhood as we walked around the streets in Tower Hamlets.

The young people showed great commitment and most had undertaken preparation work for the interviews. However it was important for me as the mentor to brief the team prior to the visit about the project they were visiting. This involved reminding them of the researcher's code which had been developed to explain the ethical processes of the research, including how to introduce the research to the interviewees, to stress confidentiality and gain informed consent.

The interviews generally went well and the more interviews the young evaluators carried out the more their confidence increased. Practical considerations were crucial in ensuring that the interviews went smoothly. The mentor was always present at the interviews and made written notes of the interviews although the interviews were also tape recorded. As far as possible, as mentors we tried not to interject in the interviews unless the young evaluators were finding it particularly hard to engage with the interviewees. We found that interviews were best undertaken in a quiet place where young interviewees were away from the distraction of their peers. It also became apparent that young interviewees felt more comfortable if they were interviewed in pairs by the young evaluator.

The young evaluators relied heavily on the discussion guide and, as it was largely written using their words, it was meaningful and they felt ownership of it. On the whole the young people tended to follow the discussion guide strictly but, as some grew in confidence, they were able to be more creative with their questioning, for example by rephrasing questions or asking more probing questions. Increased confidence was also observed among the young evaluators as they demonstrated better eye contact, speaking less quietly and learning to listen more carefully.

Some of the young interviewees commented that it was good to be interviewed by other young people, as the questions were easy to understand. Respondents were open with their answers but were less willing to communicate more complex thoughts and feelings. The young evaluators had some difficulties maintaining the concentration of younger interviewees and in these instances the mentor was able to support the young evaluator in getting interviews back on track.

Analysis and reporting

Once the interviews had been completed we held an analysis session with the young evaluators. During this session the young evaluators referred to the mentor's interview notes, listened to tape recordings where necessary and worked in their groups to attempt to analyse the findings. The adult research team had done some preparatory work to identify some of the common themes that were emerging from the interviews, and the young evaluators worked in small groups around these themes to analyse the findings. This proved a particularly difficult exercise for the young evaluators as we had limited time for the session. The session had to be held at the end of the school day and it also coincided with Ramadan and so many of the children were fasting.

Although some progress was made during the session, the work had to be completed by the adult research team.

The young people then worked together with the mentors to produce a short presentation which they gave to all of the Children's Fund project partners and the mayor of Tower Hamlets Council in the council boardroom. The young people prepared the presentations themselves — with one group choosing to carry out a mock interview to demonstrate the skills they had learned and another group acting out a role-play to discuss their experiences of the evaluation. The presentation went extremely well and a couple of the young evaluators even fielded questions from some of the project partners. One of my lasting memories of the project is observing the young people confidently talking to the Mayor of Tower Hamlets about their experience of the evaluation while they and the Mayor tucked into a large bowl of jelly and ice cream.

Reflections on the experience

Having been involved in a number of research projects where children and young people were involved as interview respondents, I was keen to learn what added value a participatory approach could bring to an evaluation. My experience was that it was more the participatory process itself. It was the impact of this process on both the young evaluators and the research team — rather than the quality of the data received — which was the most valuable aspect of the approach.

Benefits for the young evaluators

The young evaluators benefited in a number of ways through their involvement in the research; ways that were both observed by the mentors and described by the young evaluators in their diaries. This included an increased understanding of research and improved interview skills. Alongside this mentors and project workers noticed an increase in confidence and communication skills. By visiting other projects the young evaluators learnt more about the Children's Fund program and met a range of new people including children from different cultural backgrounds and children with disabilities. The young evaluators were also exposed to a number of new situations including presenting findings to adults in the boardroom of Tower Hamlets Council where they could directly feed their findings back to key stakeholders.

Benefits for the adult researchers

For every member of the research team the project was an exhilarating experience. None of the research team had experience working with children and young people and so this was new for us all. Apart from learning about mentoring young people and the practical aspects of accompanying them to undertake the research, it was also a very valuable experience to work alongside the young evaluators in the design, implementation, analysis and reporting of this qualitative research. Personally it was one of the most rewarding and enjoyable projects I have worked on and I feel I am a much more skilled researcher as a result of my involvement. It helped me learn to describe and communicate research concepts and methodologies in a simple and accessible way and taught me a great deal about appropriate ways of engaging children and young people in the research process.

Challenges

We faced some major challenges with the research. The most significant of these was that the data generated through the peer interviews often lacked depth and the quality was at times poor. As a result, this type of participatory research approach might better lend itself to quantitative methodologies where young people have a more structured framework within which to work. It is also fair to say that as the majority of our time and resources were invested in building relationships and supporting the young evaluators, less time was invested in developing methodologies to engage the young interviewees. In retrospect we might have used a range of methods, other than just interviews, to engage the young interviewees in the research such as drawing and photos.

Maintaining the interest and engagement of the young evaluators was also a challenge. We found that involving them at all stages in the research process helped to maintain their interest, and giving them as much time as possible to actually carry out the interviews was important. The analysis stage of the research was particularly challenging and was probably the least enjoyable part of the project for the young evaluators. Exploring more child-friendly ways of undertaking qualitative analysis rather than using the traditional thematic analysis technique used in this project would have been valuable.

Another factor that impacted on this was that in our initial plan we had underestimated the amount of time required to build relationships with the young evaluators and prepare them for the research process. As we were also working to the short timeframe of the funders we had limited time towards the end of the process to pull together and report on the findings, and this determined the timing of our analysis session. One of the key lessons from the evaluation was the need to allow sufficient

time in the research plan to enable these relationships and support to be developed and maintained throughout the project. Overall the research was extremely resource-intensive and our original budget did not realistically reflect the amount of time and effort spent on the project. It is a challenge for both funders and researchers with this type of research to reflect the true costs in both commissioning and budgeting for the research.

The practical issue of getting young people to and from interviews was a challenge for the research team and a significant amount of additional time was needed for this. A flexible approach was required at all stages and working at the weekends was essential. At first we had tried to organise visits through the young people's project workers but this created problems and in the end direct contact between the young people and mentor was a more effective way of organising project visits. However, this placed an additional burden on the research team.

Some strong relationships developed between the young researchers and mentors and in some cases it was difficult to manage these relationships coming to an end. On reflection it would be important to plan an exit strategy for similar research projects to ensure that the children and young people are not negatively impacted by the research coming to an end. We were lucky that we were able to work with the young evaluators on a subsequent project with Tower Hamlets Council and I think, where possible, it is important to create opportunities for young people involved in participatory research to continue to use the skills they have learned.

In conclusion I would say that the benefits of this evaluation approach far outweighed the challenges we faced as a research team. The positive impact of the research on the young people, researchers and

on the Tower Hamlets Children's Fund program more than justified the resources invested. The process was a clear demonstration of one of the guiding principles of the Children's Fund program (participation) and although the evaluation findings generated by the peer research were fairly basic, the process added value both to the local Children's Fund program itself as well as to the wider program evaluation. Through close involvement in the peer research process, the research team gained an insight into the projects, the community and the lives of the young project recipients which a more traditional evaluation approach would not have provided. This led to a richer and more meaningful evaluation report as the research team had a much deeper understanding of the environment in which the program was being implemented.

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Reflection 1

Sue Dockett

This paper reports the involvement of children and young people in a local evaluation of the implementation of the UK Children's Fund project in Tower Hamlets, in London's East End. The paper describes the significant involvement of children and young people in the project itself and the evaluation of the project.

A major focus of the paper is the strategies and approaches taken to engage children and young people in the project evaluation, effectively training them to conduct much of the data collection, analysis and reporting under the guidance of mentors. Some of the challenges identified within this process included:

- Presenting the proposal for evaluation to a group of children and young people (aged 5–13 years), who selected the evaluators (itself an important element)
- Training sessions for young evaluators (15 children and young people aged 10–13 years)
- Developing a discussion guide for use by the young evaluators
- Engaging the young evaluators in processes of data analysis
- Data analysis — this seemed to be the least interesting for young evaluators and most challenging for researchers.

The strategies used by the project team to meet these challenges were innovative and responsive. In particular, the involvement of children and young people in the design, implementation, analysis and reporting of

the research reflected a genuine commitment to engagement across the entire research process, rather than at specific, adult-identified points. A notable example of this is the notion of the research team effectively having to 'pitch' their plans to a group of children and young people, with this group then making the decision about who would conduct the evaluation and how. However, it also raises some questions — including those related to whether the children and young people had sufficient background in research to be able to make informed decisions.

The continued involvement of children and young people throughout the project was connected to the development of strong supportive relationships with the researchers. The presence of mentors to support the children and young people as they conducted interviews, liaise with project workers and provide both briefing and debriefing sessions for interviewers provided a solid basis for the children and young people to extend their skills and actively engage in the evaluation. Such relationships also provided a challenge for those involved in the project — what happened when the mentor support ceased and the project ended?

This project has a number of implications for practice as we seek to engage with children in varied research contexts. Of particular importance are the following:

- The reality of researching with children and young people is that it is a time-consuming, resource-intensive, often 'messy' process that requires considerable time and commitment to work through with different agencies (such as project workers), talk with children and young people, provide briefing and debriefing sessions, organise travel and provide ongoing support. All of these aspects are critical to building strong and responsive relationships with children and young people.



- Involving children and young people across all aspects of projects is an admirable aim. However, it needs to be supported with opportunities for skill development — for example in data analysis. What are suitable strategies for data analysis where children and young people can have an active role and where the analysis is of sufficient depth and rigour to have the research taken seriously? How do we strike a balance between involvement across all aspects of the project, and expecting children and young people to have all the skills and expertise necessary to undertake this? Can we expect the least experienced members of the research team (children and young people) to have responsibility for all aspects of research?
- Building strong, supportive relationships with children and young people can be the basis of their ongoing engagement in research. Given the commitment to developing such relationships, equal attention should be directed to appropriate exit strategies when projects (and therefore the relationships) come to an end.

Reflection 2

Tim Moore

It gives me great pleasure to reflect on Andrew Anderson's reflection of a program evaluation conducted in Tower Hamlets in the East End of London. In this brief reflection I hope to identify some of the key messages that arose for me as a youth worker and researcher with experience in working with vulnerable children and young people. These observations are made as a rookie who continues to grapple with many of the professional, ethical and methodological issues that arise when conducting research with and for children and young people and are informed by my own learnings, successes and failings within this often complex but exciting research environment.

Brief summary of the research context

Andrew's research project was conducted in Tower Hamlets, a culturally diverse and economically deprived community in London. It attempted to evaluate how a range of services was being provided to children and young people in the area. The project engaged children early in the life of the project, in fact before Andrew's team were formally involved children assessed the suitability of research teams and helped to select the successful tenderer. Children and young people were engaged as peer researchers and helped design and deliver a series of interviews with children who had received service from local programs. These peer researchers were assisted by an adult 'mentor' who provided them transport, briefing, debriefing and encouragement and who acted as a scribe during interviews. Children were involved at all stages of the research project, analysing data and presenting findings. Tools were

developed by young people themselves, with children choosing to use child-friendly and child-centred methods for conducting the research and presenting its findings. Participants appreciated learning new skills, in working with others and in developing new relationships.

Points of impress

Children and young people wanting to participate in research and the need to make opportunities accessible to all

In his paper, Andrew noted that his research team was surprised by the number of young people who expressed an interest in participating in their research process. This mirrors my own experience — that young people often are intrigued by research projects and often want to ‘suss out’ why adults are interested in their view; that young people want to be part of projects that they believe will make a difference in the lives of others; and that when their fears about the process of research (i.e. their capacity to talk to people, issues of illiteracy, concerns about how information might be used) are allayed they are often keen to participate and, in fact, to ‘pathfind’ a multitude of other young people who are interested in participating.

Balancing meaningful participation and the need for robust research outcomes

In his paper, Andrew notes that the value of his team’s learning about how to best engage children and work with them in a research context and the benefits that children and adult researchers gained as a result of their involvement far outweighed the data that was collected through it:

My experience was that it was more the participatory process itself and the impact of this process on both the young people and the research team rather than the quality of the data received, which was the most valuable aspect of the approach.

This is an interesting and important point and is an observation that could be made of a number of projects that engage children and young people.

Having completed similar projects, I am interested in the inherent challenge that this poses and the important question that must be asked: ‘what are we willing to sacrifice to maximise young people’s participation in research, either the robustness of the research methodology or the impact that the research can achieve post completion?’

For me, this question must be seen alongside the ethic of beneficence — the need to ensure that children and young people, both individually and as a collective, benefit from children and young people’s participation in the research.

On one hand, by maximising children’s involvement in a project we are providing them with opportunities and skills and the capacity to influence change. However, on the other hand, by having children who may not have the skills or capacity to research their peers, are we missing an invaluable opportunity to identify and respond to key issues of concern for children and young people themselves? In the case of Andrew’s study, children were ‘open with their answers but were less willing to communicate more complex thoughts and feelings’ and were also less able to analyse data than what had been envisaged, which meant that the information they presented to key decision-makers may also have been limited. This may be of concern as this process was

primarily to ascertain the effectiveness of the Children Fund's program objectives, which was to reach and support the most vulnerable and families within the community.

As such the benefit for children and young people in the services that were being evaluated may have been compromised by the benefit received by the young people who gained from the experience of being a researcher in this project. This is not to claim that the benefit of one group has lesser or greater value but we need to further explore how we get this balance right so that we can have the greatest impact for as many young people as possible.

Elements of good practice

Although Andrew notes the challenges of engaging children as researchers and in their involvement in the analysis of data, the value of meaningfully involving children throughout the research process is evident. I was particularly struck by children's engagement in determining which research team would 'win' the project — it is hard to bluff one's skills or commitment to children's inclusion when confronted by a mob of discerning kids — and wonder whether this should be built into other research processes.

Also, the importance and power of relationship was highlighted. My experience would be that children often need to feel safe and to be assured that their input is valued before they will actively participate. Providing encouragement to peer researchers also seems to be imperative, as many feel anxious about how adults perceive their skills. The gentle presence of the adult researcher seemed to be valued by children in Andrew's study.

Finally, Andrew's work provides the research community with new ideas on how to best disseminate research findings in a meaningful way. Giving kids the opportunity to present research to decision-makers directly was obviously valued by the children themselves and, through their direct involvement, may have meant that the findings were taken more seriously by an adult audience emotionally engaged through the children's participation.



2. Research with Children: Thinking about Method and Methodology

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As researchers engaged in research with children today, we are faced with an exciting range of methods. We have at our disposal — and have the opportunity to develop — methods capable of offering deep insight into children's experiences and perspectives. We can also seek out and develop methods that make research more enjoyable for and inclusive of children and young people. There is much to be said for the focus on methods in much of the literature on research with children and young people. However, the world of methods has become so fascinating and now offers such opportunity for innovation that we sometimes lose sight of *why we choose* particular methods and, more importantly, *how we use them*.

In this paper I want to explore the distinction between methods and methodology, which I define here as including theoretical perspective. I argue that this distinction is critically important in research with children. This paper does not outline the various methods I have used, but aims to grapple with some of the issues and dilemmas that arise

from my experience of researching with children. I argue that methods alone are incapable of facilitating children's positive involvement in research. Instead, I will suggest that it is *methodology* — and specifically rights-based, participatory methodology — that offers the potential to transform the way in which children are involved in research.

The first section of the paper examines the important distinctions between methods and methodology in research. I then explore how methodology can act to guide the way in which research is carried out, the choice and use of methods and, importantly, the power dynamics between children and researcher.

Method and methodology in research with children

The terms method and methodology are often used interchangeably and without precision. This is not a matter of mere semantics, but has important — and problematic — implications for the way we think about research. Method refers to the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyse data (Crotty 1998, p. 3). Methods are essentially tools — they are at the 'sharp end' of research. Methods are what children and young people experience directly when we ask them to participate in our research. Photovoice, body-mapping, dialogue boxes, problem-trees, drawings, mapping and group discussions and semi-structured interviews are examples of *methods* that I have used — and prefer. I cannot, however, claim that these methods necessarily or automatically 'work well' in research with children. Methods are chosen, and more importantly used, within a broader context. With some extreme exceptions, any method can be designed and used in a way that engages children and young people, respects their dignity and opinions, identifies them as stakeholders, ensures they feel some control over

their involvement in research and upholds their right to say no. When this occurs, I would argue that the method has worked well. Conversely, any method can be used in a way that treats children as the objects of research and leaves them feeling disillusioned.

Thus, methodology is important. Burnham et al. (2004, p. 4) define methodology as the principles and theoretical perspectives that underpin the research. These principles and theories come together as the research design (Crotty 1998, p. 7), which in turn shapes the choice of methods and the ways in which methods are used. The methodology adopted in research with children is all-important — more so, I would suggest, than methods. In designing our research methodology, we need to confront the ‘assumptions about reality that we bring to our work. To ask about these assumptions is to ask about our theoretical perspective’ (Crotty 1998, p. 2). In research with children, bringing our assumptions to the fore is crucial. For, as Alderson and Morrow (2004, p. 22) argue, we ‘cannot avoid holding beliefs or theories about what children are and ought to be like’. These beliefs shape the *approach* we take to research and the *methods* we choose. More importantly, our beliefs shape the ways in which we *use* our chosen methods. It is the underlying methodology that determines the children’s place within research and the way in which the researcher positions themselves in relation to children.

Broadly speaking, I try to put into practice a methodology generally described as rights-based, participatory research. My thinking about methodology has been greatly influenced by the work of Judith Ennew (1994; Ennew and Milne 1996; Ennew and Boyden 1997), Virginia Morrow (1998, 2001, 2008; Morrow and Richards 1996) and Priscilla Alderson (1995; Alderson and Morrow 2004).

How does methodology matter?

In 2005–06 I was involved in a study of children’s views and experiences of physical and emotional punishment. There were 3322 children and young people participating in the research across nine countries (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Mongolia, Hong Kong, South Korea, Indonesia, the Philippines and Fiji).² A team of nationally-based researchers was responsible for undertaking the research in each country and involving children in a meaningful and respectful way. Given the large scale and complex nature of the research — and the importance of data being comparative across countries — a research support team was established. I provided support and worked closely with research teams in Fiji, the Philippines and South Korea. An early role of the support team was to develop, in close collaboration with the national teams, a regional research protocol and to subsequently support the development of national protocols to be used by each national team (see Beazley et al. 2005).

The approach adopted was rights-based and participatory. Two key principles underpinned the research design: first, research methods should be rigorous and facilitate children’s right to express their views; and second, the research must meet certain ethical challenges (Beazley et al. 2006, p. 22). We drew, in particular, on four articles of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* in designing the research protocol:

- Article 12: Children’s right to express opinions on matters concerning them

2. The children participating in this study were aged between five and 17 years, with 46% boys and 54% girls. Children came from rural and urban settings. The research sought children’s and young people’s views and experiences of punishment in different settings: home, school, residential institutions and within the community. For details of the study, see Beazley et al. (2006).

- Article 13: Children's right to express their views in the way they wish
- Article 3.3: Children's right to the highest quality services, which we took to include research
- Article 36: Children's right to protection from all forms of exploitation, which we took to include protection from exploitation through research processes and through dissemination of information.

While children were not involved in collecting data, stakeholder meetings of children were held in each country prior to the commencement of the research. At these meetings, children were involved in identifying research priorities and questions, and discussing possible methods. In some countries, for example Fiji, children's reference groups supported and advised the national research team. In this case the children's reference group worked well, in part because the members of the reference group had existing professional relationships with the research team, and trust had been established over time. The use of children's reference groups does, however, raise some difficult issues that go to the heart of quandaries about the participation–protection nexus. Our research on children's experiences and views of punishment raised confronting issues and involved discussions of violence and sometimes abuse. As a team, we found it difficult to come to an agreement on whether we should withhold some data and discussion of some issues from the reference group. What some saw as protection, others saw as paternalism. There are no clear or easy answers, but a sound methodology underpinned by the four rights outlined above provides a way to consider and balance the arguments on either side. A rights-based approach demands that the children's right to express an opinion is taken seriously, as are other rights that arise in the

research process. Moreover, from a rights-based perspective, all children and young people involved in the research process are bearers of human rights, which must be respected.

As our punishment research unfolded, the methodology became important in two ways. First, the emphasis on methodology brought differing beliefs and theories about children to the fore. In one country (which I will call Country Z) the national team was strongly influenced by what they described as cognitive–development approaches. While there are multiple methodologies and standpoints within any particular discipline, in this instance, the approach of the Country Z team translated into a rather conservative view on children's role and agency within research. While neither was right nor wrong per se, the underlying theoretical assumptions adopted by the national team sat uneasily with the rights-based participatory approach that was adopted in the regional research protocol. Significantly, the point of dispute was not the methods themselves, but the way in which they were used. The Country Z team was more inclined than other teams to conduct the research in conditions that resembled school examinations and were uneasy in giving children a choice of methods. The Country Z team was also reluctant to allow children to draw their own body maps (usually done by one child tracing around another on a large sheet of paper), but preferred to use printed outlines of adults' bodies. The development of a clearly stated research methodology by no means resolved the differences in approach — but they did make clear the divergent perspectives and led to robust discussion of the ethical implications. Without a clearly stated methodology, it is unlikely that the way in which the Country Z team planned to use various methods would have become a focus on attention and debate. The implications for children's involvement would have gone unnoticed.

Second, the rights-based, participatory methodology provided national research teams with considerable flexibility to respond to challenges in the field and to ensure that methods were used in a way that reflected children's rights to express their views in a way of their choosing. For example, despite common assumptions, some children in the Fiji study felt uncomfortable drawing. Some were self-conscious, while others felt that it was a test to determine whether or not they could draw the correct image (Save the Children Fiji 2006). A tool that we had considered appropriate to all countries, despite the social, economic, political and cultural differences, proved not to be so. The methodology allowed the national team to decide not to use that tool, or to amend it.

Among the methods included in the regional protocol was a 'protection' tool. The original intention was that children would be given a picture of an umbrella, which was divided into five segments. On each of the segments, children were invited to write:

1. The person you love most
2. What you are best at
3. What makes you feel safe
4. Your happiest memory
5. If I were president/prime minister/party chair I would ...

This method was used at the end of the research and, beyond providing data, aimed to encourage children to think about positive things in their lives at the completion of research on confronting issues. Generally, the protection tool worked well and the data collected demonstrated the positive things in children's lives. However, there were some unexpected issues. The national research team in the Philippines first raised a problem with the choice of visual stimulus. While umbrellas are used to protect

people from sun and rain, in the Philippines they are also used to beat children. Children do not necessarily equate umbrellas with protection. Thus, in the Philippines we used a 'protection jacket' rather than a protection umbrella. The methodology necessitated that the specific method be changed.

In this research, the methodology did not resolve all of the dilemmas that arose, but did give a sound framework for identifying and responding to dilemmas that may have otherwise gone unnoticed, but which had important implications for children's involvement in and experiences of the research.

Methodology as a basis for decision-making

In 2005, I undertook a commissioned study of children's views and experiences of the care and protection system in an Australian jurisdiction. In designing the research, I aimed to use rights-based, participatory research, based on the principles outlined above. The study included children and young people aged between eight and 24 years of age. The commissioning agency was keen to have a young researcher participate in the research process.

Michael Crotty (1998, p. 2) suggests that when designing research we need to justify our choice of methodology and methods and, in doing so, confront the 'assumptions about reality that we bring to our work'. When the involvement of a young researcher was raised I was enthusiastic about the idea and certainly made no effort to justify it. Involving young researchers in research with children and young people is generally considered a means of ensuring a more authentic and direct form of youth involvement. This was an assumption that I held without challenge

and, with the benefit of hindsight, without even acknowledging it. The young researcher was a skilled facilitator in his late teens. His involvement in several group discussions was extremely valuable. It became apparent as the research unfolded, however, that not all participants were entirely comfortable with a researcher of their own age and social group. More specifically in this case, some younger children felt uneasy with the idea of an adolescent researcher. The involvement of young researchers does not *necessarily* overcome issues of power and possible discomfort on the part of participants. It should also be said that, equally, not all young research participants are comfortable with an adult researcher. Ideally, and however difficult it is to achieve in practice, a genuinely rights-based and participatory approach would provide young research participants with some choice about the researcher.

What was important in this case, however, was that the methodological approach forced attention to the issue and directed us to a response that prioritised the concerns of the child participants. This experience highlighted to me the importance of justifying the approach taken, and being aware of and responsive to the concerns of the research participants.

The involvement of young researchers can greatly enhance research with children and young people, but is not *always* welcomed by young research participants. It may also be an unsatisfactory experience for the young researchers. Based on my limited experience in working with young researchers (I have done so in only two projects), it is crucial that they be given adequate financial compensation, sufficient training, and support and mentoring before, during and after the research. While young researchers should be valued as equal members of a research team, it should also be recognised that extra support is necessary. In practice, however, it seems that the necessary support is not always forthcoming or adequately built into funding provisions. A rights-based methodology and

an insistence on justifying our choices focuses attention not only on why we might involve young researchers but also how.

Choosing and using methods

If methodology is important in creating the principles and approach of our research, how does it assist us in choosing — and more importantly using — methods? In my experience, mixed methods are best able to provide rigour and facilitate children's rights to express their views in a manner of their choosing. Multiple and mixed methods give deeper insights into children's perspectives and experiences. It also allows for crosschecking methods and, consequently, more robust findings (see Darbyshire et al. 2005; Punch 2002; Morgan et al. 2002). This was certainly our experience in the study of children's experiences of punishment.

Mixed methods also give children an opportunity to select the methods that they like and want to use. For example, in a current research project with children aged between three-and-a-half and five years, I have used a mix of methods, including group discussions, drawings, mapping and photovoice. During one session, three four-year-old boys actively participated in the group discussion and in the photovoice, but said they did not feel like drawing and left the research to play elsewhere. Alternative activities were provided, to ensure that children had a choice about involvement in the research and could exercise 'informed dissent' (see Bessell 2006; Boyden and Ennew 1996) by simply moving to another activity. About ten minutes later, two of the boys returned and said they now felt like drawing and wanted to be involved, the third said that drawing was still boring and continued to play away from the research. As Darbyshire et al. (2005) notes, mixed methods give children at least partial control over the research process.

Methodology and power

The research methodology and the methods chosen have the potential to either compound or alleviate the unequal power relations between an adult 'professional' researcher and a child participant. It would, however, be naive to suggest that specific methods or broader research methodology can overcome deeply entrenched power hierarchies that shape child–adult relations generally. Samantha Punch (2002) has argued that children lack experience in interacting with adults as equals. The accuracy of this statement was brought home to me during my 2005 research on children and young people's views about the care and protection system.

One 11-year-old boy (I will refer to him here as R) was keen to participate, but was quite 'shy'. Dialogue boxes seemed to be an appropriate method, so I explained to him the way dialogue boxes work and asked him how he felt about filling in the boxes. R liked the look of it and wanted to have a go. This 'shy', 'reserved' young man then filled in sixteen pages of dialogue boxes (with eight call-out boxes on each page), reaching for a new sheet as he finished each one. The more he wrote, the more enthusiastic he became about having his say on the issues that were important to him. As R sat enthralled in his task, I quietly congratulated myself on choosing such a successful method. Then, towards the end of the session, R looked up from his writing, glanced at the boxes he had completed laying on the table beside him and asked hesitantly 'Is this OK?' My self-congratulations melted away. Children rarely have the experience of engaging with a task involving an adult that does not have a 'right' and a 'wrong' way of doing things. The adjudicator on what is right and what is wrong is usually the adult. The dialogue boxes worked well, but a 'good' method — even when thought has been given to

the overall methodology — is insufficient to break down the unequal relations that exist between child participant and adult researcher. Rights-based, participatory methodology does, however, help us to explicitly recognise power issues and has the potential to hand some power to research participants.

Analysis as part of method

As discussed, Crotty (1998, p. 6) describes research methods as the activities that 'we engage in so as to *gather and analyse* our data'. This connection between data collection and analysis is particularly important in research with children. My first research with children was in the mid-1990s, when I was carrying out research on child labour in Indonesia for my doctoral dissertation. I began using drawings almost accidentally. Having little experience in research with children, I had no idea how to interpret or analyse the drawings, except by asking children to explain to me what they meant.

In the ten years since, I have maintained — and indeed strengthened — the view that methods are the starting points for conversations and engagement with children and young people, rather than ends in themselves. This is exemplified in my study with children aged between three-and-a-half and five years old, which explored their views about long-day care and preschool. Among the methods used in that study, children were invited to show what they liked most about preschool/child care by drawing a map or a picture or taking a photograph of their favourite things or activities. Once complete, children talked to me about their maps, drawings or photos, and explained what each meant. Without the explanation from children, the maps, drawings and photos would have meant little to me and I would have missed many important

nuances — and sometimes key messages — had I tried to ‘interpret’ the drawings and photos without children’s input.

To illustrate the point, when invited to draw a picture of the things he likes about child care, one boy (B) drew two pictures. He showed me the first, which was clearly a picture of an apple. B said that it was indeed a red, shiny apple. I had discussed mealtimes and morning tea earlier with other children, when they usually have fresh fruit. Clearly, I thought, this picture was about morning tea and B likes apples most. After some discussion, it became clear that B did not like apples to eat and never had them for morning tea. He simply liked drawing them. After a discussion about the apple, and the fact that it looked like a balloon when turned upside down, B turned to his second drawing. This one is not about apples, he said, it’s about child care. He then proceeded, in great detail, to explain the forms of outdoor play he enjoyed (no mention of fruit). My own initial interpretation of the apple was a long way from B’s intended message.

In my experience, analysis of children’s perspectives must start at the time of data collection, particularly when more innovative methods are used. Participatory approaches to research direct us, at the stage of design, to build analysis into our data collection. To be fully credible, analysis needs to involve the child participants — the alternative is for adults to translate (and potentially mistranslate) children’s perspectives and inadvertently reinforce power inequalities.

Concluding comments

In recent years there has been considerable focus on the range of exciting and innovative methods that are available to researchers working with children. The development of methods that produce robust data and are enjoyable for children is most welcome. In my experience, however, no method is intrinsically ‘best’ for research with children and no method will ensure that children’s rights and dignity are respected during the research process. Thus, as researchers we need to justify why we choose particular methods and *how* we plan to use them. We need to clearly appreciate the distinction between method and methodology. Rights-based, participatory methodology offers the potential to design research that is respectful of children and of the highest quality. It is the careful design of methodology — rather than methods alone — that can facilitate children’s genuine involvement in research. Carefully designed methodology can also provide the means through which children can exert some control over the way they are involved in research and the way in which the data they provide is understood.

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Reflection 1

Sue Dockett

This paper is an important reminder of the difference between methods and methodology in research. The starting point for the paper is the argument that methods themselves do not facilitate children's involvement in research — rather it is the methodology (the principles and theories) underpinning the research which has this potential. In other words, the methods themselves are only likely to facilitate children's engagement in research if they are underpinned by methodologies committed to the active participation of children. To this end, the significance of rights-based, participatory methodology is highlighted.

To illustrate the significance of the distinction between methods and methodology, Bessell provides an overview of an international study of children's views and experiences of physical and emotional punishment. In this study children were involved in helping to identify research priorities and questions, and in discussion relating to the use of possible methods. Children's reference groups were an important element in this involvement. From the study, implications are drawn about:

- The nature of the interface between research teams and such reference groups
- Issues relating to research conducted by multiple research teams and the importance of research teams exploring the ways in which methodologies influence the implementation of methods

- The importance of flexibility across contexts and the influence of those contexts on local relevance and interpretations of both method and methodology.

The paper provides some clear examples of the ways in which consideration of methodology influences the methods employed and provides a means for research teams to identify, discuss and work through a range of research dilemmas. There is a strong message that methods themselves are insufficient to promote children's research engagement in meaningful and relevant ways. Following from this are the notions that not all methods will be appropriate for all children, and that there is potential for any method to be used in ways that actively engages with children, respects them, identifies them as stakeholders and provides opportunities for them to exercise control. Conversely, there is the potential for any method to be used in ways that do not promote children's active engagement, demonstrate appropriate respect, recognise the significance of their input or provide opportunities for the exercise of choice or control. Clearly, in any research involving children and young people, there is a need to examine methodology — the assumptions, principles and theoretical perspectives that underpin our research — as well as the methods to be employed.

This paper provides a number of implications for practice. Of particular importance are:

- The establishment of research protocols within and across research teams, providing opportunities for reflection as well as time to identify, work through and understand a range of methodological issues.

- Recognition that research with children and young people must be underpinned by methodologies that emphasise children's rights to be consulted and to participate in matters that impact upon them.
- Awareness that without such methodologies, methods can become 'gimmicks' that do little to value and respect the engagement of children and young people.
- Realisation that a focus on methodology will not necessarily solve or resolve all research issues which emerge during specific projects. However, the focus on methodology does provide a context in which many issues can be identified, discussed and responded to.



Reflection 2

Judy Cashmore

The paper by Sharon Bessell highlights the importance of respect and recognition for children's views and the importance of a relational approach, starting from a rights-based framework. Bessell discusses the duty of adult researchers to structure both the research experience and the means by which children can provide meaningful input into that process. Like Bessell and Gal (2006), this paper is underpinned by the concept of children as recognised bearers of rights with competencies and legitimate views and experiences.

Bessell's paper focuses on the methodology and methods for conducting research with children, and particularly cross-cultural research about children's experiences. Bessell draws a clear distinction between research methods — what the children are asked to do — and methodology — the philosophical approach of the researcher underpinned by the principles, theoretical approach and the researcher's view of children and what assumptions are made about their need for protection over participation. An important point Bessell makes is that any method can be designed and used in a way that engages children and is respectful or in a way that treats them simply as 'objects of research' that 'leaves them feeling disillusioned'. What matters is an overall approach that respects children and sees them as capable participants and avoids making assumptions that restricts their participation or is not sensitive to different cultural interpretations and individual differences.

Bessell provides several examples — from a large-scale study across nine countries concerning children's experience of physical and emotional

punishment that highlighted the dangers of assumptions about the meaning of particular symbols (umbrella as 'protective') and an Australian study about children's presumed comfort with peer researchers or with particular methods (drawing). She advocates the value of multiple and mixed methods and of checking with children their interpretations of their drawings and other forms of responses. She also highlights the differences in the approach of researchers in the cross-cultural study that emerged in the way they conducted the research while using similar tools and attributed a more structured approach in Country Z to particular beliefs about children's capacities and the influence of cognitive developmental theory rather than a rights-based, participatory approach. While 'old-style' cognitive developmental theory is more rigid than the more recent developmental theory, especially in terms of younger children's perceived capacities, it is not clear that it is necessarily contrary to a 'rights-based, participatory approach' although the definition of this term is not explicit in this paper.

Whether or not to keep certain information about sensitive areas from children was also a contentious issue for Bessell in relation to the children's consultation role in the cross-national study on children's experiences of punishment, but one that Bessell argues is more transparent and balanced in consideration if children's rights to express an opinion is taken seriously.

In summary, this interesting paper highlights the principles of recognition, respect and flexibility in working with children and involving them in research. Beyond that, there is still much more to be learnt about the issues that concern and matter to children and young people — and these need to be included on the research agenda.

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3. Participating in Research: What's it Really Like for Kids?

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Introduction

I have been involved in a number of participatory research projects with children and young people, which varied in their methodologies, methods and research settings, and involved children and young people of ages ranging from seven to 18 years. As a result of this work, I am interested in addressing the issues that surround the experience of participatory research and the potential contrast in the proposed value of participatory research for children and young people and the actual reality of the experience for them.

This paper is a series of personal reflections on the experience of implementing participatory research projects and some of the perceived points of breakdown for children and young people who become involved. It also identifies gaps in the literature on participatory research which include the response of children and young people to this kind of research from their experience of participating in it, and the relationship between the articulated ambitions for this kind of research in children's lives and the reality of it from children's perspectives.

Background

Engaging children and young people in participatory research is done in the belief that it is inherently 'a good thing' for knowledge and for children and young people. These constitute some of the fundamental assumptions that lie behind this kind of research (Graue and Walsh 1998; Prout and James 1990; Qvortrup 1990). Participatory research is unquestionably 'a good thing' for our knowledge of children and childhood but in relation to the benefit to children and young people — especially those who participate — this is less certain.

In discussing participatory research, the literature cites real benefits for children and young people such as boosting personal skills and self-esteem, or empowering children in their own lives (e.g. Kellett 2004, 2005). However, many projects would find it difficult to defend these benefits as outcomes of the research for the children and young people who participate and it is rare that projects include the step of asking participants to evaluate the actual process of the research that they participated in.

The dilemmas and complexities of participatory research are methodological, ethical and practical, and, in resolution, may not lead to particularly positive experiences for children and young people — or to identifiable benefits. Well before reaching the point where children and young people become involved in a research exercise, there are many processes that undermine the potential benefit of research to children and young people as well as minimising the potential access children and young people may have to participate in research. Processes such as obtaining ethics approval, recruitment and consent have enormous power over the research that is conducted and power over which groups of children can participate and in what capacity.

For example, obtaining ethical approval for participatory studies can be a battle that is hard fought and won with ethics bodies. Whatever regulatory or legislative environment researchers and ethics bodies are operating within, it is likely that ethics bodies will make a conservative interpretation and the researchers will make a liberal interpretation of what is recommended in any guidelines. Ethics bodies will be concerned principally with minimising risk and the researchers will be concerned principally with the potential benefit to knowledge and to children of their research.

It is not that ethics bodies are not mindful of benefit and researchers are not mindful of risk but there can be a great disparity in the perception of both. In the cases where these two positions are not closely aligned, reaching a compromise can require altering the fundamental characteristics of the project, such as the age of participants approached in the study, or the type of consent that is adopted and who has to give it. These changes can result in the exclusion of groups of children from participating in the research. In effect this process has enormous power over the research that is conducted, and over children's participation.

Defending and justifying the conceptual premise of the research, and negotiating the complexities of obtaining ethics approval, access and approval from all relevant gatekeepers are all levels of checks and approvals that have implications for the benefit of the research for children and young people and their capacity to participate in it. These are major areas for consideration and discussion in participatory research but they are not the focus of this paper, which is interested in children's experience of participatory research.

For children and young people it is the points at which they come in contact with the research project that counts most in their experience.

Hopefully many research projects will have been able to involve children and young people in the design and development of the project. However it is not always possible to do this, with children and young people often participating in the project for the first time at the point of data collection. Some projects manage to involve children in the synthesis and analysis of data but again this is not always possible due to pragmatic constraints such as time, access and resource limitations. Even if children and young people have been involved in the whole process it is not always the same group of children that participate all the way through.

In the end participatory research encompasses a wide spectrum of research methodologies and methods which potentially vary greatly in their participatory components and value to children as participants. I am aware that some of the considerations that will be discussed here are probably associated with only some participatory methodologies rather than all participatory projects. However, I do not think this undermines the value of raising these issues.

Questions that this paper will discuss to a limited extent include:

- Are the benefits of participatory research for children a reality? How should 'benefit' be understood?
- If participatory research does not result in a positive experience for children and young people, is it still a valuable opportunity for them?
- How can children's experiences of participatory research be used to inform participatory research, researchers and the bodies and gatekeepers involved in research projects?

Are the benefits of participatory research for children a reality? How should 'benefit' be understood?

At the heart of this question is the notion of how 'benefit' is defined and understood. The literature discusses two principal levels on which benefit for children and young people in participatory research projects potentially functions. First, the personal benefits for those children actually involved in the research project and second, the potential benefits to children and young people as a social group (Alderson 2005; Kellett 2005).

If the research project does not have the potential to benefit the wellbeing of children as a group then it should be questioned why the research is being conducted with children and young people at all (Alderson 2005).

Arguing for the collective benefit of the research outcomes for children and young people as a social group is likely to be easier than arguing for the benefits for the children and young people who actually participate in the research. In reviewing the preferred outcomes for children who participate in research as identified in the literature, the following commentators across many disciplines offer some suggestions: Alderson 1994, 2000, 2005; Christensen and James 2000; Farrell 2005; Graue and Walsh 1998; Greig and Taylor 1999; Grodin and Glantz 1994; Hart 1997; Hill, Laybourn and Borland 1996; Kellett 2004, 2005; Mauthner 1997; Mayall 2002; Morrow 2001; Pole et al. 1999; Punch 2002. These commentators suggest that participation and participatory research should be used to:

- Enhance children's personal skills, self-esteem and confidence to be more active participants in the rest of their lives
- Increase the capacity to contribute to their positive sense of self
- Empower children by developing their capacities to investigate, evaluate and act on issues they determine are important to them
- Increase children's awareness of and interest in valuing their own knowledge, understandings and insights
- Enrich their lives personally by being involved in a constructive experience which they enjoy, or by being personally transformed by it, or by finding satisfaction through helping others through the research.

Most of these are not modest ambitions or benefits and many participatory projects would have trouble evaluating them as outcomes for the participants in their projects. It is also not likely that researchers would use these outcomes as measures of the success of their project. So what is their function? Why articulate such ambitions and benefits? Who does it serve?

Even though the right of children to participate as social citizens in decisions and processes that affect their lives is enshrined by documents such as the *United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989), there is still an inherent self-consciousness amongst adult researchers which surrounds participatory research. There is still a need to justify children's involvement in research which has led to theorising about the benefits of participatory research for children and young people.

The resulting conceptual ideals represent adults' projections of their own aspirations for research with children and young people and have little basis in children's actual experience of research. It is an ambitious, almost arrogant claim that children who participate in a single qualitative or quantitative data gathering exercise as part of a participatory project will have benefited from this exercise in any estimable way, let alone at the levels of personal benefit discussed in the literature. However, this only becomes problematic in the face of adults' ambitions for participatory research. Children's understanding of sufficient reward may be quite different and it may be enough for children that the experience of participating in the research was positive and engaging.

Aiming to benefit children through participatory research both as individual participants and collectively should be an ambition of this kind of research, but the levels of benefit need to be more realistic and have a greater relation to the spectrum of participatory research that children may participate in. They also need to include children's perspectives on what they consider the benefits of participatory research from their experience as this will likely lead to a list of potential benefits which are much more real and meaningful in children's lives. Understanding children's perspectives on benefits will also provide adult researchers with new ways and depths of understanding as to how to engage with children and young people in research which is mutually beneficial, or at the very least provides a positive engaging experience.

If participatory research does not result in a positive experience for children and young people, is it still a valuable opportunity for them?

Any time children and young people are involved in a research project there is potential for either a positive or a negative experience for the children involved. Fieldwork in a research project for example, can amount to problem-solving on the run and is a section of the research process which researchers can struggle to control no matter how well planned, with the outcome being poor for the participants at times.

For example, an incident occurred in a research project I was involved in at a school where, unknown to the researchers, a member of staff had invested considerable time telephoning 150 families in a year group to receive verbal consent from parents for their children to participate in a survey, as the written consents had not been returned and she was worried that the response rate made the researchers' visit not worthwhile. The researchers arrived at the school the following day to conduct the survey. During the course of the introduction to the survey several of these children decided not to complete the survey.

In relation to the research, the researchers approached the exercise with the understanding that children's participation is voluntary and that they can withdraw at any point without retribution. The school however, made a different interpretation and decided that the children had inconvenienced the school and the researchers and put those children that had decided not to do the survey on recess and lunchtime detention. In a situation such as this, the researcher has limited authority to alter the outcome for participants. An argument can be made in defence of the children's actions about the voluntary nature of

participatory research but in the end the researchers are there as guests of the school, and it is the school that has the authority in the moment.

Clearly the capacity for the children's experience of participatory research to be positive or empowering in this instance was completely undermined. For those children caught up in this incident it would be impossible to argue that their experience of research had been of value to them, in fact it could even have contributed to children's disillusionment in this case. They were punished for exercising their right to choose. This was not only wrong in relation to the philosophy of participatory research, it was an extremely confusing message for the children involved. They were being invited to participate voluntarily and yet they were punished when they decided not to.

Of course, this is just a face value reading of this incident which really speaks to the difficulties of the contexts in which we recruit children to participate and the potential culture clashes that may occur, as in this instance. A school's culture is based on compliance and obedience and most of its daily routine will be mandatory for students rather than voluntary. The school's response to the students' behaviour in this incident was in-keeping with their culture and values.

It is naive to suggest that fieldwork can be made consistently problem-free but how should the potential experience of fieldwork — which can be positive or negative — be reconciled with the adult ideals of participation? Is participation in research valuable to children at potentially any cost? What is the opportunity we are really offering children when we invite them to participate in research? More effort needs to be made to understand this from children's perspectives.

From my own experience I do not doubt that children value the opportunity to participate in research, but I suspect that their

motivations and terms of reference as measures of success or failure and ours as adult researchers are quite different. Greater understanding of these differences would improve the experience for children, reducing the probability of negative outcomes.

In a recent qualitative study with children and young people in a children's hospital, I interviewed a number of seriously ill children who struggled emotionally with their interview from the moment they started it. The children were offered the opportunity to end the interview at any point but none of them chose to do this, arguing that they wanted to do it so the 'hospital could be a better place for other kids'.

In contrast to those who were strongly motivated to participate in this study, 50% of those children approached to participate, refused. There are many reasons why a child in a healthcare context might refuse to participate in research but if any of these reasons have to do with any aspect of the research process which could be altered, researchers and those that regulate research need to know. It was not possible to ask these children why they were refusing as this would quickly be interpreted as coercion. However, the research community does need to understand from children and young people how the process of research as it is perceived and experienced by them translates into their understanding of it and their desire, or not, to be part of it.

A better understanding of how children perceive the opportunity of participating in research grounds researchers' understanding and interpretation of events. It provides researchers with a tangible set of parameters from children's perspectives which can be used by them to improve the experience of participatory research. There is no need to imagine the reality of the experience and invent the value of it for children and young people and it serves no purpose doing so.

How can children's experience of participatory research be used to inform participatory research, researchers and the bodies and gatekeepers involved in research projects?

Assuming we, the research community, has become more conscientious about seeking children's feedback on their experience and perceptions of participatory research, how do we incorporate this knowledge in a feedback loop to the layers of authorities, gatekeepers and researchers involved in participatory research?

The incident described earlier with the children in the school environment highlights the complexity of contexts that often surround participatory research where there are competing ideologies and authorities which can clash when they are combined. In the context of a school, children's uses of time, occupation of space, choice of clothing, times of eating, playing and working, and even their modes of social interaction can be controlled by the school. This is the antithesis of the ethos of participatory research which is predicated on children being allowed to choose or refuse to participate as they see fit. However schools are frequently used as a place to recruit children and young people for participatory research projects because they are a natural catchment for large numbers of children. Not recognising the potential for a misfit under circumstances like these between the authority of the school and the ethos of participatory research maximises the potential for incidents such as the one described.

Bodies involved in participatory research are disparate and view this kind of research through different practical and philosophical lenses. At present there is only limited consensus on all aspects of this kind of research across the community, regulatory bodies and researchers. This

is likely to persist and it makes it difficult to recommend methods that could be used to allow feedback from children and young people to be used to inform the future of participatory research consistently. However, participatory research needs to be self-informing.

Historically, adults' conceptualisations of childhood have dominated notions of children's experience (Qvortrup 1990). Most of what we know about children in research comes from adults (Graue and Walsh 1998). Now as a result of the changes in research with children we increasingly have the opportunity to reshape notions and conceptualisations of children and childhood based on their own experience (Grover 2004; Prout and James 1990).

Participatory research provides the impetus and evidence for this change but it also stands to benefit from its own experience. Reconciling the idealised notion of what participatory research can be for children who participate with a more grounded reality can only benefit the efficacy of this research and its capacity to provide knowing insight into children's lives and lived experiences.

It can also only help to eliminate poor experiences and increase the benefit of this research in children's experiences. Maintaining inaccurate representations of children's experiences does not assist our understanding of children and childhood, nor does it assist children. The research community uses this as the argument for completing participatory research; we should also apply it to the ambitions of the process of participatory research itself.

One recommendation is for a greater degree of reflexivity in research methodologies employed in participatory research which allows greater insight from children's perspectives on the process of the research itself to become available for the benefit of researchers, regulatory bodies and

community groups. This is a recommendation for a methodological step to be included in participatory research projects generally. However, it could also be the focus of research itself. A comparative research project based on understanding the efficacy, benefit and value of a range of methodologies as approaches to research with children and young people — from their perspectives — could benefit all those involved in participatory research. The findings from this research could be used to assist researchers to understand how best to engage children and young people for the most mutually beneficial outcomes. It could also be used to assist regulatory bodies such as ethics committees to assess and evaluate potential participatory research projects.

Another recommendation is for research which is dedicated to understanding the perspectives of all those involved in participatory research. Through a dedicated research project, the perspectives of several key groups involved in a participatory research project such as the ethics bodies, researchers and children and young people could be understood. This would reveal the major challenges, concerns, benefits and value of this kind of research for each group. The results are likely to show both the motivations and barriers to the success of this research on a number of levels which could be used as a basis for recommendations for future participatory research that reflect the perspectives of all involved in the research process.

Both these recommendations could be used to improve the shared understanding of all groups involved in the participatory research process and possibly breakdown barriers and promote smoother working relationships.

Conclusion

Children have only recently been given the opportunity to speak for themselves in research (Barker and Weller 2003; James and Christensen 2000). Participatory research can be problematic, resource-intensive and can take more time to implement and execute than other forms of research. However, it provides an invaluable insight into children's lives — which is enormously beneficial to society's understanding of children's experiences — and increases the chances of being able to support the wellbeing of children and young people.

As part of the development of participatory research, the research community needs to conscientiously include children's and young people's perspectives on the experience of it to inform the practice and regulation of it. Without children's reflections on what this research is like to participate in, we as adult researchers cannot base our understanding of how best to proceed with this genre of research on the reality of children's experience. This undermines the strength and efficacy of participatory research and our capacity to use this research in children's lives to its greatest advantage.

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Reflection 1

Kaye Scholfield and Paul Collits

This paper addresses the issue of what benefits children involved in participatory research actually obtain from their involvement, both as individual participants and generally. The paper contrasts the theory of involving children in participatory research with the reality.

The paper highlights two examples of the practical difficulties related to involving children in participatory research. The experience of the unfortunate schoolchildren disciplined for not cooperating more with the researchers demonstrates how schools can have different agendas to those of the researchers. The paper's case study involving the children's hospital underlines just how difficult it can be for researchers to get a better understanding of how children perceive the benefits of research.

The paper argues that participatory research should aim to benefit children both individually and collectively. This is an important point and the paper correctly points out that 'benefit' needs further definition and that children's notions of 'benefit' need to be taken on board. More could be said here about some of the ways 'benefit' might be interpreted. This may be an issue for discussion at the Think Tank.

The paper makes a strong case for taking children's views into account in relation to their experience of research, and suggests that there are difficulties to be faced in doing this. The Think Tank provides an opportunity to consider how this matter might best be advanced.

The paper points out the reality that using children in participatory research is still very new. Yet the argument is that we can do a lot more to advance the experiences of children who are participating in research,

with potential benefit to all concerned. The two recommendations for action in the paper need to be fleshed out more.

The paper does not develop specific strategies for how this might best be achieved, and what doing this might mean for addressing some of the other key issues relating to children and youth in research. Finally, it would be of interest to know where in the overall mix of youth-in-research issues the question of benefits to children addressed by the paper fits in, and what weighting/priority should be given to this question. For example, much is made in the literature of notions of 'power' and 'voice'. Are these issues related to 'benefit', and how much? Is there a hierarchy of benefits to children of participating in research, and how would adult and children's conceptions of such a hierarchy differ?

The paper raises fascinating questions and the Think Tank will benefit considerably from teasing them out further. We have absolutely no quarrel with the argument that children's perspectives on the practice of their involvement in research can only improve outcomes for participants and researchers alike.



Reflection 2

Deborah Harcourt

Focus

This paper discusses researching with children seven to 18 years old. It discusses the premise that participatory research about children/childhood is good for our (adult) knowledge — but it is questionable whether it is good or beneficial for the children who participate. The literature suggests benefits may include boosting personal skills, self-esteem or empowering children but it is rare that projects are evaluated by children and therefore the 'benefits' are difficult to defend. The paper discusses the roadblocks or barriers to researching with children — particularly during ethics approval process, which ostensibly is to minimise risk by various gatekeepers/stakeholders. Limitations are evident in children's involvement in the research process, design, analysis and evaluation.

Relationship to own work

My focus has been with children two to seven years old. With Heather Conroy, we have focused on the informed assent processes and engaging children with the initial stages of the project. Our work has closely examined data collection tools — Singaporean children's strong command of literacy at a very young age enables them to 'speak' for themselves. This paper gives me an affirmation of children's understandings.

Points of impress

We are at a pausing point in research with children — there are many things for us to reflect upon and the benefit of research to children is one of them. The paper raises issues of concern about children's understanding of the research process: about research and about research processes. Have children been consulted over these issues?

The example given of the incurrence of a penalty for children who did not participate raises issues about how we communicate the research intention to others; about whether all participants (including the stakeholders/gatekeepers) have a shared philosophy about research with children; and about the 'spirit' of the research

The paper asks us at what cost do we embark upon research with children? Where do we draw the line? It asks if schools are the best sites/contexts for research with children. They are really the antithesis of the ethos of *participating* and could exacerbate potential problems we face in research by their very nature as a structured environment.

Summary

In summary, I would like to acknowledge what participatory research offers to the practice of research. The reality is that we are still learning and being informed about participatory research by conducting it. We are generating more accurate knowledge about children, childhood and their life worlds. The methodologies we employ in the process help us to inform further research. We need to seek opportunities for children's perspectives on the process of research by developing a 360-degree understanding of the research process.



4. Involving Young People in Research: Lessons from the 10MMM Project in South Western Victoria

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Manager, Partnerships and Projects

The paper outlines the 10MMM (Multi-Media Mayhem across 10 towns) project which commenced in 2002 in Southern Grampians Shire in rural Victoria. The project is an interagency initiative aimed at decreasing social isolation and stimulating the expression of a youth voice through multimedia tools (Brumby et al. 2007). It is a participatory research

3. The authors wish to acknowledge the contributions to the research behind this paper of Dr Robyn Eversole, Ms Susan Brumby, Ms Helen Lane, Dr Helen Marshall, Ms Leanne Watt and Dr Leone Wheeler, and especially all the young researchers who worked on the *Your Say* project.

project involving children and young people (aged 12–20) with RMIT University staff involved as mentors and observers.

The paper focuses in particular on the 2007–08 *Your Say* report as part of the Rural Young People, Technology and Wellbeing research project (Marshall et al. 2008), and on the issues raised by the involvement of young people as researchers in the project. The report focused on how young people's aspirations and social relationships are impacted by technology.

The results of the *Your Say* survey questioned some of the conventional wisdom surrounding use of information and communication technology (ICT).

The survey was undertaken by a group of young people who designed and implemented the survey. The training of young people as researchers raised some challenges: the ways cultural codes were managed, the extent of empowerment that took place, the benefits and limitations of using young people as researchers with extensive control over the project (e.g. related to validity of data), and strategies for implementing the current (final) phase of the project. There are important learnings that have occurred in this project, and the paper explores what worked and didn't work in 10MMM and how the key issues relating to the involvement of young people in research have been addressed.

Outline of the project

The 10MMM project relates to the experiences of young people in rural communities. The position of young people in rural communities has generally received attention in the context of rural youth out-migration

and the problems of disengaged young people (Collits 2007; Brumby et al. 2007). Rural young people are often researched 'on', 'about', or 'for' — not 'with' or 'by'. The project's current phase, funded by VicHealth, has sought to develop a research design where the agendas and processes are largely determined by the target group, with professional researchers acting as facilitators and advisors in a mentoring role (Eversole et al. 2006). The research has set out to investigate how technology impacts on rural young people and their aspirations, identifying questions such as:

- Who is 'included'?
- How does the use and encouragement of ICT and multimedia mitigate against a geographical, social and digital divide amongst young people?
- What are the implications of ICT use and access for the level of youth aspiration and participation in rurally isolated communities?
- What is the level of access to employment, technology, education and training?

The project team set about ensuring that the research and evaluation was carried out by young people with expert facilitation, to create a situation where everyone learns. An important aim was to achieve capacity and confidence building for participating young people — teaching them how to ask and answer research questions important to them and to advance the 'youth voice' reflecting the aims of the original 10MMM project (Eversole et al. 2006).

The first phase of the research was the *Your Say* survey, which was completed in 2007. The results of the survey were published in a report (Marshall et al. 2008) and the second and third phases of the research, which build upon

the learnings from the first phase, are now underway. The *Your Say* study has been youth-centred and youth-driven and aspires to address the questions or data which the young people wanted to explore.

General issues of youth in research

There are many issues relating to youth in research canvassed in the literature. Kirby (2004) identifies some of the advantages of including young people in research, some of which are discussed below. Clearly a number of them are relevant to 10MMM and the *Your Say* project:

- Young people may identify research opportunities that professionals may miss
- Young people are likely to ensure that research tools are worded in ways understandable to peers
- They may have different perspectives
- Their informal approach may put respondents at ease
- They are likely to have a better understanding of issues faced by young people
- They are actively involved in issues that affect them
- They recognise the contribution of young people.

However Clarke (2004) also addresses the issue of motivating young people to be involved, addressing the 'researcher'–'researched' relationship, skills development, barriers to participation and issues of empowerment.

Nevertheless, 10MMM's attempts to authentically reflect youth participation and voice finds resonance in Clark's (2004) observation

about the importance of involving young people genuinely in research, going beyond mere tokenism. Therefore, in establishing the research design, the practicalities of young people's involvement in research and the question of validity and reliability of the research need to be considered (Smith, Monahan and Broad 2002). This issue has been raised explicitly in relation to 10MMM, and this is discussed further below.

There is also the added dimension of undertaking youth-led research in a rural location where distance is an important issue. Distance only exacerbates some of the issues raised in the literature.

These questions have been central to the 10MMM project, and recognising them has benefited the project substantially. Additionally, the adult research team identified academic language and jargon as a barrier to participation of young people. Young people needed to understand what was meant by 'research'. Several ways of describing research were utilised by academics, and finally put simply as 'what do you want to find out' and 'to whom do you want to say it'.

The Victorian State Government Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee's *Inquiry into Retaining Young People in Rural Towns and Communities* report was seen by some as one way to advance the voice of rural young people (Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee 2006). The 10MMM young people considered that they were excluded from participating in this kind of democratic process by age, proximity, knowledge, and access to protocol and language. As Kirby has suggested, young people 'may have a different perspective' (2004).

Informal language and less formal research procedures were employed by 10MMM to overcome these issues. In relation to the use of language, the young people themselves wrote the survey questions for their peers, ensuring language that participants would understand. In one case, a press

release that was drafted by RMIT researchers was rewritten by the YouthBiz coordinator which acted as a filter to demystify jargon and make the language more accessible. The research team generally found that modifying language is much easier face-to-face than in written documents.

In relation to research procedures, a number of strategies were employed to make the research process itself more accessible. The setting was seen as important, hence research training sessions were conducted in the young people's space, food was generally provided, online formats (the tools of the young people) were used for the survey, the leadership camp was made into a fun experience in order to build trust as people got to know one another, the Survey Monkey questionnaire tool was perceived to be easily learned by the young people involved, and the research leader used informal engagement approaches.

Processes to ensure the young people's active involvement, though presenting some challenges, have been developed in the project. As a consequence, the young people's contribution to their community was nurtured by encouraging and supporting their involvement in this research — once again Kirby (2004) identified this as a positive outcome of involving young people in research.

Young People in the 10MMM *Your Say* research project were actively involved from the beginning: identifying issues, scoping, developing a questionnaire, administering the questionnaire, and collaborating with schools and partner agencies. A research action group comprising young people was established and this group was represented on the 10MMM Steering Committee. The steering committee also includes lead agency and community partner representatives as well as project and research staff.

At each step, the action group has been actively consulted in the design and direction of the research.

The *Your Say* survey

Your Say (Young People, Technology and Social Relationships) has been the central research component of the 10MMM project to date. A range of community partners have been involved in the project, including a key media outlet and an adult education provider. This phase (2007–08) of the project attempted to focus specifically on the core questions of technology used by young people in the region and on the impacts of this use on social relationships (Marshall et al. 2008).

The project's approach has been participatory and youth-centred. The 10MMM project established mechanisms and protocols for involving children and young people as researchers. Initially young people across the region were invited to become researchers in the project — through advertising in the local paper, newsletters and a website. This approach was mostly unsuccessful. The members of the action group who were already involved in 10MMM (as the leadership and driving committee of young people) were also interested in the research, so they became the research group. There are now three subgroups — one at Hamilton, and one each at the smaller rural remote centres of Casterton and Merino. The groups are open to any young person aged between 12 and 20 years of age.

RMIT and WDHS⁴ staff supported the team of young researchers with training and guidance.

The research group (and subgroups) consists of 15–20 members with a core group continuing despite some fluidity of membership. The group has self-selected and generally has representation from all six local secondary schools, a youth program and unemployed young people.

4. WDHS — Western District Health Service — are project leaders and also responsible for youth 'drop-in' service (YouthBiz) in Hamilton where the action group meets.

The young people designed and conducted social research and communicated the results.

The project sought specifically to engage young people in the research. The young researchers set the research questions: How does technology affect young lives? What questions do young people themselves want to explore? What messages would young people like to get across? The research questions were discussed with the action group. They 'brainstormed' issues related to ICT and its impact on young people. They defined what was meant by ICT and identified important issues, for example peer group pressure in relation to mobile phone ownership and use, access to broadband, and mobile phone coverage. The brainstorm prompted the young people to find out the extent of ICT use in their local region, and who used it and how much.

Through consultation, it was decided to develop a survey to undertake this research. A weekend leadership camp designed the survey and participants subsequently undertook training in Survey Monkey. Survey Monkey is an online survey tool which was considered accessible for novice researchers. The survey was piloted and workshopped with advisors and community partners. The survey was conducted online and in paper form. The raw data were transferred to Statistical Package for Social Sciences (Marshall et al. 2008).

There were responses by 176 young people to the survey, which was conducted in 2007. The central research questions for *Your Say* related to the impact of technology on young people in the Hamilton region (see Attachment 4A).

The 10MMM project and the *Your Say* research in particular have been based on a broad understanding of the benefits and challenges of involving children and young people in research, and the utilisation of

a range of strategies designed both to empower those involved and to produce robust research outcomes that are useful to the community. The project has also reflected the experience and observations of professionals who work in the region with young people and RMIT researchers with expertise in the field.

Preliminary research was undertaken into issues such as mobility and their drivers; privacy and identity in a rural setting; voice, media image and place attachment; and belief in self. These issues, which helped determine the research direction and design, emerged from previous work with young people in the region (notably the evaluation of the first phase of 10MMM) and the interests and questions of community people involved in the project, including the researchers themselves who are also members of the rural community. Discussions with young people through the project's initial stages also helped shape the focus of the research.

The mentoring of the young people by RMIT researchers and project officers has been central to the project and has continued throughout. Key approaches to this task included guidance by the steering committee, facilitation of discussions, imparting research skills, and overseeing the development and processing of the survey. Part of the process involved providing the young people with skills in research, to help them to come to grips with the key issues they face. At the weekend leadership camp, and at subsequent action group meetings, an RMIT researcher and the 10MMM project officers worked with the group to develop and refine the survey. The training and mentoring which occurred between the adult researchers and project staff and the young people illustrates the capacity-building process which exemplifies 10MMM's modus operandi. It also demonstrates the efforts of the project proponents to move well beyond the superficial — or tokenism (Clark 2004) — to ensure young people are genuinely and actively involved in

all levels of the research. The process embodied a commitment to the young people's understanding of the notion of research as they explored what they needed to know and how to find out. The young researchers are now actively involved in communicating their research through the publication of the *Your Say* report and, more recently, by holding a forum with local government candidates.

Challenges, issues and learnings from the *Your Say* project

The *Your Say* project has provided rural young people the opportunity to raise and explore issues of concern to them (Marshall et al. 2008).

Key issues relating to the involvement of young people in research in this project include the following:

- Youth turnover in the core research group
- Strategies for ongoing engagement
- Ethical issues
- Validity of data
- Involving disengaged youth in the right balance
- Ensuring adequate geographic coverage and overcoming isolation and distance
- Communications strategies
- Understanding modes of empowerment
- Getting young people comfortable in a group setting

- Ensuring a balance between encouraging youth leadership and achieving robust research outcomes
- Ensuring authentic youth voices in the project while attending to compliance issues
- Ensuring that young leaders took on the sometimes confronting discipline of leading the project, e.g. in relation to administrative tasks.

The project has come to grips with the core issues of involving young people in research and has attempted to devise strategies for managing them; in relation to representation, the stability of the research group, and balancing support for a youth voice against the need for robust research methodologies.

The *Your Say* project explicitly set out to provide rural young people with a voice, encouraging them to be researchers and to impart research skills in an attempt to develop that voice. The role of the action group has been critical in achieving this objective.

It has also been important to provide a voice to as many young people as possible across the entire region, not just in Hamilton itself. Getting involvement from more rural parts of the region has been a challenge, in particular in ensuring a representative sample of survey participants. This is generally a challenge in conducting social research in rural locations.

Positive outcomes from the project to date have included:

- The young people have valued ownership of the research, in particular having their names on the report empowered them and gave them a 'voice'

- The young researchers have delivered a high quality report which answered many of the key issues relating to ICT use
- There is evidence of considerable skills development among the young researchers as a result of RMIT's mentoring
- The young people are keen to take it further and are excited about the next phase of the project
- The research has raised further issues to be taken up more systematically in later stages of the project
- 10MMM received a Highly Commended Award in the Improving Health and Well Being of Disadvantaged People and Communities Section of the 2008 Victorian Public Healthcare Awards.

From a research perspective, one of the critical issues for the *Your Say* project has been the robustness of the findings of the research. In particular, the local media focus has been on the finding that young people were sanguine about the dangers of too much use of technology. This seems to conflict with popular and media-generated perceptions.

There has been a perception that the action group is disproportionately representative of disengaged young people, and those who do not easily fit into other more traditional networks, the so-called 'cool' groups. This raises the question as to whether the action group is truly representative of young people across the region. On the other hand, it demonstrates that the project has endeavoured to provide a voice to those young people most excluded from social networks.

Heeding the lessons

There are a number of questions arising out of the research that require further consideration — particularly in relation to perceived ‘conflicts’ between parents’ perceptions and concerns in relation to ICT use, and the more benign attitudes of young people. Potential areas of conflict relate to:

- Use of ICT for homework and research
- Supervision
- Gender differences relating to ICT use and attitudes (e.g. parents may fear that girls are more vulnerable to potentially dangerous situations arising from internet use)
- Location of computers within the home
- Filtering systems
- What information regarding the nature of ICT use is shared between parents and young people (e.g. research showing only 12 per cent of young people would tell their parents they intended to meet someone they had met through internet; see Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies 2005).
- Mobile phone use and conflict.

The next research phase will respect the work undertaken by the *Your Say* team in exploring and obtaining the views of local young people on their use of ICT. The research will build on these views by examining key areas — including the potential for conflict within families over ICT — by hearing more directly from adults and young people on a range of contentious issues. The research will investigate in particular what concerns parents have, what they fear, the range of evidence in relation to these fears, and what (if anything) can be done about them in the way of interventions.

The next phase of the project will also further address the issue of ‘voice’. In particular, it will pose the questions:

- How has 10MMM made a difference to assisting young people find a voice?
- How do young people want to use their voice? Who do they want to listen to?

Summary

The 10MMM project has been highly innovative in providing young people in a rural location a voice through active participation in a research project. This has not been without its difficulties, relating in particular to the struggle to maintain a stable research group and question marks over the robustness of the findings.

Yet the importance of giving young people a voice has been the overarching consideration in conducting the research to date. While this has not devalued the overall research findings, it is important to find the right balance between this objective and delivering research outcomes that resonate with the whole community.

The project will ensure during its next phase that other perspectives are included in the framing of the research questions and the conduct of the research, without in any way diminishing the involvement of young people. Further work will attempt to resolve unanswered questions from the *Your Say* project, especially those related to conflict within households over ICT use, and explore in greater depth issues relating to the links between ICT and wellbeing and between ICT and aspirations.

Just as importantly, as a result of the 10MMM project, RMIT University is building youth issues more firmly into its Southern Grampians-based research, and explicitly will continue to focus on disengaged youth and young people impacted by rurality.

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Attachment 4A

Research Framework (from Marshall et al. 2008)

Research Issues

A. How do young people access and use technology (especially ICT and multi-media) in our region?

<i>YOUR SAY</i> issues	Possible survey questions	Other possible questions
1. Allocation of funds and resources to rural youth	Do you have enough resources?	Why do you use information and communications technology (ICT)?
3. Leaving the area	Where would you like to see money spent?	Are you concerned with any negative effects of access — such as
4. Does ICT make you grow up too soon?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online bullying? • Access to pornography? • Excessive time online?
5. Who organises after school activities and are they adequate?		Are you aware of any positive effects of ICT Access — such as
6. School leavers		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to information? • Connecting with people like you? • Knowing 'what is going on' with music, movies events etc?
10. Does ICT make you more or less social with family and friends?		

B. What influences does technology have on social life?

<i>YOUR SAY</i> issues	Possible survey questions	Other possible questions
4. Does ICT make you grow up too soon?	How many screens do you have at your house?	How many hours a week are you using ICT?
5. Who organises after school activities and are they adequate?	What do you do after dinner?	Does being online allow you to interact with others?
10. Does ICT make you more or less social with family and friends?	Are people or technology more of an influence on your life?	What sort of sites do you frequent?
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Games • Interaction • Chat • YouTube • Information for study.
		Does your time online or on your mobile conflict with the way your parents or teachers want you to use your time?
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Always • Sometimes • Never.

C. Are there any implications for who is 'included' and who is left out?

<i>YOUR SAY</i> issues	Possible survey questions	Other possible questions
1. Allocation of funds and resources to rural youth	Do city youth know anything about rural youth?	Where are you when you access ICT and mobile services?
2. Age and gender — do questions need to vary for different age groups	How old are you? Are you male or female?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Home • School • In Hamilton.
8. Rural youth stereotypes — divide between city and rural youth	Do you have access to the internet? Do you have mobile phone coverage?	Do you ever have trouble with access of mobile or internet services?
10. Does ICT make you more or less social with family and friends?		What sort of trouble?

C. What influence does technology have on young people's aspirations and goals?

<i>YOUR SAY</i> issues	Possible survey questions	Other possible questions
1. Allocation of funds and resources to rural youth	Do you plan to leave this area?	Do you have concerns about the effect of ICT access and multi-media on the lives of you or your friends?
3. Leaving the area	Do you want to leave?	What are your concerns?
6. School leavers	Do you want to come back if you go? Does ICT make you grow up too fast? Are young people growing up too fast?	

E. Are there ways in which technology can help young people achieve their goals?

<i>YOUR SAY</i> issues	Possible survey questions	Other possible questions
1. Allocation of funds and resources to rural youth	Do you think there are opportunities for school leavers in this area?	What do you hope to do when you have finished school?
3. Leaving the area		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work in this area • Study in this area • Work in a large city • Study in a large city.
6. School leavers		Do you think you will be able to achieve that?

Attachment 4B

Key Participants in the 10MMM Project

Dr Kaye Scholfield, Manager Community Partnerships and Projects, RMIT Hamilton is the Project Manager for the 10MMM project. Co-authored with Susan Brumby and Leanne Watt: 'Rural youth and multimedia', in *Youth Studies Australia* Vol. 26 No. 4 December 2007.

Dr Paul Collits, Research Fellow, Regional Development Program, RMIT University Hamilton is the senior researcher/research advisor to the project.

Dr Helen Marshall, senior associate in the Centre for Applied Social Research in RMIT's School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning has taught and researched aspects of family and work life, especially for women, and teaches sociology and qualitative methods. She delivered training workshops and focus groups for young people with the *Your Say* project, oversaw the conduct of the survey using Survey Monkey and undertook analysis of the survey results.

Ms Jo Brown is Project Officer for the *Your Say* project. Jo is coordinating the next phase of the *Your Say* project, including the planning and conduct of school-based focus groups.

Leanne Watt is a Youth Worker at YouthBiz Western District Health Services. Leanne coordinates the young peoples' action group for the 10MMM project, and liaises with other project partners to conduct project/research activities with young people.

Susan Brumby, Director Community Services, Western District Health Service is the program coordinator of the 10MMM project.

Dr Leone Wheeler, Head of Learning Community Partnerships, is Executive Project Manager, with responsibility for overseeing the project. She leads educational development and practice and demonstrates leadership in the field of learning community partnerships, community engagement, lifelong learning, and learning networks within an international context. Dr Wheeler provided expert knowledge and training in the use of Survey Monkey.

Helen Lane, former project officer, responsible for the instigation of the *Your Say* project in its first stages.

Action group members: (young researchers and contributing authors to *Your Say* Report) *Katherine Clare, Toby Clark, Adrian Densley, Sebastian Eales, Tali Eley, Emma Hammel, Kirsty Heron, Deb Loats, Paula Muir, Ricky Shewell.*



Reflection 1

Jan Mason

The participatory, interagency research described in this paper which commenced in 2002 in rural Victoria, aimed to decrease youth social isolation and facilitate youth 'having a say', through multimedia tools. In a process of collaboration with schools and partner agencies, RMIT University staff acted as mentors and observers of the children and young people (aged 12–20), who were involved in the 10MMM *Your Say* project. The young people were actively involved from the beginning in identifying issues, scoping and developing and administering a questionnaire. A research action group was established and represented on the 10MMM Steering Committee. At each step, the action group was consulted in the design and direction of the research.

The paper identified important issues for those researching with children, particularly when children are assisting with the research. I will identify those on which the writers placed particular focus and briefly comment on them.

Two of the issues can usefully be bracketed for discussion. These are: first, the problems children and young people have with the language and jargon employed by adult researchers, including what is meant by the word 'research' and second, the provision of mentoring/training to enable children to be competent in research. It can be argued that how we interact with children and young people around the nature of research, both in the language we use and through training to enable them to participate in research activities, is fundamental to them being involved as participants in these activities. However, we should not

ignore the fact that children and young people participate in research as part of their everyday lives, for example in internet activities, often with their peers — that is in forums in which adults have no, or very limited, roles. If, however, we are attempting to be inclusive of children in areas of research usually dominated by adults, we need to take active steps in a process, referred to by John (1996), as building bridges between adults and children to facilitate children's participation. Here, we can see a parallel with women researching women. In this research women have tended to value different methods and subject matter from that valued by their male colleagues. At times these different approaches have resulted in a devaluing of what women researchers have been able to contribute. We need to make sure that adult researchers facilitating children's participation in research remain open to new approaches and to concerns originating with children themselves.

A third issue raised by Brown et al. in this paper is the importance of strategies for ensuring representativeness and stability in the child researcher group. Concerns about problems arising from lack of representativeness can be a barrier for adult researchers in encouraging children's participation as researchers on children's issues. I think this barrier is appropriately challenged through projects such as that described by the authors of this paper. Again, drawing parallels with women researching women's issues, similar questions about representativeness have been raised, both of researchers and of researched populations. Yet, research by women has been very valuable in promoting women's issues. Further, it could be argued that research by men has not necessarily taken on board issues of representativeness of researchers.

A fourth issue raised is the requirement for balancing support for a youth voice (perhaps we should say voices), against the need for



robust research methodologies. While we should of course aim at robust research and help young people to do the same, we need also to differentiate criticisms against the research because it lacks validity, creditability and an auditable trail, from criticisms of research in which children participate on the basis that it is research conducted by young people and differs from mainstream research. Likewise, with the final issue raised by the researchers, that of a youth perspective or standpoint that challenges adult 'conventional wisdom', I consider it almost inevitable that youth standpoints will challenge adult perspectives. That is, after all, why children's standpoints need to be heard, because they are likely to have something to say which differs from what adults will say on the same issues. It is understandable that adults are likely to find children's perspectives a challenge, when they threaten adult power and status quo. Those of us who support research with, or by, children, would do well to think through and make explicit our roles as advocates for them, once they have contributed their standpoints.

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Reflection 2

Naomi Priest

Overview of the project

The paper provides an overview of a Multi-Media Mayhem project across 10 towns in rural Victoria; an interagency initiative aimed at reducing social isolation and stimulating an expression of youth voice through multimedia tools. It was a participatory project with children and young people aged 12 to 20, with RMIT as mentors and observers.

The project aimed to develop a research agenda and process determined by young people in rural Victoria, with professional researchers as facilitators and advisors. It focused on exploring how technology impacts on young people, and their aspirations in a rural context. In particular, it explored whether technology helps mitigate against the geographical, social and digital divide amongst young people; the implications for ICT use and access for youth aspiration and participation; and access to employment, technology and training.

It focuses on the *Your Say* survey as the central research component. RMIT staff supported a team of 15–20 young people to design and conduct the social research, and to communicate the results. Young people set the research questions they wanted to explore over a weekend leadership camp at which they were trained in Survey Monkey. They piloted and workshopped the survey with advisors and community partners.

The paper identifies key challenges, issues and learnings, including turnover of young people in the core research group, how to involve disengaged youth in the right balance, ensuring adequate geographic coverage and overcoming isolation and distance, and ensuring balance between youth leadership and robust research outcomes. It also highlights positive outcomes of young people having valued ownership of the research, skill development and raising issues for later stages of research.

Points of impress

- Active engagement of young people in development of research process and conduct of research across all stages, i.e. development, collection, analysis and presentation of findings.
- Consideration of issues to do with representativeness of young people involved, including the need to engage those that are more socially isolated, as well as those in the 'cool' group, tensions between young people's involvement and robust research, and geographical issues — it is often particularly challenging to engage young people in rural areas
- Skill development component, young people's camp etc.

Summary

The challenges of engaging with young people in rural areas in research include issues with maintaining a stable research group and maintaining young people's voice with robust research outcomes, the need to consider diversity and representativeness of young people involved, and ways of maintaining their engagement across the research project.



5. Engaging Young Children in Research

*Professor Sue Dockett
Charles Sturt University
Professor, Early Childhood Education*

Introduction

In recent years there have been significant changes in conceptual and theoretical views of children and childhood and the expectations adults have of children (Christensen and James 2000). Current perspectives view children as competent experts on their own experiences (James and Prout 1997) who actively shape their own lives, cultures and spaces, and have a right to have a say in situations that impact on them (Lansdown 2005; United Nations 1989). This paper reflects these perspectives in reporting a range of strategies used to engage with young children in research and in reflecting on some of the methodological and ethical tensions inherent in such engagement.

Background

Over a number of projects, and with a number of colleagues, I have been interested in investigating young children's perceptions, expectations and experiences. This has occurred through projects focused on the transition to school (Dockett and Perry 2005a, 2005b, 2007a) and children's views of museum spaces (Kelly et al. 2006). Each project has emphasised the importance of children's perspectives and of appropriate adult responses to these — including changing practices to reflect what is important for children and developing ways to ensure that children's perspectives are not regarded as tokenistic.

Strategies for engaging young children in research

Researchers have used a range of strategies to engage young children in research. For example, various studies have utilised extended periods of observation (Dunlop 2003); interviews and conversations with children (Broström 2003, Clarke and Sharpe 2003; Peters 2003); and photographs (Einarsdóttir 2005a, 2005b) as well as combinations of these strategies (Clark, Kjörholt and Moss 2005; Clark and Moss 2001). This paper focuses on the following strategies:

- Conversations with children
- Drawings
- Reflections
- Photographs
- Journals.

Conversations

A conversation:

Joanna and Sam were aged about five years when they talked about starting school.

Interviewer: How did you feel when you started school?

Sam: I think a little bit happy or sad.

Joanna: I felt a bit embarrassed. Because ... too many people standing around looking.

Interviewer: Why do you think they were looking at you?

Joanna: Because I was looking at them.

Our conversations with children tend to be informal in style and location. We generally use some open-ended questions to start conversations, such as 'can you tell me what it was like when you started school?' We are also quite happy to talk to children in a location of their choice — be it the sandpit or other area. The reasons for this are that we want children to feel comfortable, able to finish the conversation whenever they want to, and able to resume it if they feel so inclined. They can also choose to have someone else with them, and that too can help children feel comfortable in their conversations with adults. In other words, we want children to have some control over the nature of their engagement in conversations. Where possible, and with the permission of the children, we audio-tape our conversations and transcribe them for analysis. Some of our most involved conversations have occurred when we have revisited children and followed up the conversation. Sometimes, children are very keen to edit their initial comments, either by adding to them or by deleting some of them.

There are a number of ethical issues to be considered when talking with young children. We seek children's assent to their involvement, even though we already have parental consent. We also seek children's assent to having their conversation recorded. In addition, we aim to be clear about what children's contribution to the research will be and how the information will be used. Mindful of obligations relating to child protection, we let children know this before seeking their agreement to talk with us (Dockett and Perry 2007b). As we are aiming to build a relationship based on trust, we believe that this would be impossible if we did not disclose our obligations.

Drawings

Some children prefer to draw — rather than talk about — what is important for them. Some other children are happy to draw and converse, with their conversations and their drawings influencing each other (Dockett and Perry 2005a; Einarsdóttir, Dockett and Perry 2009 in press). Children are often familiar with the process of drawing and eager to use a range of drawing materials and paper. With drawing, children have a high level of control, both over what is drawn and what information they choose to share about the drawing. Tasks such as drawing also provide opportunities for children to talk with researchers without maintaining eye contact or feeling that they are in the spotlight, and possibly under pressure to produce answers to specific questions. Drawing and other concrete tasks, such as construction activities, also provide children with time to respond to specific issues and questions.

Many of the same ethical issues identified in engaging children in conversations also apply in the context of drawing activities. In any task where children produce an artefact, we ask children if we can take a copy

of their drawing (or a photograph), rather than ask them to give their drawing to us. We believe that this respects the effort they have put into generating the drawing, as well as reflecting our appreciation for their involvement.

It is important that children's narratives about their drawings, including their interpretations and intentions, form the basis for interpreting children's drawings. These are often co-constructions, as adults and children, or children together, jointly construct text and drawings to share intended meanings. Figure 5.1 is an example of a co-construction between Caitlin (3.6 years) and her mother after a visit to the museum. Caitlin was fascinated by the crystal gallery and the fairies she expected to live there. Caitlin drew her picture, talking with her mother as she did so. She then asked her mother to scribe the dictated text.

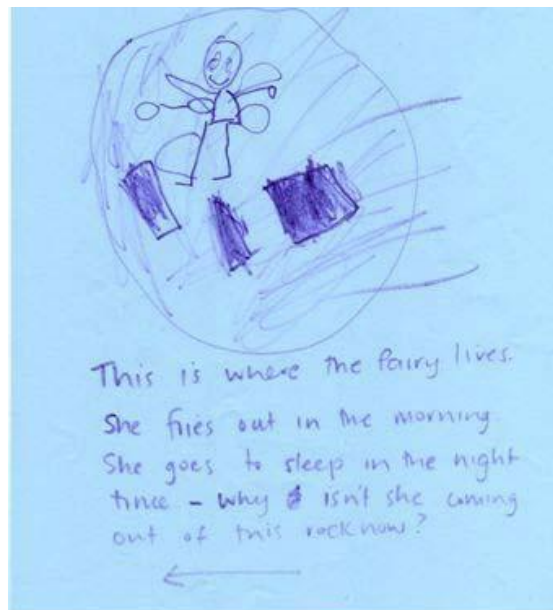


Figure 5.1. This is where the fairy lives. She flies out in the morning. She goes to sleep in the night time — why isn't she coming out of the rock now?

Reflections

The reflection task is an extension of the drawing task. We have used it in a number of contexts to encourage children to reflect upon their start to school and to consider how they may have changed over their first year at school (Dockett and Perry 2004, 2005a; Einarsdóttir et al. 2009 in press).



Figure 5.2. One child's reflection on how she had changed over her first year of school.

As with drawings, this task provides children with a concrete task as they think about and reflect on their experiences. This task recognises children's ability to reflect upon and articulate what is important for

them. Very often, we hear adult reports of what is important for children. This task opens up that opportunity to children themselves.

Photographs

Along with a number of our colleagues (Clark and Moss 2001; Dockett and Perry 2005b; Einarsdóttir 2005a), we have encouraged young children to use cameras to record their perspectives and experiences. The photographs that result can provide a focus for sharing information, affect and reflection (Rose 2007). Using this strategy, children have control over what photos they take, which of these they share with others, and share the narratives that accompany the photos. We have found that children (as young as two to three years of age) enjoy taking the photos, particularly with a digital camera where they can review them instantly. One challenge has been the number of photos that children want to take. To help focus their attention, we have emphasised the purpose of the task through questions such as 'What do you think new children need to know about your school?' or 'What is something special for you at the museum?'

The children with whom we have worked have all been very competent with digital camera technology. Even when they may not have used a digital camera before, they are rapidly able to master its operation. One challenge with using digital cameras is that children expect that the photos are immediately available to access. To facilitate this and to promote their selecting specific photos to share with other children or adults, we have found that downloading a copy of the photos onto a computer has been helpful. This also makes it clear to children that they have control over the data and how they choose to share these with others.



Figure 5.3. Why are there only bones left? (Ellen, aged 3 years).

As with the drawings and reflections, the narratives children construct around the photo are just as important as the images. The text offers children's explanations as to why the image is important, and reflects some of the things that are important for the children. For example, Figure 5.3 was taken by Ellen, aged three years. She was interested in the bones in the museum, and curious as to why the museum had only bones. Ellen took the photograph and asked her mother to scribe her question. She then chose to share it with the researchers.

Journals

In some projects, we have sought a strategy to collate the range of information shared by children, both as a means of grouping data and as a way of facilitating children's opportunities to review material they have provided (Kelly et al. 2006). The strategy adopted involved the use of journals — a collection of A4 pages, some with headings, to prompt children's reflections or comments. As children had the original copies of all of the information (including drawings, photographs) they had gathered, they (and their families) were invited to incorporate these into the journal, reflect on their experiences and to any follow up discussions or interests that emerged.

Caitlin's journal (Figure 5.4) was jointly constructed by Caitlin (aged 3.6) and her mother after a visit to the museum. Caitlin sorted through the photographs she had taken and selected some for inclusion in her journal. She added to these with drawings and asked her mother to scribe some comments and explanations. When Caitlin was ready, she sent the journal to the researchers, who copied it and returned it to her.

Regardless of the strategies used to engage with children in research, it is critical to provide feedback. We believe that research relationships are based on trust, and that one element of this trust involves sharing the data we have generated with children and providing opportunities for them to review, edit and change the information they are prepared to share. For example, after transcribing conversations with children, it is important to have a further discussion with the children about what they have said. Such discussions can seek clarification as well as confirm initial comments. We would introduce such a follow-up discussion with the comment that 'last time we spoke you talked about ... is that still important? Do you still feel that way?' Similar discussions can be had using artefacts (such as the drawings, photographs or journals) constructed by children.

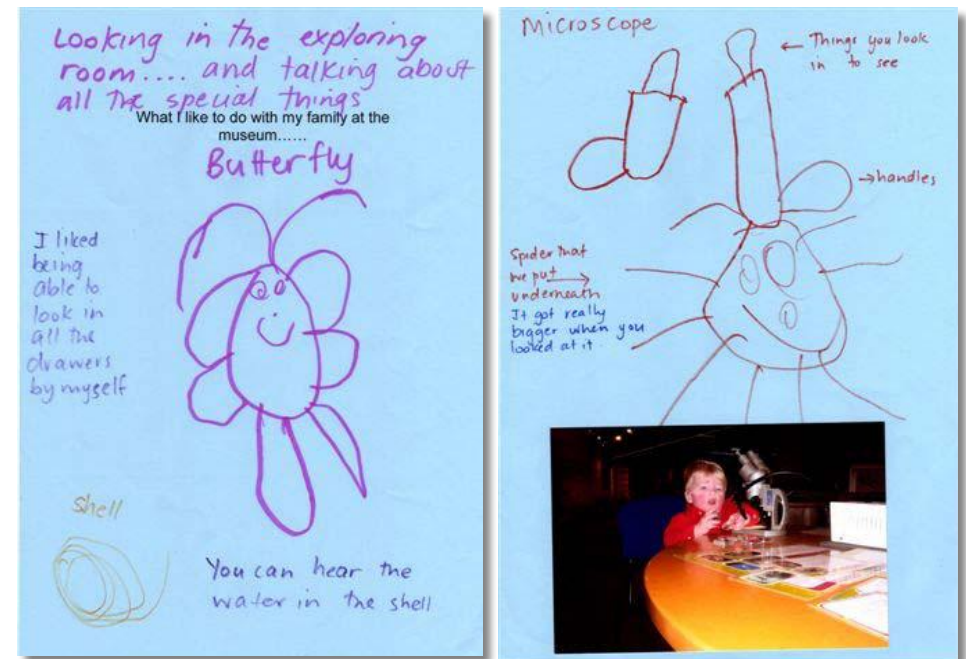


Figure 5.4. Pages from Caitlin's journal.

A further opportunity for feedback and review can be provided by appropriate displays of the material children are prepared to share. For example, with children's permission, copies of drawings, photographs and the narrative of their choice can be displayed on walls, in books, or downloaded onto the computer. This can provide opportunities for children to access them, respond to them or change what they wish to share.

Methodological and ethical tensions

Engaging with young children in research highlights a number of methodological and ethical tensions, notably those related to consent (Farrell 2005; Ford, Sankey and Crisp 2007), what constitutes data and how it is interpreted (Grover 2004), the representativeness of children who participate in research (Hill 2006) and the potential impact of children's involvement in research (Hill 2006).

Consent

While there is a clear legal position in terms of what consent is needed to engage with young children in research (that is, informed parental consent, Dockett and Perry 2007b), this should not negate the importance of seeking children's informed consent to participate. Sometimes, this is regarded as seeking children's assent, as opposed to the legal concept of consent (Cocks 2007). Children can provide assent in a number of ways, such as responding to a smiley chart noting how they feel about participating in research. Equally important is an adult reading of children's non-verbal actions and signals. For example, children seeking to avoid researchers, turning away from interactions or generally seeking to be engaged elsewhere are all signs that a particular child may not feel comfortable participating. Several researchers emphasise the importance of time in developing trusting relationships (Clark and Moss 2001; Greene and Hill 2005; Lansdown 2005), noting that children may have an initial reluctance to engage with researchers, and that this may well reflect the need for time to build a connection, rather than a refusal to participate.

Seeking children's informed assent is an ongoing process (Flewitt 2005). It involves using a range of approaches to ensure that children are aware of what is being asked of them, what it involves and what will happen to the data they contribute. For young children, promoting understanding across these areas presents a number of challenges. Underpinning our approach to seeking children's informed assent has been the concept of process assent (Alderson 2005; Einarsdóttir 2007), where children have multiple opportunities to either confirm their willingness to be engaged, or to withdraw from the research.

Interpreting data

All researchers adopt an interpretive framework that shapes their interpretation of data (Grover 2004). When interpreting data constructed or contributed by young children, it is important to reflect on the meanings and interpretations ascribed by the children themselves, rather than those imposed by adults. Such a view regards data as an intercultural event where the researcher and the children involved both shape the generation of outcomes (Baker 2004) and where the data generated are therefore the result of intercultural collaboration (Danby and Farrell 2004). In other words, children and researchers shape the data and interpretations that are conveyed.

When children have important roles in the interpretation of data, as well as the construction of data, it is likely that their own perspectives are reflected, rather than those of the researchers. Such an approach requires researchers to build into the research opportunities for children to review and interpret data. These could include revisiting conversations, or reviewing photographs or drawings they have made. One likely outcome of these opportunities is that children will censor what they choose to share.

Who is represented in research?

Children have diverse backgrounds, expectations, perspectives, experiences and understandings. Choosing to involve some in research and not others can mean that this diversity is neither recognised nor respected (Vandenbroeck and Bie 2006; Waller 2006).

It is evident from children themselves that some are comfortable engaging in research; others are not so. In a similar way, some parents are more comfortable than others with notions of their children's engagement in research, and hence more likely to give consent for this to occur. Some older children regard participation in research as intrusive (Kirby and Bryson 2002) and we have noted this in our own research with young children, where some children have regarded our attempts to converse with them at home as an invasion of their private space (Dockett and Perry 2007a).

In one situation, a child who had been keen to talk with us in his preschool setting was not as eager to talk with us at his home. At home, he was watching television and, when invited by his mother to talk with us, indicated that he was watching television and did not want to be disturbed. He remained watching television during our visit and did not interact with the researchers at all. His mother seemed a little embarrassed, and did try to coax his involvement. However, it was clear that he did not wish to speak with us in that space, and we accepted his decision. Two issues were highlighted for us in this situation: children's rights not to participate and the importance of providing more than one opportunity for children to be involved, if they so wish. In this situation, the child was happy to speak with us at preschool, but not at home.

A further constraint on who participates in research relates to the source of the invitation to participate. Such invitations generally come from

adults (Hill 2006) and may well have some conditions. For example, in some of our research in schools, from among children who have parental consent, only children who have completed set tasks or behaved in specific ways have been nominated by teachers to participate in research. One consequence is that some, rather than all, children are likely to become research participants.

To promote the involvement of as many children as possible, we have aimed to work with teachers, fitting into their schedules and explaining the nature and intent of the research. For example, in one school teachers were asked to talk with children about starting school and invite them to draw about their experiences. The teachers then collected the drawings and selected the best to share with the researchers. Only when we talked some more about the aims of the research did the teachers realise that we were seeking to involve all children, regardless of their drawing skill, and the importance of taking a copy of the drawing to share with us, rather than keeping the originals. In other situations, working with teachers has involved spending some extra time in the classroom helping the teacher complete their set tasks, so that some time could be devoted to the research tasks. Having researchers and research assistants who are qualified teachers has assisted greatly in this.

The impact of children's participation in research

There are many positive consequences of young children's participation in research. These include recognition of the competence of young children and the opportunity for children to guide change in aspects of their lives. Across several projects, we have sought children's views of their transition to school experiences, including information about what could be done to make these experiences better. In one project

(Perry and Dockett 2008), involving children from four schools and 11 preschools, the children made a range of suggestions about how they would change transition programs, ranging from the number of visits children should make to school and what should happen on these visits to how buddy programs should operate. These changes have been made and the children have clear evidence that their input was respected and valued.

In our museum project (Kelly et al. 2006), young children identified a number of things that they would like to see changed in the museum. These included making sure that some of the equipment (such as microscopes) and displays were at their level, so that they could reach them and engage with them. In recent changes to some spaces in the museum, these suggestions have been incorporated.

However, there is also the potential that children's perspectives are sought but then ignored, or that children's participation becomes tokenistic (Tisdall and Davis 2004). It is also possible for children's participation in research to become an additional mechanism of surveillance (Arnot and Reay 2007). For example, in some of our research about schools, children have identified spaces they like to play that are designated 'out-of-bounds'. Identifying these spaces has resulted in greater supervision of these areas, to ensure that they genuinely are out-of-bounds. Broström (2005) has challenged adult researchers to consider carefully the consequences of engaging children in research, particularly when it has the potential to impinge on their private spaces. If we accept children's rights to privacy, then we must also accept being excluded from some spaces. This presents some challenges for adults in a social context where there are expectations that children will be supervised at all times.

As researchers we are conscious of trying to promote a balance between wanting to know what is important for children and realising that researchers' desires to know are not sufficient to expect children to share details of their lives. How can we respect children's privacy, yet also seek to change situations that are not positive for children? While not having simple answers to this question, we do reflect on a range of questions related to this (Dockett and Perry 2005b):

- What are the tasks children are asked to do? How relevant or important are they to those children, as opposed to the researchers?
- How can we faithfully represent children's knowledge and understanding?
- Do we ground the research in what matters to children, in the interpretation of children, or is the focus on what matters to the researcher and what counts as data?
- Does the research matter to children?
- What do we do to meet the concerns expressed by children in the research discourse?

Conclusion

In seeking to encourage young children's participation in research we endeavour to call upon a range of strategies as a means of recognising that children have many preferred ways of interacting. We also accept that some children choose not to engage with our research, and respect their rights to make this choice. However, we also recognise that to be genuinely promoting children's engagement in research, we need to constantly reassess the strategies we use and to be reflexive as we ask how some of the strategies might promote the engagement of some children, but not others. Engaging young children in research brings a range of ethical obligations and dimensions. It also brings great potential to treat young children seriously and to begin to understand how we can promote their agendas in positive ways.

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Reflection 1

Andrew Anderson

The paper provides an interesting and comprehensive summary of the practicalities and ethical issues relating to various strategies to engage young children in research. The strategies described include conversations with children, drawings, reflections, photographs and journals. It is particularly interesting for me in my current position as manager of research at The Benevolent Society as we are always interested in exploring effective ways of involving children in the research and evaluation of the services we deliver.

There are some great examples in the paper of drawings and photographs and how these have been used in engaging children in research which really brings the descriptions to life.

The paper was a strong reminder that involving children in research entails not only their participation through, for example, a conversation or a drawing but that involving them in the interpretation and analysis of those conversations and drawings is as important.

There was a strong message that, as far as possible, children should maintain ownership and control over their contribution to the research and how it is used. It clearly describes how drawing and photography are good strategies to achieve this. I was interested to know more details about how practically the researchers have collected children's interpretations of their drawings and photographs and how this information has been used.

Sue makes an important point in the background section of the paper about 'developing ways to ensure that children's perspectives are not regarded as tokenistic' and I wanted to know more details about how the strategies described in the paper had helped achieve this end and ensure that the children's involvement was not tokenistic.

One of the key issues which this paper raised for me was the amount of time and resources required to effectively engage young children in research using the strategies described. From negotiating consent through to undertaking the research and revisiting the research with children, the paper highlights the additional time and resources taken to undertake this research in a rigorous and ethical way.



Reflection 2

Kate Bishop

Sue discusses her experience in relation to two research projects: transition to school and children's views of museum spaces carried out with children in early childhood.

The paper includes a summary of methods used in research including conversations, drawings, reflections, photographs and journals. She discusses their use and the particular considerations associated with each of them in implementation. She uses this discussion to highlight ethical and methodological considerations and tensions.

The paper focuses on a series of methodological and ethical tensions which Sue has negotiated during the course of her research. She identifies tensions related to consent and assent and how this is managed continuously throughout a project. She emphasises the importance of children's perspectives and the positive use of children's input to bring about change in children's lives. Sue emphasises the importance of building trust in research and illustrates ways she has approached this, including the need to negotiate the terms of engagement constantly with participants, the need to provide feedback and opportunities for children to control the data that will be included and the need to provide opportunities for children to assist in the interpretation and synthesis of data. She identifies the potentially major influence of gatekeepers such as teachers in influencing which children will be allowed to participate, which leads to another tension concerning the representativeness of participants who are ultimately allowed to participate.

Sue points to a range of benefits and a range of potentially negative consequences for children involved in research. The benefits include providing children with an opportunity to reveal their competence and an opportunity to influence change. The negative consequences that she has experienced include findings from research being used to make negative changes to children's lives, research being used as an opportunity for additional surveillance of children and children's views being sought in research and then ignored.

Finally Sue poses a series of questions relevant to ensuring the rigour of participatory research, including how relevant are the tasks children are being asked to do in the name of research? How can children's knowledge be faithfully represented? Should we ground research in what matters to children? And how do we meet children's concerns as they are expressed in the research process?

For me the paper touches on aspects of participatory research which are in real need of consideration at this point in the journey. Conceptually, the positive potential of this kind of research to benefit children is easy to identify with but, as the paper discusses, the difficulties associated with implementing participatory research and managing knowledge transfer have the capacity to undermine the potential of this research to be a positive experience for the children who participate and for children as a social group. These are particular areas that need more attention as we move forward with participatory research.



6. 'Young People Big Voice': Reflections on the Participation of Children and Young People in a University Setting

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The purpose of this paper is to share critical insights into the strengths and challenges of progressing child and youth participation in a university-based research context, drawing on our experience of establishing and facilitating a consultative group, Young People Big Voice (YPBV), as part of the work of the Centre for Children and Young People (CCYP) at Southern Cross University. The YPBV has played an integral role in the centre's activities over the past four years. The paper will synthesise the key issues involved in attempting to convene, engage, support and learn from children and young people as they collaborate on the research, education and advocacy activities of the centre.

Why children's participation?

The idea of children and young people⁵ as participants in social and political life now occupies a central place in the way we think about them (Davis and Hill 2006; Moss, Clark and Kjørholt 2004). This turn towards children's participation is exemplified in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCROC), most particularly Articles 12 and 13, which assure children the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them. In framing children's participation as a fundamental human right, the Convention has positioned it as something critically important and worthy of continued attention internationally. Kjørholt (2001) captures the significance of developments such as UNCROC on children's participation in the following way:

[D]uring the last fifteen years, the emphasis on children as social and political actors holding special rights in decision-making processes at different levels has been overwhelming. The notion of children as independent individual citizens with democratic rights in many ways represents a qualitatively new perspective on childhood (p. 68).

These more contemporary understandings of both participation and childhood are also reflected in research settings where the important role of children as active participants in research, rather than the passive objects of study, is now quite widely acknowledged (Powell and Smith 2006; James and Prout 1997). Children are increasingly viewed as having strengths and competencies, which transform them from invisible

5. For the purposes of this paper we use the terms children and young people interchangeably but with the intention that either term is inclusive of the other.

objects into subjects with legitimate voices of their own (Fraser et al. 2004; Neale and Flowerdew 2007). Prompted by a number of new theoretical developments — particularly in the field of childhood studies — this new emphasis on the ‘voice’ of children as integral to the research process has resulted in researchers thinking much more critically about how to access, facilitate and report children’s own understanding of their experiences (Christensen and James 2000; Powell and Smith 2006; Pufall and Unsworth 2004).

The burgeoning literature on childhood and the increasing recognition of children in research, and in social life more broadly, has now generated a significant body of convincing evidence pointing to the importance of their involvement and inclusion. We now know, for example, that participation holds a number of benefits for children and for the broader community. These include strengthening the status of children in social and political life, challenging issues associated with their social exclusion, emboldening the accountability and responsiveness of institutions, as well as contributing to the wellbeing of children, their families and wider communities (Cairns 2006; Cashmore 2003; Kirby and Bryson 2002; Kjørholt 2002; Lister 2008; Parkinson and Cashmore 2009 in press; Smith 2007).

At the same time, we also know that such progress in establishing a rationale or case for children’s participation has not been matched by evidence of change for children in their everyday lives (Davis and Hill 2006; Cairns 2006; ESCR Seminar Series Participants 2004; James 2007; Gallagher 2006a; Kirby and Bryson 2002; Partridge 2005). As one of the most governed groups and highest users of state services in western societies, children continue to have little, if any, input into the policy, research and practice decisions made about them (Gallagher 2006; Rose 1999). Morgan (2005) points especially to participatory initiatives where organisations consult with children, but then provide little feedback or

action in response to the children’s views — a concern also shared by Davis and Hill (2006, p. 9) who assert that children’s involvement is often ‘tokenistic, unrepresentative in membership, adult-led in process and ineffective in acting upon what children want’.

It is against this broader background of evidence about the importance, potential benefits and emerging challenges of participation that the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University set out to establish a youth advisory group, Young People Big Voice.

About Young People Big Voice

The CCYP was established in February 2004 to promote improved participation, protection and provision for children and young people through a range of research, education and advocacy activities. The centre brings together four important strands: an interdisciplinary approach, a focus on research education and advocacy for children and young people, an emphasis on cross-sectoral partnerships to promote evidence-based policy and practice, and the inclusion and participation of children and young people. The YPBV group was convened at the same time the CCYP was established to help ensure the centre’s activities were informed, supported, enhanced and challenged by the views and perspectives of children and young people. At the time, we could find no precedent whereby a university centre — such as ours, with its emphasis on applied research pertaining to children and young people — had successfully integrated and sustained a youth advisory group to assist its endeavours.

The YPBV group comprises eight young people aged between 13 and 20 with wide-ranging backgrounds and diverse experiences including,

over the years, out-of-home care (as carers and as living in out-of-home care), separation and divorce, young parents, school leaders, early school leavers and youth advocacy experience (including youth parliaments). While the group is diverse, members share a passion for social justice and a commitment to change, as evident in the following comment from a YPBV member about the membership of the group:

We are diverse and some of the people here probably wouldn't speak to some of the people in the outside world ... the reason why it has worked is that, for most of us, we all have prior social justice commitments and things that we're already passionate about.

The group meets once a month for two hours, with meetings taking place at the CCYP over afternoon tea. The agenda is negotiated ahead of each meeting and items are usually drawn from a combination of centre and YPBV priorities.

An adult facilitator with considerable expertise in working with young people supports the activities of the group. Her role is dynamic and critical to the success of the YPBV initiative. Her activities include developing selection and recruitment criteria and processes; recruiting and inducting new members; organising an orientation and training weekend; developing individual work plans; identifying the support needs of individual members and of the group; liaising with parents and carers; establishing meeting protocols; providing ongoing mentoring, support and training; identifying resource requirements including funding; sourcing potential projects for YPBV involvement including those of the CCYP and also local, regional, state and international forums; monitoring and evaluating the activities of the group; providing recognition and acknowledgement of existing members; liaising and

communicating with media; and promoting the activities of the YPBV in the wider community. The facilitator maintains regular contact with YPBV members through meetings, phone contact, and group email and discussion. The following recent comment from a YPBV member, captured in meeting minutes, highlights the importance of her role in the group:

You're like — see that brick wall — and there's the bricks and there's that grey stuff in between? You're like the grey stuff in between!

Membership of the YPBV is for two years, although existing members can elect to continue if they wish. The recruitment approach has varied since the first group was established in 2004, when we approached local non-government and government organisations in the region working with young people, as well as a number of schools, to recommend members. However, the next recruitment period, at the end of 2008, will involve existing members making nominations for consideration by all members of the YPBV in conjunction with the facilitator and the CCYP Director.

Over the past four years, the YPBV members have been involved in a range of activities to develop their skills, to help them cohere as a group, and to actively contribute to the advancement of the centre's objectives. They have developed, implemented and documented meeting procedures and outcomes, identified strategies to support the work of YPBV and the centre, and increasingly articulated their learning and value to the group. Their contribution to the work of the CCYP has been considerable.

In terms of our research activities, they have engaged in consultations with researchers (both from the CCYP and elsewhere) to assist in refining research questions, methods, tools and processes. For example, in a consultation about a research project on children's participation in family law decision-making, YPBV members provided advice in respect to the wording and design of information for child participants, including consent forms, to ensure they were likely to be understood and responded to. For this particular project, the YPBV also facilitated a role play in which the researcher was asked to explain to 'the child' research participant her assurance of confidentiality and how this would be managed in the event of a disclosure of abuse or harm during the 'interview'. More recently, the YPBV met with a group of Childwatch International researchers (from five countries) to provide feedback on a proposed study on rural childhoods. Their meeting with the researchers pointed to important issues of diversity, the increasing blurring in experience between rural and urban, the framing of research questions so they are inclusive of both experience and culture, the methods most likely to engage child participants, as well as challenging the value and likely outcomes of the proposed research project for children. A number of the international researchers later commented that the dialogue with the YPBV was a highlight of their visit.

In addition to assisting various research agendas, the YPBV recently developed a submission to the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into Children and Young People aged nine to 14 years, focusing their contribution on key issues of importance to young people in the region. They were subsequently invited to appear before the Inquiry at a hearing convened within the region, partly in response to the opportunity extended by the YPBV for the Inquiry Committee to speak with them. Members of the group provided media interviews associated with the event and later

reviewed the Inquiry transcripts and gave feedback to the secretariat. The YPBV has also actively contributed to the planning, organisation and promotion of CCYP seminars and conferences, including the forthcoming CCYP seminar 'Giving children and young people a say: is it important and how do we do it?' Members will be presenting alongside the NSW Commissioner for Children and Young People, Ms Gillian Calvert, and experts in education, community services, family law and health, and a young person will co-facilitate the seminar alongside a CCYP researcher.

In the period since the inception of the YPBV, we have reflected at some length about our objectives in establishing the group, the benefits in doing so, the value for the centre, the significance for the young people involved, the effectiveness of our approach and the responses we have made to the various challenges and opportunities that have invariably shaped our endeavours.

Of particular importance is the way our involvement with YPBV has challenged our understandings, assumptions, knowledge and skills around what 'participation' is and what it requires. A key learning that has emerged concerns the rich and multi-layered nature of participation that requires us to suspend our judgements about whether and to what extent young people want a 'choice' or 'voice' (or both) and, indeed, whether they want to participate at all in the various activities of the centre (Cashmore 2002; Thomas and O'Kane 1999). Our learning has centred around both the *conceptualisation* and *practice* of participation and, in the following section, we elaborate on some of these insights.

Key learnings about children's participation

Conceptualising participation: what do young people say it is?

An important aspect of our work with YPBV has been to base our conceptualisations of what 'meaningful' and 'relevant' participation might be on the views and perspectives of young people themselves. Data collected from YPBV members about their evolving understanding and experience of participation have been integral in shaping and challenging the ways we subsequently endeavoured to facilitate their involvement.

In broad terms, young people who have been involved with YPBV over the past four years have identified two key factors that are critically important for their participation: *recognition* and *transformation*. In calling for recognition, young people say that participation should be respectful, that their views should be taken seriously and that recognition is most deeply experienced when they are invited to talk directly with decision-makers. The importance of being offered the opportunity to have a say, be listened to and be asked for a viewpoint is evident in the following comments from YPBV members who presented to the recent Parliamentary Inquiry:

[I hoped] ... *that they would actually take us seriously.*

It was good because you had one-on-one contact with the actual parliamentarians ... so it was good that you're talking with real people.

In comparing participation in YPBV to participation in schools, one member highlights the significance of young people's competence being recognised:

[Each member] *has the option to do something else, whereas at school, everyone has to do the same thing — they don't recognise that different kids have different abilities and different learning techniques and stuff. They kind of just treat everyone as the same person, whereas here it's 'Well, if you're better at this, you can do that.'*

Members of the YPBV group also point to an important connection between dialogue, participation and recognition. At a training session in early 2008 various YPBV members talked about the importance of 'discussion' with adults, citing the opportunities that conversation opens up for affirming, challenging and developing them as people:

As teenagers get older we want to discuss things ... the sooner that's introduced to youth ... they learn how to interpret their thoughts better ... so discussion is a really good thing.

When students start to talk more, they mature ... gain confidence ... that's why I like participating in as many things as possible.

There's too much for kids to live up to, but not enough discussion about what matters to kids.

In underscoring the importance of recognition, members of the YPBV also pointed to a lack of opportunities for participation as contributing to a feeling of marginalisation and misrecognition, with some attendant consequences:

Depending on the reason ... it can develop a lack of respect for the system.

They'll fight it. They'll get pissed off and they'll be like — 'I hate it — I'm not doing any of this.'

Yes, and they won't comply with it and they'll probably just end up sitting there and ... 'I don't like it, I'm not going to do it.'

In addition to a core emphasis on the idea that participation is inextricably linked with their recognition, members of the YPBV have also repeatedly pointed to the critical importance they place on their participation 'making a difference'. In this, they are referring to the transformative potential of what they do and the fact they hope their efforts might result in some change. Members speak of this in terms of wanting to 'give something back to the community' and 'turn ideas into something practical'. The following comments reveal that young people place a significant emphasis on enabling change and making a difference:

Participation is about making a difference.

I think it's about contributing to society.

When the international researchers came, we were given the opportunity to contribute to how youth are portrayed ... so that's making a difference.

I think if it [participation] actually achieves something, yes. And maybe it'll take a while for one of them to actually achieve something — maybe it's a case of doing 20 and then one will actually make the change.

As long as you've done something, it's an achievement ... as long as there's a change or if something changes in a positive way.

These accounts not only provide us with some insight into what YPBV members expect of their participation but also open up a space for adult researchers and facilitators to think critically about the processes they were engaged in, the purposes intended, the expectations raised, and the dynamics at work that either limit or facilitate recognition and change under the mantle of 'participation'.

Practising participation: what works and what doesn't?

In reviewing the processes of participation used with and by the YPBV, it is evident that a number of factors have contributed to its success. Most important, perhaps, has been the influence of 'scaffolding' the young people for participation. Scaffolding is a term most often associated with socio-cultural theory (Smith 2002; Vygotsy 1986), which proved useful in understanding and planning for the incremental assistance provided to YPBV members to support their participation until they acquired the confidence, competence and motivation to participate independently. A defining feature of this scaffolding process has been the nature of the relationships between YPBV members and the skilled adult partners working with them. Consistent with the work of Smith (2002) and Tudge and Hogan (2005), we have observed closely how trusting and reciprocal relationships with the adults at the CCYP have been instrumental in

supporting the young people to become active and competent players in the varied activities in which they have participated.

A number of initiatives have played an important role in scaffolding the participation of individual group members. The first is regular meetings between the facilitator and members. The key focus in these meetings is to devise and implement an individualised work plan for each new member and to identify what skills and resources young people need in order to achieve the outcomes set out in their work plan. This might include discussion about ongoing training needs required to develop particular skills (for example, public speaking skills, advocacy skills, media skills, writing a funding application etc). Both the work plan and the conversations about it are invaluable for enabling young people to talk about what it is they hope for and to identify what they need in terms of skills and resources, hence creating a safe space for young people to learn their strengths and limitations in a participatory setting.

The second initiative aimed at scaffolding the YPBV members has been utilising appropriately trained experts on a range of topics to prepare the young people for the dynamics and activities associated with their participation in the work of the CCYP. Earlier in 2008, for example, an induction weekend focused on developing skills in conflict resolution, leadership, meeting protocols, grant writing and community engagement, as well as developing understandings about what participation can be.

A third initiative has been the ongoing development of collaborative and inclusive group processes to enable the meaningful participation of a diverse group of young people with wide ranging life experience, but who may have little in common other than their work together with YPBV. While we are often asked how we ensure that YPBV is

‘representative’ of young people in the community, rarely are we asked how the views and experiences of a diverse group of young people are recognised and respected to enable them to participate effectively. In reflecting on this aspect of our work, we have been influenced by Nancy Fraser’s view of participation as transformative politics, the aim of which is to ‘overcome injustices ... by changing not just the boundaries of the ‘who’ of justice, but also the mode of their constitution, hence the way in which they are drawn’ (2008, p. 25). So while we recruit widely, a great deal of attention is directed towards scaffolding the young people in a way that develops and supports their understanding of the processes of inclusion and exclusion, which sometimes get played out within the group itself. As a consequence, the group has a much better capacity for dialogue and working through differences in experience or perspective despite the diversity of membership.

In addition to reflecting on what has worked in establishing, facilitating and maintaining the YPBV, we have also learned a great deal about what doesn’t work. The most significant issue has been how to effectively identify and balance the ongoing procedural conditions under which the YPBV might best operate. To date, this issue has generated a number of tensions, both for ourselves and for the young people, as we have sought to negotiate and communicate the purpose of the group such that its modus operandi reflects ‘better practice’ in participation. The inevitable ‘push and pull’ of participation has been especially evident when members have been unsure or resistant to involvement in a particular activity or project.

The facilitator has become adept at negotiating the delicate balance between participation and imposed consultation by constantly monitoring the benefits of involvement for and by the young people, communicating her insights to them, listening for what they need to

remain engaged and committed, and reassuring them about the limits of participation in certain contexts so these are understood and agreed upon from the outset. We have had to accept, for example, that young people do not always want to participate as researchers, preferring instead an advocacy or advisory role providing feedback and ongoing consultation. Whilst we remain open to the possibility the YPBV members may take up the challenge of being researchers on a project in the future, we respect the fact, for now, this is largely outside the interests of the group. In this way, our early intentions and aspirations for supporting YPBV to undertake its own research have been given a 'reality test' by the young people themselves, who have opted not to commit to a process with considerable time implications, when it is beyond their current interest or motivation.

Resourcing participation: the challenge of translating principles into practice in a university setting

In an earlier section of this paper, we referred to the critical role of the facilitator in establishing and supporting the momentum of the YPBV and, de facto, their participation in the work of our centre. We subsequently referred to a number of other resource-related activities such as additional training costs, food and transport that are incurred in maintaining the group. A key issue in assessing the future viability of the YPBV will be the ability to attract sufficient funds to cover the costs of participation in the context we have described.

There are a number of barriers and constraints in attracting funding for the YPBV. While there have been several attempts at securing funding through various government and non-government sources, it has become increasingly apparent that the current strong emphasis of

the YPBV on *process and inclusion*, doesn't readily align with funding programs that are assessed on *project outcomes*. Our experience suggests that funders want evidence of the economic and social benefits of a 'project', particularly evidence of short-term benefits. While we acknowledge the growing evidence of the benefits of participation for young people, families and communities, such benefits are difficult to measure, particularly within the timeframe of most funding schemes. That said, however, we suggest there is an urgent need for more empirical evidence that shows the worth of young people's participation and its positive influence on policy and practice, including in research settings (Kirby and Bryson 2002).

In addition, we have found that the notion of youth participation is often narrowly interpreted (for example, as workforce participation or retention in education), rather than as young people's citizenship rights. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore this issue further, the inevitable tensions around the value we place on understanding the process of participation versus the outcomes we expect of it, will continue to constrain the opportunities for funding to support both. Beers et al. (2006) remind us of the importance of this ongoing task of progressing the conceptual as well as practical spheres of participation:

[S]ome crucial conceptual work remains to be carried out by and within organisations promoting children's participation. The often-repeated terms 'meaningful participation', 'enabling environment' and 'participation' itself, remain unclear or have different meanings to different social groups and agencies ... the definition of participation ... [is often] teleological, by which we mean a definition according to what is done in the name of participation rather than what children's participation means for children and society in the long term (pp. 29–30).

Finally, the context of the YPBV as a participatory initiative located in a university setting presents a distinct disadvantage in terms of attracting external funding. The unconventional nature of involving children and young people in the way we have is not well understood by funders who have preconceived views about the role of universities and the purposes for which funding is used. Supporting the participation of young people in applied research activities appears to 'fall between the cracks' of both research and service provision such that it contributes to both but belongs to neither.

Concluding comment

In establishing the YPBV in 2004, we were strongly influenced by a growing body of convincing evidence that involving children and young people in a university-based research centre would provide yet another perspective on the theory, principles and practice of participation. We were acutely aware of the need to ensure the involvement of the young people was not tokenistic and that their inclusion would have benefits for everyone, most especially the young people themselves. We did not fully realise, however, the multi-layered complexity and resource-intensive nature of what we were about to undertake. Nor did we envisage the richness of the experience and the multiple ways in which we would be challenged and inspired by the growing confidence and competence of the YPBV members as they directed our attention to what matters to them rather than us. We have grown significantly in our understanding and commitment to their participation in our centre, to listening to, interpreting and acting upon what they have to say, and to reflecting their views as best we can (in the knowledge that meaning cannot be simply translated). We still have some way to go in refining and evaluating our approach but the data we've collected to date strongly suggests the

process of pursuing the participation of children and young people in a university research context carries significant benefits.

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Reflection 1

Judy Cashmore

The paper by Robyn Fitzgerald and Anne Graham highlights the importance of respect and recognition for children's views and the importance of a relational approach, starting from a rights-based framework. The paper discusses the duty on adult researchers to structure both the research experience and the means by which children can provide meaningful input into that process, which Fitzgerald and Graham refer to in terms of the Vygotskian concept of 'scaffolding' (van der Veer and Valsiner 1991). The paper is underpinned by the concept of children as recognised bearers of rights with competencies and legitimate views and experiences.

Fitzgerald and Graham's paper is focused on the various issues associated with establishing and working with a consultative group of children and young people in a university setting, including their contribution to and advice about research. The Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University is concerned with research, advocacy and education with a key focus on children's participation. It established at its inception several years ago a group of children and young people (Young People Big Voice or YPBV) whose role in a university centre is unique and presents some challenges in funding such activities. There have now been several groups of children and young people involved in YPBV and this paper outlines the ways the centre has benefited in relation to the challenges to their thinking about and practice in involving children and young people in their own activities and, more broadly, in the conceptualisation of participation (Graham, Whelan and Fitzgerald 2006).

The specific benefits in relation to the centre's research have involved children's feedback on consent forms and on refining the tools and the research process, as well as YPBV's discussion with an international group of researchers about their experiences of rural and regional life for another international project by Childwatch. For the children and young people, their involvement in the centre was motivated by keenness to make a difference and to have a say on issues that affected their lives rather than their input into the research process.

Fitzgerald and Graham highlight the importance of such recognition and of respectful interactions, and they sound a warning about making assumptions about children's involvement — in this case, that children will be interested in contributing to research and will see the value in doing so. Concerns about the assumptions that university human ethics committees make about children's vulnerability and their need for protection have been the driver for a preliminary study by the centre on the perceptions and processes of such committees in approving ethics applications for research with children and young people.

A recent discussion with the chairs and managers of university ethics committees at a meeting hosted by Southern Cross University in Byron Bay with Gillian Calvert and several members of the Centre for Children and Young People staff and advisory board indicated that ethics committees are keen to hear advice about the various issues concerning the involvement of children and young people in research. In particular, making consent procedures and forms more meaningful and managing and explaining confidentiality to children were raised as key concerns.

In summary, this interesting paper highlights the principles of recognition, respect and flexibility in working with children and involving them in research. Beyond that, there is still much more to be learnt about the issues that concern and matter to children and young people — and these need to be included on the research agenda.

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Reflection 2

Sarah Wise

This paper discusses the implementation and development of a youth consultation group to collaborate on a university-based research and advocacy agenda. In the absence of systematic research, the paper helps confirm a belief that youth participation has considerable value for organisations as well as benefits for the young people themselves.

By sharing information about this somewhat unique framework for dialoguing with young people, it also offers valuable insights for any institution wishing to meet its responsibilities to engage young people as decision-makers.

The paper echoes other commentaries about the key ingredients to making genuine participation (as opposed to less meaningful participatory process such as involvement in adult-led reference groups) successful, which appear to include an organisational culture of participation and a long-term focus, as well as principles respect, recognition, trust, flexibility and reflexivity.

Support (or 'scaffolding' the young people for participation), development of functional group processes, as well as individual consultation and feedback mechanisms also appear central to the success of the YPBV participation process. In the case of YPBV, this appears to hinge on the time and expertise of an adult facilitator who supports the activities of the group.

Capacity to support these processes is also what threatens the long-term viability of youth participation processes like YPBV, and is perhaps what stops genuine participatory processes from happening in the first place. It would seem, therefore, that to be sustainable, innovative ways of resourcing and supporting child and youth consultation groups are required, in addition to greater enthusiasm on the part of government and other bodies to fund these activities.

Representation of young people is a constant theme in the youth participation literature, and while YPBV is a diverse group, and close attention seems to be paid to its selection processes, it remains an issue. The need to focus on encouraging participation for much younger children has relevance that extends far beyond the YPBV process.



7. Standpoints on Quality: Young Children as Competent Research Participants

Associate Professor Deborah Harcourt
Bond University
Head, Children's Services Program

If you want to know if you are going to a good kindergarten, this is what you should do. If your parent has been to that school, ask them if it is good. If they don't know, ask them to ask the teachers weather [sic] it is good. If they won't, then, when you go to that school, you will know weather [sic] it is good enough. If it isn't, talk to your parents about it. Then ask them to talk to the teachers. Another way is to tell your teachers about it. If the teachers don't listen, then don't go to that school anymore, ask your parents to register for another school. And if it is good, then, stay at the school.
Written by Renee⁶, aged 6. Centre A, Singapore July, 2002.

6. The children in this project have asked for their real names to be used because they indicated that using their real name says who they really are.

Introduction

The issue of quality in early childhood services has been a focus of global socio-political discourse in recent decades. The construction of our understandings about quality is also an issue that impacts on young children and I acknowledge the *United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCROC 1989) as a significant platform from which to include children's views on issues that impact their lives. Investigation of the literature identified that early childhood research and policy which focused on quality was, for the most part, adult-generated with little if any attention given to children's own views of their experience in early childhood settings. Therefore, it is my view that any work that seeks young children's understanding and opinion about issues of quality is timely.

In this paper I will report on an ethnographic study that was conducted in the context of early childhood education in Singapore. As a teacher educator in Singapore since 2000 (I lived in Singapore for eight years), I had worked, in various capacities, with over three hundred early childhood services. As my interactions with young children and their teachers became more frequent and relationships deepened, I saw the UNCROC as providing researchers, teachers and children with a mandate for advocacy and action around the views of young children. For me, the UNCROC document opened up a multiplicity of possibilities for looking into issues that may concern children. One of these possibilities was the inclusion of the accounts offered by young Singaporean children, and their constructs around the issue of quality in their early childhood services. In response, 25 five- and six-year-old children (Singaporean Chinese) and I (Australian) engaged in an examination of the quality of early childhood education services (kindergartens) attended by young children in Singapore over one school year through weekly half-day visits to each service.

Informed by the sociology of childhood conceptualisation of child competence (Corsaro 1997; Mayall 2000; James and James 2004), and framed within an image of child as a participant in social discourse (Rinaldi 2001, 2006) the following discussion will focus on the methodologies that were used to position children as active research participants in this study. In order to examine the research question, 'What aspects of preschool are seen by young children to be important, and what do their accounts tell us about notions of quality in early childhood services in Singapore?' I essentially undertook four phases within the study.

Phase 1

Beginning with agreement to participate

The principals from the two kindergarten settings the children attended (13 children from Centre A and 12 children from Centre B) gave permission for the research information sheets and consent forms to be given to parents. The parents and principals were able to pose questions and raise concerns through a series of formal and informal information sessions organised by the services. Through these discussions, I found parents had made the (fair) assumption that my research referred to a study on their children rather than *with* the children. We were able to use these and other subsequent encounters (e.g. arrival and departure times) to move to a shared understanding about the notion of a collaborative research model that was to be undertaken in the settings.

Conversely, it was often a struggle to ascertain whether the children had been empowered by their understanding of similar (verbal) information sessions during the morning meeting times I attended. I wondered

whether they were adequately informed in order to make a decision on whether or not to participate in the research. In another aspect of my work, I had been exploring informed assent⁷ as a vital part of conducting ethical research with children (Harcourt and Conroy 2005). My colleague and I affirmed the notion that it is essential to ensure that the aims and the purpose of the research are fully explored with young children. These are often reaffirmed in subsequent encounters, prior to engaging in data collection. Thoughtful consideration had to be given to the language, or other forms of communication, which were to be used to support the child's decision-making. Researchers may unconsciously use a language of power, which implies that the child will participate. Phrasing requests to participate such as *I have come to get your permission or I have come to get you to sign saying you agree to be involved in my research* may have the intention to seek permission, but the request is posed as an already negotiated agreement. Children may then find it difficult or challenging to decline the researcher's request.

In the initial sessions with the children in this study, I talked about the research proposal with the class group in their classrooms. Both groups of children were informed that I was also working with another group of kindergarten children in Singapore. Discussion then focused on what research was and what a researcher might do. Given that both settings employed, to different degrees, a project-based approach (refer Katz and Chard 2000) to curriculum, the children were familiar with the words *research* and *investigate*. This made it easier to explain the *project* (another word familiar to the children) and to establish a shared understanding

7. Under Singapore law, a person under 21 years of age may not give consent. Legal responsibility for consent falls under the purview of a legally recognised parent or guardian (Women's Charter 1961, Chapter 353, section 122).

about what we might be doing. The use of familiar language assisted in the development of the research relationship, as we were using terminology already part of classroom language culture.

Over several sessions we discussed the word *quality*, a new word for consideration, and one which the children made an association with the word *good*. With a commitment to collaborating with the children on as many aspects of the study as possible, I then sought ideas on how I might find out about a *good school*. I asked, *I wonder how I might find out about a good school? You see, I have forgotten what it is like to go to kindergarten. Since we know each other a little bit, maybe you could help me?* Many of the children were enthusiastic (e.g. *You need to ask lots of questions to [sic] us*), while others were more reticent in their responses, listening rather than contributing verbally to the conversations. In later discussions, we talked about how I might collect this information (e.g. *Maybe we could write or draw for you?*) and what might happen to it once I have it (e.g. *I need to show it to people at the university where I work. Sometimes I will share your ideas with other teachers who work with children.*). We also discussed what a child might do if they had something to share about someone or something that was not so kind or good. I needed to know when it would be OK to use it in my project, or they could tell me when it was not and I would not write it down or record it.

I showed the children the forms that parents might sign as examples of how an adult might record their permission. I considered these forms as providing the children with a reference point and another connection to familiar classroom practices. According to the teachers in both

settings, children were familiar with excursion permission forms as part of the ritual of going out of the centre. They were invited to think of ways that they might record their permission. Since my research journal had already become a familiar part of my activity in their classrooms, Hui Min (from Centre B) suggested it was the best place to write their permission (initially she was one of the dissenters). While all the others in her group agreed, I offered the same suggestion to the children in Centre A. The children were invited to record their names to indicate *yes* or *no* (as assent or dissent) in my journal. All 13 children from Centre A wrote their names and *yes*. Nine children (one was away) from Centre B wrote their names and *yes*. Three wrote their names and *no*. One, Alan, changed his mind that day (*but I might change it back to no if I get tired*). Each visit for several weeks was then begun with a confirmation of assent or dissent. In the week following initial assent, another child from Centre B who wrote *no* crossed it out and wrote *yes*. Four weeks later, the third dissenter (Hui Min) also changed her *no* to a *yes*. In discussing the dissenters with the principal of Centre B, she expressed her surprise at the dissensions. She identified a possible explanation through the Chinese tradition in negotiation, where *yes* can mean *no* and *no* can mean *yes*. She suggested that perhaps Hui Min wanted me to dissuade her from a negative response. The child actually tried to persuade others to say *no*. The assents given for this project, which were reaffirmed at the beginning of each session with the children, then stood for the duration.

Phase 2

Beginning the research: whole group sessions

Subsequent whole group sessions focused on the idea of a good school, which the children had raised in response to our earlier discussion around the word 'quality'. I kept anecdotal notes on these discussions to help remind children of previous discussions and to provide a background for any subsequent data — such as drawings and texts — that may be generated by the children. In a semi-structured group discussion, we talked about how a child would know if they were going to a good school and the kinds of things they might look for. The whole group session was used here as a way of bringing all participants together at the beginning and made more personal by the group sizes of 13 and 12 respectively. A contributing factor in this decision to use a whole group discussion was that, in the familiarisation observations, I noted and had taken photographs of each teacher leading daily sharing times with the children (see Figure 7.2). In Centre A the children discussed their work and plans for future work during these sessions. In Centre B, the faith-based aspects of the curriculum were discussed with the children in a circle time, where each had an active role to play (e.g. writing the date on the board, noting and predicting the day's weather, role playing the day's religious story). It was possible to approach the whole group discussions as a forum for individual participation as, in these two contexts, there was an already established atmosphere that allowed personal opinions to be expressed and respected as discussed by Miller (1997).

Centre A



Centre B



Figure 7.1. Daily sharing at school.

At the same time, children were experimenting with a still camera, a micro-recorder, and a video camera. While I had noted that the teachers in both centres used still cameras (digital and analogue) and video cameras often, the children were not actively encouraged to use them as a representational tool. There was a greater focus in both centres to record ideas and opinions through more traditional representations such as drawing and writing text (handwritten and computer processed). I introduced the cameras and recorder in the hope of broadening the range of media the children could use to represent their ideas about their preschool experiences.

Since we had previously raised the notion that I was interested in what children thought about their settings, and how I might best access this information, the children in Centre A, led by Renee, decided that it would be appropriate to generate a list of questions to ask the children at Centre B. *We could write a list of questions and you could take them to [Centre B]. Then you will know what we all think.* Each child in Centre A

then generated a list of questions over two of my weekly sessions with them (see below). At the children's request, these were to be later posed by me to the children in Centre B.

Beatrix — Kinder Campus is my school 16-8-2002

1. *Is your class room nice?*
2. *Who is your best friend*
3. *Do your school have some pets?*
4. *Is school inpotant to you?*
5. *Is your friends nice to you?*
6. *Is your school good?*
7. *Is your school big?*
8. *Do you decarade your school together with your teacher?*
9. *Is your teacher nice to you all the time?*
10. *Do you like playing with your friends?*
11. *Do your teachers give homework?*
12. *Is your prinsaple fierce to you?*
13. *What is the name at your school?*
14. *Do you bring your own lunch all the time?*
15. *What did you learn in that school?*
16. *What do you do in that school?*
17. *Who is your best friend?*
18. *What is your teachers name?*
19. *Which school are you going to?*
20. *What subject is your frovrot?*

In contrast Alan, from Centre B, suggested, *It is too tiring all of us to do so long list, lah* (Chinese slang). It appeared that the children in Centre B were seemingly less enthusiastic about the additional 'work' required. Through a process of consensus, the children invited me to co-construct a class question list. All agreed that they would dictate the questions and I would write them down.

Over several weeks, I randomly gave the individual lists of questions compiled by the children in Centre A to a 'question partner' in Centre B. The partner responded to the questions using the corresponding number (i.e. Question 1: Response 1) on a separate piece of paper. As an example, the questions and responses constructed by Celine and Jei Le can be seen in Figure 7.2.

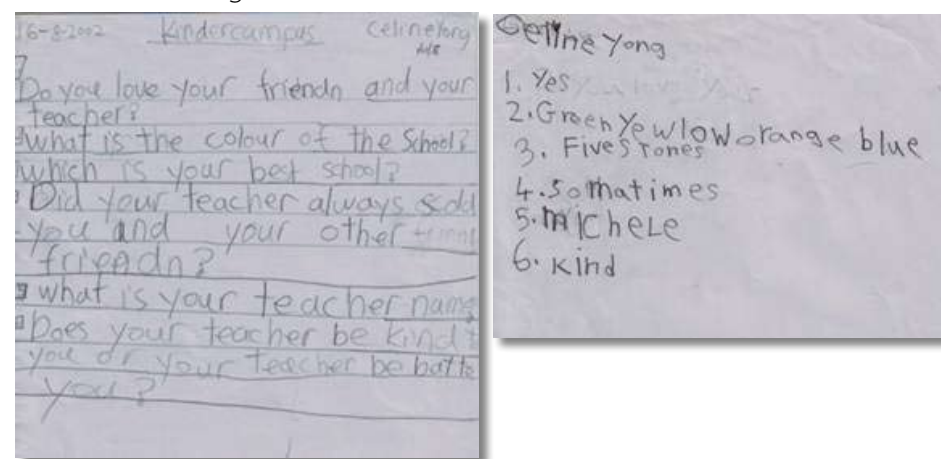


Figure 7.2. Questions and response: Celine and Jei Le.

Similarly, the class question list constructed by the children in Centre B (and written by me) was given to the children in Centre A as a whole group. We discussed the questions together and I wrote the answers

in my journal to give feedback to the children in Centre B. At this point, data gathering and data analysis became concurrent, as tentative themes in the children's work were identified. For example, comments on the physical environment, friends, teachers, lessons and projects were recurrent in the questions both groups of children wished to ask of the others in the study. Once back in my office, I analysed the children's questions and identified tentative themes. Initially these were grouped according to themes such as the physical environment, adults, children and curriculum. The subsequent responses to the children's questions, by their counterparts in the other centre, were treated in the same way, searching for emerging themes. These initial themes were then used as the basis for further discussions and clarification with the children during small group discussions, who subsequently renamed my themes so that they read 'the school', 'the teacher', 'friends' and 'learning' because *[T]hat's what the questions are about*.

Phase 3

Continuing the research: small groups and new tools

I was in the two classrooms during the regular kindergarten program day, working now with self-selected groups of usually three or four children in discussion sessions. These small group discussions focused on the emerging themes offered by the questions the children had posed in Phase 2 and the responses they had received from the children at the other centre. The teachers were not engaged in the research process at all, other than enquiring about how the day had progressed and if I was happy with the children's participation.

Some of these sessions were audio-taped at the discretion of the children involved. The children had become familiar with the technical aspects of the micro-recorder and video camera during my earlier visits, using them to record songs, dialogue and group times. They had also become comfortable with their own, and their classmates', voices and images being played back. In the small group sessions, the children were invited to begin or end the conversation whenever they wished, by being in control of the recording device. We often sat together to listen to these conversations, but this was not always the case due to time restrictions. I did, however, replay passages to children when I was not sure of their meanings or when the recording was not clear enough for me to be assured of an accurate transcription. At the same time, I used my journal to record contextual information such as who was there, non-verbal interactions, and timing of these conversations. Respectful of the children's right to privacy and confidentiality (Alderson 2004), the times children did not wish to have our conversations (or images) recorded remained 'off the record', as part of the agreed-upon conditions of the research.

Other representational media were chosen by the children in order to clarify or provide a richer description of the ideas children were putting forward. For example, when we were discussing the physical environment of the setting, children chose cameras (video and still) for their representations. Many children suggested that it was too hard to draw the classroom exactly as it was, but were quite happy to draw when they were putting forward new and improved design ideas. I was instructed by children on several occasions to take a photograph of a particular tableau. Here, the author of an idea wanted to be included in the record. When the children were using the video camera, I walked with them around the room, enabling me to capture both our voices. When a child took a photograph (using a still camera), they would make a record of it in my

journal (their name and the title of the photograph) alongside notes I had been taking that day. Both the video footage and the still photos were later viewed and discussed by their authors. In this way we began to develop a shared understanding of the meaning and purpose of the data. This helped to shape the intersubjectivity, which Rogoff (1998) had referred to as an important part of working with young children in research and assisted in shaping the lens for data analysis discussed in the next section.

Phase 4

Concluding the research: individual interactions, texts and drawings

Once the children began representing their own ideas through individual pieces of work such as written texts and drawings, I engaged with them in conversations one-on-one or, as Mayall (1999) had suggested, sometimes with a partner/friend for support. These helped me to understand or expand on the ideas being proposed in the data. These interactions were audio-taped, if that was acceptable to the child, and later analysed alongside the text or drawing. Some children, such as Renee, Beatrix, Celine and Alan were prolific writers and drawers. Renee, in particular, also requested a private chat on more than one occasion, which would, at her suggestion, be held on the waiting chairs outside. These personal encounters led to opportunities for prolonged discussion and provided some of the richest data in the study.

Conclusions

The study conceptualised young children as ‘sophisticated thinkers and communicators’ (Harcourt and Conroy 2005, p. 567), who are capable of reporting on important issues in their everyday encounters of an early childhood setting, where teachers and groups of children engage in a program of learning. As an example of the competence children demonstrated in this study, Renee provided an insightful account with [A] good school that gives advice to other children on how another person would know they were going to a good school. Renee presented the possibility of a child providing multiple viewpoints on the quality of a school; the experience of a parent, the child’s own experience, and the willingness of the teacher to engage the child and parent in the assessment of a good school. There is evidence of the child’s power to make a decision, in this case, from a child standpoint (Mayall 2000).

Renee’s use of a traditional literacy medium (i.e. writing) provides an example of a documentary tool commonly employed by the children in the study. My experience as a teacher with children of the same age in early childhood settings in Australia (1984–95) had not afforded encounters with environments where there was an explicit educational emphasis on fluency in literacy. In contrast, children in Singapore start on this journey, in a bilingual context, at a very young age (sometimes at two-and-a-half years). Thus, this educational phenomenon opened new possibilities for the study. The high rate of academic instruction at many levels of early childhood education in Singapore had, indeed, given the participating children, at the age of five and six years, the capacity to skilfully produce accounts that use communication tools easily understood by any literate adult. However this does not discount or denigrate the other representational tools that were used by the children

(e.g. photography, drawing and conversations) but does highlight that offering participants (whether child or adult) a range of tools in which to record their opinions, in a manner with which they are comfortable and confident, is worthy of consideration.

The language used to introduce and explain the research project was situated within the children's sphere of understandings. Rogoff (1990) saw this shared understanding as occurring through active communication, as participants elicit and share information with others, i.e. negotiate shared meaning. Participants' standpoints are adjusted as they communicate and discuss ideas, reaching a common ground or mutual understanding of the experience to be shared. Principles of respect are vital, and children have the right to be spoken to as researchers, in the language of research. It was evident to me in this study that using familiar terminologies provided the children and me with an opportunity to acknowledge a shared understanding of the language of research and therefore tools that encouraged a balance of power in decision-making.

When young children participate in shared research projects with adult researchers there is tremendous potential for co-construction of meaning about actions, events, places and relationships. Farrell, Tennent and Patterson (2005) noted that research requires 'sustained social engagement' (p. 143). Harcourt and Conroy (2008) stated that the time needed to develop this relationship cannot be circumvented and Rinaldi (2006) reminded us of the significance of the *pedagogy of listening* — listening with intentionality, creating sustained opportunities for children's thinking to become apparent. By working with a group of children over a school year on a weekly basis, it was possible for me to develop reciprocal relationships that enabled in-depth discussion and for the children to be closely involved as participatory and decision-making researchers.

Harcourt and Conroy (2008) believe that children hold a strong desire to both construct and share meaning about their world with significant others. In seeking to collaborate with children — to invite them to share constructed theories — adults hold a responsibility to provide children with a respectful and legitimate opportunity for hearing of their ideas, views and opinions. It is now our responsibility as early childhood educators or representatives of government authorities to ensure that these standpoints are acted upon. We need to pursue ongoing opportunities for young children to be consulted in matters that concern them and to act ethically and purposefully on their views.

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Reflection 1

Reesa Sorin

'Standpoints on quality: Young children as competent research participants' presents a year-long research project that Deborah Harcourt conducting during her time as a teacher educator in Singapore. To advance the discourse about quality in early childhood services, which has been largely from an adult perspective, Harcourt felt it was necessary to include children's views. Her research question was: What aspects of preschool are seen by young children to be important, and what do their accounts tell us about notions of quality in early childhood services in Singapore?

She conducted research with 25 Singaporean children aged five and six, who attended two different kindergartens, visiting each classroom for a half day per week. Beginning with an agreement to participate, which came from principals, parents and the children themselves, she conducted whole class sessions, small group discussions and some one-to-one data collection. She encouraged data in a variety of forms, from traditional spoken, drawn and written text (Singaporean children of that age have quite advanced literacy skills) to new media such as photography and video and audio-taping.

She concluded that young children are 'capable of reporting on important issues in their everyday encounters of an early childhood setting' and some can report from multiple perspectives. She says that adults hold the responsibility for providing children with 'respectful and legitimate opportunity for hearing of their ideas, views and opinions' and the collaborative research process hold great potential for 'co-construction of meaning about actions, events, places and relationships'.

Brief overview of my work

As an early childhood teacher educator, I work in a similar field to Deborah and much of my research is conducted young children, their parents and teachers. I am continually reflecting on my research processes, and many of the issues Deborah confronted have also been issues for me. Like Deborah, I see young children as active agents in their learning and development.

Issues/points of impress

Deborah clarified with parents that the research was *with* their children, not *on* their children. This helped them to develop a shared understanding of a collaborative research model.

Deborah also clarified the aims and purpose of the research with the children. Language used was situated within the children's sphere of understandings. She considered the communication strategies she would use, and came up with words and phrases that were requests rather than mandates. She said, *'I wonder how I might find out about a good school? You see, I have forgotten what it is like to go to kindergarten. Since we know each other a little bit, maybe you could help me?'* rather than something like *'I have come to get you to sign saying you agree to be involved in my research'*.

Use of something familiar was a key strategy in Deborah's work. She talked about the research in terms that the children would understand. Much of their learning had been by the 'project' approach, so words like 'research', 'investigate' and 'project' were already familiar to them. She showed the children the parents' forms, which were familiar because they had seen excursion permission forms, and asked the children to determine how they might record their permission. They decided they

would write their names, and 'yes' or 'no', in her researcher's journal. She modelled their teachers' daily sharing times in her whole group discussions, so that 'there was an already established atmosphere that allowed personal opinions to be expressed and respected'.

Deborah allowed children to dissent and didn't try to persuade them to agree. One of the teachers suggested to her that those who disagreed might be responding in the 'Chinese tradition of negotiation, where yes can mean no and no can mean yes'. Children's assent was re-confirmed every week and they were allowed to change from 'no' to 'yes' or vice versa.

Rather than relying solely on verbal and written data, Deborah introduced a variety of media, such as cameras and audio-recorders, to increase the way children could represent their ideas. Children took photos and videos. When they had become familiar with audio-taping, and comfortable hearing their voices played back, they took control of the audio-recording device and were able to stop it if they wished. Deborah and the children listened to and reflected on the recorded conversations and Deborah was able to clarify passages she was unsure of. At times, children designed a new classroom tableau and instructed Deborah to photograph them in it.

She also worked collaboratively with the children, eliciting from them research strategies. For example, she raised the issue about how she could find out what children thought about their settings. A child from Centre A suggested that children could write a list of questions that Deborah could ask the children in Centre B. Children in Centre B thought it would be too tiring to write a question list, so decided that they would dictate questions that Deborah would write down to ask the children in Centre A. Deborah coded their answers, identified potential themes (physical environment, adults, children and curriculum), then presented



these to the children as a basis for further discussion. They renamed her themes as 'the school', 'the teacher', 'friends' and 'learning' because 'that's what the questions are about'. Shared understandings were created through discussion and other strategies, such as children writing in the researcher's journal along with the researcher.

Deborah continued data collection around emerging themes through self-selected groups of three or four children and one-on-one conversations or, if they chose, sometimes with a partner/friend for support. These smaller groups allowed her opportunities for prolonged discussion and depth of data collection.

Points of learning

Deborah concluded that young children are 'capable of reporting on important issues in their everyday encounters in an early childhood setting'. Respect and value of children's ideas was apparent. She saw children as being competent decision-makers, able to provide information from multiple perspectives and using multimedia forms. She acknowledged that data collection was made easier because of the Singaporean early emphasis on explicit literacy, where children often as young as two-and-a-half are instructed in English literacy. But she also stresses the importance of 'offering participants a range of tools (cameras, recorders, art materials etc.) with which they are comfortable and confident'.

Deborah speaks of her research as 'shared research'. She says 'there is tremendous potential for co-construction of meaning about actions, events, places and relationships' and suggests that adults should listen intentionally, over extended periods of time to develop reciprocal relationships that enable deep discussion and participation by children as 'decision-making researchers'.

Reflection 2

Sharon Bessell

This paper describes Deborah's study of young children's views of quality education, conducted in Singapore over a school year. Twenty-five children, aged five and six years, participated in the study. This paper is especially useful for those engaged in research with very young children — but many of the issues it raises are relevant regardless of children's age.

There are many issues raised by Deborah's paper. Here I want to focus on five:

1. Flexibility on the part of the researcher
2. Providing children with a level of control over the process
3. Child protection issues
4. Understanding the context
5. Children's competency to participate in research.

Flexibility

Deborah notes that once children began representing their own ideas through written texts and drawings, she engaged them in conversation, one-on-one or with a friend for support. This raises some important issues about the necessity of maintaining a degree of flexibility around methods. Whether children want to talk alone or with a friend — or in a group — is almost impossible to predict, and may change within the research process. The ability to accommodate children's preferences for the way in which they shared information was an important methodological aspect of this study.

This study was carried out over a year with the same group of children, providing the researcher with the opportunity to develop a relationship with the children. Presumably, the children were able to develop a level of trust, comfort and familiarity that is less likely to be achieved in a shorter-term research project. The length of this study no doubt allowed for greater flexibility in the approach to the research and the methods used.

However, a study of this length is not always possible. This paper is useful in laying out possible methods that could well be used in studies that take place over a shorter timeframe.

Children's control

One of the very interesting aspects of this study was the extent to which children were able to shape the direction of the research process. It is also interesting — and significant — that of the two groups of children participating in the study, one seems to have been far more proactive in shaping the research. One of the methods used was developed by the children. One group of children developed a list of important questions that the second group answered. The first group (who had developed the idea) enthusiastically generated a list of questions, while the second group was less keen about what they saw as the additional work involved. This group negotiated with Deborah to co-construct a list. This negotiation shows the way in which this research design respected children's competency, and also gave them a significant degree of control.

In other ways too, it seems that children were given a significant degree of control over methods — for example, children were able to determine the beginning and end of conversations by being in control of audio-recording equipment. In my own research I have also found it very effective to

give children control over audio equipment. In one study of children's views of a community strengthening and support program, I invited children to interview one another, using a recorder. Both interviewees and interviewers were enthusiastic, and we swapped roles so all children had an opportunity to be both interviewer and interviewee. In my study, one of the most striking aspects of this particular method was the seriousness with which the children approached their roles.

One of the things I thought to be very important in Deborah's paper — and an issue that is central to children's control — was contained in a footnote on page one. Deborah noted that children asked for their real names to be used 'because they indicated that using their real names says who they really are'. Often, researchers are encouraged to use pseudonyms in order to protect children's identity. In my experience some, although certainly not all, ethics committees seem to prefer the use of pseudonyms as a 'safer' option. In some cases, I would agree that care should be taken to protect children's identities. But in other cases, as in this study, children may be less concerned about confidentiality and more concerned with owning their ideas. Giving children the option to determine how they want to be referenced in any written work is an important aspect of respecting children and handing to them a degree of control.

Child protection issues

This issue of balancing confidentiality and ownership of ideas takes me to another issue that arises from Deborah's paper. One could see this balancing as an issue of the protection of children. There are some cases where revealing children's real names can be problematic. In one study I undertook on children's views of the care and protection system, one

young woman wanted her real name used, because she saw the research as a way of sending her message to particular individuals within the system. However, there was a real possibility that using her name could have exposed her to negative repercussions. We discussed the issue, and she ultimately decided not to use her real name. When there is no risk involved, children should have the right to decide how they want their ideas and experiences to be referenced. The key to respectful research would seem to be engaging in a discussion with young research participants.

The issue of protection also arises from Deborah's paper when she notes that one girl in particular requested a 'private chat' which at 'her suggestion [would be] held on the waiting chairs outside [the classroom]'. This seems to have been a good solution — the image I have in my mind here is of child and researcher sitting outside the classroom in a space that is public, but offers some privacy for a chat away from the other children and teachers. In a study I am currently conducting of children's views of child care I had one experience where children had drawn pictures and were sharing with one another what they were about. One little girl said to me 'just you — I just want to tell you'. Again, this was easily handled, we simply moved to a table at the end of the classroom at the end of the group session and had a private chat about her drawing. But the requests that Deborah and I — and I am sure others — have had for private chats does raise this thorny issue of when and how researchers and children should be alone. Researchers are often faced with the task of 'balancing' issues and determining on-the-spot how to best respond.

The importance of context

Deborah notes in her paper that the children participating in her study were — at the ages of five and six years — able to communicate effectively and competently through writing. Some children she describes as prolific writers. This raises the importance of understanding context. I have carried out research with children in Indonesia and while some children from elite schools might be able to write ideas at the age of six, for most it would be an impossible task. But in Singapore, the education system and priorities are entirely different. In a study in Fiji, children in one school — and only one of several — were uncomfortable with drawing. A method so often considered appropriate for research with children was not appropriate in that context. This takes us back to my first point about flexibility and the importance of being able to adapt when a method doesn't engage children.

Children's competence to participate in research

Deborah's paper demonstrates clearly children's competency and capacity to engage with ideas and issues and to give sophisticated insights into their social worlds and the social world around them. A powerful message from Deborah's case study is that very young children are sophisticated thinkers and communicators. My own current study with young children is in line with Deborah's conclusions here. Deborah talks about Renee, who was able to describe what a quality school may be from different perspectives: children, teachers, parents. This demonstrates that children are competent. Renee's deep insights also remind us that all human beings — regardless of age (child, adolescent, adult, elder) will have differing levels of insight — all of which should be respected.



8. Strategies and Issues in Including Children as Participants in Research on Children's Needs in Care: a Case Study

*Professor Jan Mason
University of Western Sydney
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Introduction

This paper discusses the research with children of an ARC collaborative research project between UnitingCare Burnside and researchers from the Social Justice and Social Change Research Centre of the University of Western Sydney. The overall aim of the total project, which commenced late 2000, was 'to develop a holistic model of out-of-home care to meet the needs of individual children and young people through the participation of children and young people and other adult groups in the research and thereby decision-making about out-of-home care'.

In this paper I briefly outline the methodological approach, some of the issues we confronted and strategies we used in employing a participative methodology designed to facilitate children's involvement as active participants.

Methodology

In attempting in this project to involve children and young people through participatory research methods we defined them as co-constructors of knowledge around their needs. To conceptualise and guide this process of co-construction (Mason and Urquhart 2001), we identified three different models of children's participation, utilised in — or relevant to — child welfare practice. These are depicted in the Figure 8.1.

In this diagram we differentiated between the models on a number of significant dimensions along a continuum of child participation. At one end of the continuum is a model which can be described as adult-centric, in that the boundaries for participation are established by adults. This model allows children and young people to speak, but about what, how and to what extent they will be heard is determined by adults. The child-dominated end of the continuum refers to participatory actions where children initiate and assert their rights to establish their own agendas.

At a mid-point on this continuum, we identified a collaborative model of participation, resembling what John (1996, p. 20) refers to as a bridge of participation, in which adults take a leadership role but assist children to contribute knowledge from their particular perspectives or what others have described as their standpoint(s)⁸. In this model children are understood as social actors and understood as competent to contribute to research and decision-making from their own knowledge and experiences. It was this model we sought to implement through our research methods and strategies in our research project.

8. Standpoint theory is a sociological term acknowledging that people 'see' or 'view' things differently, depending on where they are situated structurally in society. It brings into critical focus the power and privilege that naturalise hierarchical arrangements (such as those between adults and children) and argues for the validity for them, of the knowledge produced by those in least powerful social positions (e.g. women vis-à-vis men, children vis-à-vis adults).

Figure 8.1. Models of children's participation (drawn from Mason and Urquhart article in Children Australia 2001) with minor modifications.

	Adult-centric	Collaborative	Child-dominated
Initiation of participation strategy	Adults	Adults	Children (e.g. children's labour movements)
Ideological framework	Positivist/market forces, consumer involvement	Phenomenological/ constructivist	Minority rights, groups struggle
Children viewed as	Passive, incompetent developmentally incomplete 'becomings'	Actors, competent, beings, oppressed	Actors, competent, human beings
Locus of power	Adults through governance and best interests, asymmetrical	Questions the generational order, symmetrical	Children, empowered
Needs identification	Normative from psychological literature	Individualised, from listening to children	Asserted both as a group and individually
Method of decision-making	Adults structure procedures	Negotiation between stakeholders	Children-dominated
Knowledge	Adult authority	Opportunity for children to shape and contribute	Children experts on own lives, recognises and challenges adult power over children
Professionals	Superiority of expertise	Facilitate through alliances	Provide resources
Children's voices	Filtered	Reflexivity by adults and children facilitates children's voices being heard	Challenge and unsettle adults

We considered that our acknowledgement, as a research team of adults, of the power imbalance between ourselves and the children and young people was fundamental to implementing a collaborative model of participation. We needed to constantly seek to develop strategies whereby a balance of power between adults and children

and young people was negotiated. This required attempts at honesty and self-questioning. In team meetings we emphasised reflexivity in our interactions with each other, constantly questioning the assumptions, language and processes used in the research and in interpreting and reporting our findings.

Implementing a collaborative model — issues and strategies

Engaging children as collaborators

A major issue for us in engaging children collaboratively in this research was the tension between developing methods for sharing power, or control, with children and the need to take into account the embeddedness of children in institutionalised, asymmetrical adult–child relations. This tension remarked on by other childhood researchers (Cree et al. 2002; Gilbertson and Barber 2002; Hood et al. 1996), is particularly relevant when researching with children located in the child welfare, out-of-home care system. The researcher who wishes to engage with children in care as research participants must negotiate with gatekeepers at several layers in a hierarchically-ordered network, in which the child is at the lowest level.

The initial negotiations in this project took place with various organisations concerned to determine, first, that the researchers as individual adults were compliant with the requirements of the *NSW Commission for Children and Young People Act 1998* Working With Children Check and, second, that we were approaching the project according to different organisation's ethical guidelines. We needed to obtain approval from the research committees of both the University of Western Sydney and the UnitingCare Burnside Research Advisory Group (RAG) and, additionally, from the Department of Community Services Research Unit. The tension in the case of these approvals was that, while obtaining them was part of a very legitimate process of attempting to ensure children — as least powerful — were protected in their interactions with adults, the vetting processes was time consuming and risked

distancing and objectifying the children in whose best interests they were implemented. Here, while we had the opportunity to engage in the first and necessary level of dialogue in making ethical decisions about researching with children (that around ethical guidelines) we risked losing opportunities to engage in the second form of dialogue necessary to achieving ethical symmetry (as articulated by Christensen and Prout 2002), that which facilitates dialogue between researchers and research participants, in this case the children.

There was considerable variation in the extent of tension evident in negotiations at the next level, that of gaining support from various gatekeepers within the auspicing organisation, for researchers to contact and engage with children in the research. This variation was significant as gatekeepers' support or otherwise was the major factor as to whether particular children and young people participated in the research. Those carers who did consent to children participating, at least to the stage of giving consent or declining, frequently also supported them in practical ways to engage with the researchers. For example, by being welcoming and hospitable in their attitudes to the researcher; assisting children to question the researchers and enabling those children who wished to participate to do so by, for instance, transporting them home early from after school activities. When carers did not support individual children's participation, even to the stage of discussing giving consent to the research, reasons given were generally that the children in their care were developmentally, cognitively and/or emotionally incompetent to participate.

Hood et al. (1996) have commented that the attitudes of adults to children's participation in research is informed by role assumptions and perceived child protection responsibilities. Differences in assumptions

between carers and researchers became evident in seeking the participation of children in this research project. The researchers' requests to consult with children were based on assumptions about children as actors, with competence to make informed choices and therefore, if given information, able to decide for themselves whether or not to be involved in the research. The decisions of some carers aligned with these assumptions, while the decisions of other carers, as reflected in expressed attitudes to the researchers making contact with children in their care, reflected assumptions of children's passivity, incompetence and vulnerability. Neale (2002) has remarked, in relation to some legal contexts, that it is important to recognise that when adults make decisions on children's ability to participate, they are using their individual discretion, as nowhere is the concept of competency clearly defined and, further, issues of 'children's welfare are notoriously difficult to determine, let alone predict' (p. 456–458).

Establishing respectful relationships with children

The embeddedness of children in institutionalised child–adult relations also impacted — as it does for all children who participate in adult-initiated research — on the way we sought their involvement in a research agenda whose aims had been decided by adults.

Sharing control in negotiating research directions with children

In our first research team meeting we struggled with how to implement collaboration with children as active research participants in a research project whose parameters had already been established, as a consequence of interactions between government ARC-funding

priorities and organisational and individual researcher agendas. We sought answers to this dilemma in liaising with advocates for children, such as CREATE. On the basis of our consultations we added an additional step to the project. In this step we informed children and young people about the project and asked them if and how they would like to be involved. This step enabled a more in-depth approach to informed consent procedures than is typically the case. It occurred through the distribution to children and young people of a leaflet followed up by the researcher meeting with or talking on the phone with them. Phone discussions were generally held with children in foster care while, with children in on-site care, the researchers made themselves available for discussion about participation in the research at various locations and times that suited the young people. When children understood that the research was designed to provide them with opportunities to be heard on matters important to them, they generally expressed enthusiasm to be involved in the project.

The discussions at this stage were important to many of the children, in enabling them to get to know and check out the researchers. This process, while time consuming, was the beginning of an experience of mutual exchange between researcher and child. As part of the process of becoming familiar with the researcher, some children required several phone calls and visits. In the case of some older young people, considerable tolerance was required of the researcher in dealing with missed or constantly renegotiated appointments. This process was understood as reflecting 'where the young people were at' in their lives at the time they were involved in the project.

Sharing control with children in data gathering

Researchers negotiated the arrangements for collecting data with the children and young people by consulting with them individually, about when, where and how they would like to contribute to the research. Many children very explicitly accepted opportunities to exert some control over the process. For example, children and young people in one of the placements, after being shown the questions and tools and meeting the researcher, asked for a week to think over the project. They had had previous negative experiences of research and were now not sure they wanted to be involved. These children and young people advised that if they were to agree to be involved they would like to take part in a group with children of similar ages, and they wanted it to be a fun experience. More generally, children told us what times suited them to contribute and where they would like these contributions to take place. There was considerable diversity in the places in which children chose to be interviewed, including their own homes, McDonalds and, in one instance, a Chinese restaurant.

The majority of children and young people expressed a preference for individual interviews. There was a suggestion that we were unable to implement for the use of video and some suggestions for group interviews if, and only if, the children and young people were able to have a say in who were the other participants.

Within individual interviews, control was shared with children in a number of ways. Children and young people were provided with copies of interview booklets to enable them to follow the questions. All the questions were framed in a very open-ended way to allow freedom in responding, with the final question designed to maximise participant control of the content of their response, through developing their own

question. The opportunity to develop their own question was accepted enthusiastically by most children and young people, enabling them to define what was important for them to tell the interviewer. In data gathering sessions a box of fun activities was available. This meant that children could choose to draw, write their responses, select stickers or talk around a picture that reflected their responses. This gave them flexibility to respond according to their individual competencies and in ways in which they felt comfortable.

Some children and young people took a major role in controlling the tape recorder, to the extent of deleting from the tape what they did not want recorded. Children and young people overtly controlled what they told the interviewer, as in the instance of one child who spoke about her birth mother extensively whilst travelling in the car to the chosen interview location, but did not mention her mother in the taped interview. When reminded of the earlier conversation, the child made it very clear that she did not want that conversation on tape.

Sharing control with children in presenting data

The participants were given opportunities to review a copy of the transcript of individual interviews, as part of a process of ensuring that we had correctly understood what they were telling us. One young person requested the tape itself, so she could check out what she had said. When participants indicated that they wanted changes made to their transcripts, these changes were incorporated before analysis took place. Following analysis of the transcripts by the researchers, focus groups were held with 13 children and young people who agreed to participate in this stage. In these groups the themes and issues we had identified as significant to the children and young people in care were explored and elaborated upon and contributed to the final construction of their narrative.

In completing the final analysis of the findings and writing them up for presentation in the report on the project, we, as researchers, attempted to avoid the phenomenon described by Roberts (2000, p. 229) whereby 'children's narratives tend to be edited, reformulated or truncated to fit our agendas'. In so far as we were able to avoid confirming this phenomenon, it was by making sure we were led by the data. In reporting on this process, we included segments of data that we hoped were large enough to enable readers of the document to follow the process by which themes were established. However, at this stage of the research process we were again confronted by the tension inherent in employing a collaborative approach within the framework of an adult-initiated research project. In this our final analysis and presentation of the findings occurred within a knowledge base largely unavailable to children. This knowledge base included the literature relevant to the area and also our understanding of political and social realities relevant to the aims of the project.

Disengaging from collaboration with children and young people

Quite early in the research process the researchers involved in fieldwork signalled a dilemma around engagement with children and young people. What ethically were their responsibilities for maintaining relationships with the children and young people they had effectively engaged? This dilemma was in part resolved by the extent to which we provided choices in the project — some of the children and young people disengaged themselves, by choosing not to continue into the final focus group stage. For those who did participate in this final stage, we conducted thank you, certificate-giving ceremonies. This process

provided, in a concrete way, the opportunity for participants to 'wind down' and experience a sense of closure. An opportunity was provided to those children and young people involved in the final groups, who had an interest in the presentation of the project findings, to provide input into the structure of the summary report prepared for children and young people. Three accepted this opportunity and contributed to the way the findings were presented.

Concluding comments

In summary, I would argue from this project that there are significant opportunities for a collaborative approach to research with children, in line with the theoretical model we employed in this project. Such opportunities enable the voices of children to be heard on issues affecting them, to a greater extent than possible with an adult-dominated model of researching children. A discussion in one of the final focus groups indicated that we had been, at least somewhat, successful in developing a collaborative approach with the children and young people who participated. In this researcher-participant discussion the lead interviewer asked the children:

You are OK with us [two researchers] being part of this discussion?

To which the children responded:

Yes because you are really honorary children.

You are down at our level.

and

You are like us.

At the same time as acknowledging our success in collaboration, I would argue that the existing child–adult relations in our society mean that we also experienced significant barriers to developing a collaborative approach to researching with children. These barriers included structures established to gate keep around children’s vulnerabilities, adult constructions of children as incompetent and conflicts between children as research participants and adult interests, whether they are carer and academic career aspirations, or funding and other resource problems.

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Reflection 1

Naomi Priest

Brief description of the paper

This paper describes the research with children aspect of a project with Burnside UnitingCare to develop a holistic model of out-of-home care to meet the needs of individual children and young people, through participation of children and young people and adults in research and decision-making about out-of-home care.

Jan describes the participatory research methods used in the project, in which children were seen as co-constructors of knowledge about their needs. This is placed in the middle of the continuum of other models of children's participation in child welfare practices, from adult-centric to child-dominated. The collaborative model of participation, or a bridge of participation, has adults taking a leadership role but assisting children to contribute knowledge from their perspectives. Adults involved acknowledged the power imbalance between themselves and children and young people, and attempted to be honest and self-questioning about the research process and findings.

The paper describes the process of negotiating with gatekeepers within auspicing organisations and individual carers, time to establish respectful relationships between children and researchers, methods for sharing control with children in negotiating the direction of the research, shared control with children for data collection, shared control for presenting data, and then for disengaging from the collaboration with children and young people.

Brief overview of my own work

To date my research has largely involved children as participants and am keen to move to a more collaborative participatory approach, in which children are more active agents in research processes. I have employed collaborative participatory research approaches with Aboriginal communities and in community development programs.

Important issues/points

- Acknowledgement of tension between developing methods for shared power in the study with children, and the need to consider issues of children in institutionalised, imbalanced adult–child relationships; challenges of negotiating with gatekeepers at several layers (organisational, individual carers etc.) in a context in which children were at the lowest level of the power hierarchy.
- Different views of researchers and carers of children's competence as actors able to make informed decisions and choices.
- More in-depth process of informed consent, where children and young people were informed about the project, asked if and how they would like to be involved. Pamphlets, phone calls and relationship-building with the children, in some cases over several visits.
- Control shared with children for data gathering, including time for children to consider the questions and tools to be used, define the questions, decide where and with whom they would be interviewed etc.

- Awareness of the need to consider issues of shared control in the presentation of data, in the context of challenges of wider academic and research requirements, children did have input into summary report, and also to disengage with children and young people after fieldwork.

Summary

- Challenges of engaging with children in a context of institutionalised adult–child relationships, time required to negotiate processes for engaging children as collaborators, and the need to negotiate different assumptions about children’s capacities to engage and make decisions.
- Flexible approach to research methods, allowing children to develop questions and tools for data collection, decide where and with whom they will be involved, and challenges for analysis and presentation of data that doesn’t reformulate children’s narratives but still meets needs of external funding, research demands and realities.

Reflection 2

Kaye Scholfield and Paul Collits

The paper deals with strategies used and perspectives considered when involving young people in participatory research. It describes the development of a ‘collaborative’ model for children’s participation.

The model, presented as a table (refer Figure 8.1), indicates three perspectives of children’s participation in research. While there is a continuum from adult-centric to child-dominated, the research process adopted in this case study focused on the participation of young people that was neither adult-centric nor child-dominated but rather, collaborative. In this scenario, children are seen as co-constructors of knowledge around their own needs. As such, the children are regarded as competent to contribute to research and to assert their own needs. The collaborative model encourages reflexivity by adults and children, which assists children’s voices to be heard, and thus would accord respect to children as genuine collaborators.

As a framework for understanding the distinguishing dimensions along the continuum from adult- to child-centred, the models presented are very interesting. For example: where the locus of power sits in that continuum. The model suggests that an adult-centric approach springs from governance and ‘best interests’, while the child-dominated method empowers children. On the other hand, the collaborative perspective would ‘question the generational order’. Reflecting on these standpoints provides a structure for thinking about the power imbalances inherent in research which involves child participation.

The paper goes on to outline some of the difficulties which arise in ensuring young people are protected — such as complying with ethical requirements (which sometimes risk objectifying children) — at the same time as fulfilling the requirements of the ARC grant. The paper noted the necessity to negotiate with carers and others who are gatekeepers, and the difference attitudes can make. Other challenges arose from assumptions about young people's ability to participate, and how young people make informed choices about engaging.

The tensions inherent in navigating these challenges are well portrayed in the paper. Working through the practicalities (such as negotiating with carers) of children's participation provided insight amongst the researchers about the implications for adult initiated research when child–adult relations are so institutionalised. These impacts could be seen from the initial stages of the research (e.g. ethics application, gaining consent to participate) right through to the final stages of presenting data.

The paper thus provokes interesting dilemmas. For example: the role of young people in shaping the research when the research aims had been decided by adults. Does this raise the question of whether research can therefore be classed as truly collaborative if the aims of the research are not arrived at collaboratively?

This question is implied when the author observes that, while the research was adult-initiated, a further question arose about the availability of the findings to children when the knowledge base (including relevant literature) is largely inaccessible to them. Are we just acknowledging the children's voices, or are we really including them in a true spirit of collaboration?

The question thus arises, was there a sense amongst the young people that they were contributing to 'making things better'?

The paper was challenging — it clearly portrayed many of the tensions involved in working with young people as researchers and prompted further questions to ponder. It also led us to reflect on a research project we are involved in, and opened up some thoughts about the power imbalance implicit in these endeavours.



9. Taking Little Steps: Research with Children — a Case Study

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In 2005–06, the Institute of Child Protection Studies at the Australian Catholic University conducted a research project aimed to develop an understanding of family homelessness and to increase our knowledge and skills in engaging children in research on sensitive issues.

Funded by the ACT Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services, the project focused on how children who had been homeless with family members understood and experienced their homelessness. The findings were used to inform the system on how to best support children and families accessing support. Twenty-five children currently living in Canberra participated in semi-structured interviews, a ‘children’s

activity day’ and a photography exercise where they were asked to take photos of places where they felt safe, things that were ‘child friendly’ and ‘what makes a house a home’.

This paper describes the challenges we encountered and the strategies we used to overcome the ethical and methodological issues inherent in research with vulnerable children. In presenting our findings, we draw heavily on the advice given to us by the children who participated in the study, particularly the Children’s Reference Group.

Structural challenges restricting children’s participation and the development of a children’s reference group

It has been argued that, to be fully participative, researchers need to engage children in the early planning stages of the research process (Mason and Urquhart 2001). However, this proves to be difficult for organisations who are only able to invest limited resources to the development of proposals that have no guarantee of funding. Also, at this point experienced children’s researchers are often not employed and guidelines are not often established to enable children’s appropriate and meaningful participation.

We acknowledge that these and other reasons did not allow for children’s participation in the early stages of our project: its original scope and design were developed by research staff in consultation with partners in the ACT Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services. It was attempted to resolve a gap in knowledge that had been identified in previous research projects and by practitioners working with vulnerable families rather than by children themselves.

To redress this exclusion as soon as possible, a group of children who had been engaged in homelessness services were invited to participate in a reference group. At two workshops, children worked with the research team to develop a greater understanding of how they believed children wanted to be consulted about sensitive issues and to clarify the research question. At the first workshop, children were asked how researchers might make a child feel comfortable, how to make a space child-friendly, and how adults might show that they are listening to and respecting the views of children. They also provided strategies on how researchers might respond if children became upset throughout the research process. From these recommendations and from learning gleaned from the literature (see Noble-Carr 2007) the research team developed an interview schedule and other tools to engage children in the project.

At the second workshop, by trialling the various games, discussions and one-on-one activities, children gave feedback on the research tools. After modifying the interview design, children were interviewed by one of the researchers. Some days later, they were contacted by another member of the team and were asked about how the interview had been conducted, the effectiveness and 'child-friendliness' of the tools and the personal style of the interviewer. From this feedback tools were again modified before being used with other children.

The children's reference group also helped researchers learn about engaging children effectively. For example, some of the organised activities took longer and were more engaging than others and it was important to intersperse fun activities amongst the more 'serious' discussions to maximise children's attention and enjoyment. Other children who participated in the project seemed to be less anxious about their involvement when they heard that the process had been developed with assistance from children who had similar experiences to themselves.

We consider that the children's reference group played an integral part in the development of the project and provided invaluable advice and expertise that helped guide and direct the research process. A number of activities and tools were significantly changed after feedback from the children and proved to be the more engaging of the tools used.

Our experience showed that, for a reference group to be effective, adequate resources must be allocated and the research design must have enough flexibility to ensure that changes suggested by children can be acted upon. Our flexible and reflective research methodology allowed us to make changes as the project progressed in accordance with children's wishes and ideas.

Why we engage children in research

Since its inception in 2005, the Institute of Child Protection Studies has actively developed its capacity to engage directly in research about issues that affect children. This approach is driven by the view that children are social actors who have meaningful contributions to make to our community, that they can and do have something valuable to contribute, and that when children's unique perspectives are captured and understood research is richer and more meaningful. Although it has taken the research community some time to come to this realisation, children in our reference group felt that it was somewhat obvious:

*Kids should be asked about stuff that's got to do with them ...
They can tell you stuff you'd never think of — cos you're not a kid
... (girl, aged 7)*

Rather than eliciting their needs and views through adult conduits charged with gathering, translating and then promoting children's voices,

we have attempted to develop methodologies that enable children to participate directly in a sensitive, ethical and effective way.

This project discovered that homeless children's perceptions, understandings and expressed needs were somewhat different to those identified by adults (even those reflecting on their observations and direct discussions with children). The findings also challenged the way that homelessness had been previously understood. In seeing homelessness as being more about not feeling safe, supported, informed and connected to family, friends and community than about not having a house, children contested the approaches that services take to supporting families experiencing homelessness. Rather than excluding them from information-sharing, decision-making and problem-solving in an attempt to protect them, children asked that they be supported to understand their family's situation and to talk about the things that they had experienced and needed. They told us that they were very aware of the things that were going on for their families and felt disempowered when people refused to talk to them about their concerns. In particular, children who had been actively involved in 'protecting' their parent from family violence reported feeling disempowered and 'left out' when they were not included in any of the supports offered:

You know you've got that job to do, to protect your Mum. And that's all you think about and you stress that she's gonna get hurt if you're not around so it's hard to calm down even when there're people around to help. It takes ages to get comfortable again and give that stuff up ... And they have to know they're not really protecting you from hiding that shit, hey ... You know what went on, you were a part of it, they have to keep you in it (young man, aged 15)

They also felt that providing families with housing should not be seen as the only goal of homelessness services but, instead, should attempt to provide children with all the things that they need to feel as though they are 'home' (this includes space of their own, control over their environments, pets, predictability, safety and the knowledge that things were going to get better). They also argued that workers needed to see children as clients in their own right (currently SAAP guidelines do not see children in this way) and that until workers had asked children about their wishes and needs they could not fully respond to them or their families:

If they don't know what's going on they can't really help, can they? (young man who had been homeless as a child, aged 18)

These few examples proved to us the value of directly engaging children in research. These responses were often quite different to those proffered by these children's workers and parents and, even when similar to those of adults, helped us to more fully understand children's interpretations of their situations.

Children engaging in and benefiting from the research

At the first children's reference group workshop, participants identified some essential elements that they believed needed to be prominent when working with children. First, they believed strongly that kids should get something out of being involved in the research and therefore encouraged us to make the experience as enjoyable as possible:

You should play lots of games and have fun ... Make sure there's lots of toys (boy, aged 12)

It shouldn't be like school ... and you shouldn't try to teach people stuff (girl, aged 10)

This was in recognition of the fact that children were giving us their time and ideas, but also because the reference group thought that kids would be more likely to participate if they believed that it was going to be fun and engaging. On their advice we spent significant time at both the interviews and the children's activity day playing games with the children, sharing jokes and affirming their participation.

Children told us that they enjoyed this aspect, meeting new people, having fun with peers and researchers and talking about things that were important to them. This was highlighted by one young girl who, when asked to take photos of things that were special to her, took a photo of the tape recorder that had just been used to record her interview. The researcher questioned her on why she had done so. She remarked that the tape recorder was valuable 'because it has my words on it ... and they're special'.

Children also believed that kids would want to participate in the study if they believed that it would be beneficial for others and encouraged researchers to communicate this to children in their first interactions:

*Kids wanna make things better for kids, we wanna talk ...
Let them know that they'll be helping and they'll do it
(boy, aged 11)*

Some of the children, even though they had been engaged in the service system for a long period, shared that this was the first time they had been asked about their experiences. They said that they thought

it was good for adults to talk through their issues so that they could understand them better and have unexplained aspects resolved. Although it is not the role of a researcher to provide a therapeutic intervention, it would appear that having some of these discussions with children and families began a process where they could explore their experiences more fully. One mother who sat in on her child's interview was surprised by the things that her child remembered and reported feeling comforted by the fact that he could remember positive things from his childhood and that he felt safe because he was with her:

I was worried that everything would be too much for him, that he'd think I was a bad mother. That I just let him down all the time. But he says that things were OK. That takes a huge weight off my mind. He remembered things I didn't think he would remember, and maybe he needs to talk to someone about that stuff. And I can do that for him, now I know (mother of a 7-year-old boy)

An unanticipated by-product of being engaged in this project seemed to be that some families felt that could now talk about their experiences openly and resolve any challenges that had been highlighted.

Children in our reference group reported feeling proud about their involvement in the research. One child, for example, told his mother at the launch of the project report, 'see, that was my idea — they did that because of me! How cool is that!' while another told a politician that 'we have good ideas, don't we!' They often talked about the project and how they had enjoyed being a part of it.

Engaging children by engaging workers and parents

To recruit participants to the study we required government and community organisations to identify and actively recruit children and families. Services and workers therefore had to see benefit in the study, in making a commitment to allocate time and resources to recruiting children, and have enough information and skill to promote the project to clients of their services and allay any fears that they may have related to their participation. It also required workers to know children in their services and for them to believe that children were capable of participating. Workers also needed to feel comfortable recruiting children into a study that may highlight some of the weaknesses and challenges inherent in their practice, their services and the broad service system. It required them to see value in the children's contributions and to be open to potential criticism.

We experienced significant challenges at this stage of the process. Services reported that they were unable to identify families who they believed would want to participate or children they believed had the capacity to participate. Although not voiced, it appeared that a number of services were not convinced about the value of engaging children but offered to raise what they saw as the children's issues themselves.

Once workers engaged with families, parents also needed to feel comfortable about their children's participation. Their fears related to unwanted intervention from the child welfare system, the potential that their own weaknesses and faults as parents might be highlighted and that researchers might judge their experiences and their parenting. As such, the research team spent some time with workers and, in some instances, with parents explaining the research process, the purpose and intent of the study and the fact that we were wanting to understand

children's experiences better so that more responsive and appropriate assistance for both children and families might be provided.

Ensuring safety

One of the key justifications for not referring children to a project would be to ensure that children are protected from potentially distressing experiences. In a social research context, children may be at risk of experiencing discomfort when reflecting on traumatic experiences or when asked to consider unresolved issues. Although there is some evidence to suggest that children are more resilient and able to cope with discussions about sensitive issues than we had previously assumed (see Claflin and Barbarin 1991), we spent time with workers and parents to help them feel confident that we had taken steps to ensure that children did not experience unwarranted stress or anxiety.

We also spent time with the children telling them that we did not want them to feel upset or unsafe during the interview and informed them that we would stop the interview if they felt distressed. We directly asked the children to identify their interests from a list of topics to be explored in the interviews and if there were any topics that they chose not to discuss 'because it was too hard'. Two children decided not to talk about particular topics because they were 'hard times'.

When children in our reference group were asked about some of the other potential threats that they could envisage in this project, they raised the issue that some children might feel distressed if they felt researchers didn't believe them or when they believed that the stories they shared could have negative outcomes for their families. They also felt that children might feel uncomfortable if they believed that

the researcher or others might judge or misunderstand their family's circumstance:

Sometimes, you know, you are too scared to say anything. Well I know I felt like this anyway — especially at the start

If they're scared they're not going to talk. They need to know that they're OK that they're safe Zand that you're there for 'em

They felt that researchers should spend time explaining that they valued all input and that children didn't have to answer any questions that they felt uncomfortable answering. They suggested constantly affirming the child's responses and assuring them that they were not being judged. Although this suggestion was helpful, the research team did recognise that previous researchers had found that over-affirming children may lead them to answering questions in a way that they believed researchers wanted them to answer rather than how they would like to respond. As such, researchers tried to balance these competing approaches to ensure that the child felt safe to respond without hesitation.

Like others working directly with children, researchers must consider issues of child protection carrying out research projects so that both children and staff can be protected. Police checks were undertaken with research staff, who were also provided with ongoing supervision. The team considered the most appropriate locations and times for interviews and ensured that children, parents and workers were aware of the nature of the researcher–children relationship. This transparency and accountability proved to be useful in a variety of ways: workers felt more engaged in the process, families were more aware of the nature and scope of the project and felt more comfortable engaging in the process, and the team engaged in reflective practice processes that improved the project more broadly.

Children's control over their involvement

One of the key ethical considerations discussed in the burgeoning literature focuses on research with children is that of informed consent. It has been consistently argued that research must be presented to children in a way that they can comprehend so that they can decide whether to participate or not and how they might participate. Although most ethics processes require researchers to demonstrate that they have considered children's consent, or more accurately their assent (ethical guidelines often require a parent to consent to their child's participation and for this permission to be supported by children rather than vice versa), they do not always require researchers to ensure that children understand this right nor identify ways in which they might assert it.

In this study, children in our reference group believed that children should be given the opportunity to participate in the project but that they should be given a lot of information about the choices that they had and how they might realise them. As such, each interview began with the researchers talking about the project and why it had been developed. We told children that we thought that children were experts on their lives and that we appreciated their time and thoughts. We told them that our children's reference group thought that children should be 'the bosses' of the research and that they could choose whether they would like to be interviewed or not, what types of questions they'd like to answer and the ways in which they'd like to answer them. They were also given a rights page (Attachment 9A) which included an explanation of the things that they could expect; they were given examples of when these rights might be important; and they were given some ideas on how they might enact them (i.e. to stop the interview if they felt unhappy; to complain to 'our boss' if they weren't happy with how they

were treated). They were also told that if they were worried that their parents or others might be disappointed that they didn't talk to the researcher that they could just sit and draw for the half hour and that no one would ever know that they didn't talk about their experiences. None of the children chose to take up this option but fed back to the researchers that they appreciated the offer.

A number of children chose, however, to not answer particular questions and, in one case, stopped the interview prematurely — this child decided that she couldn't remember a lot about her homeless experience and that she had nothing further to add. Other children reported back in their feedback interview that they appreciated not having to draw or tell stories when they felt uncomfortable doing so:

If people didn't want to do something and you were mean and said that they had to do it, that would be mean, so it was good that you weren't mean

[The researcher] asked me to draw my house and I didn't want to (because it is hard to draw it because of the shape) so I didn't do that — we just talked about it. That was good. I didn't have to do anything I didn't want [to]

Children were also shown how to use the tape recorders that we used to record their voices and decided which parts of the interview were taped and which were not. Some of the children decided to stop the cassette at different points throughout the interview to ask the researcher questions and, on a few occasions, to tape over comments that they had just made. On these few occasions, it appeared that children wanted to correct a statement or didn't want them to be included 'cos they sound funny'.

Although we cannot ascertain whether every child who participated in the study understood the choices that they had before them, the children who provided feedback said that they knew that they could stop at any time and that they didn't have to answer questions if they didn't want to. The fact that some children chose to stop the recorders, to not answer questions or to change the ways they provided input suggested that they felt able to do so.

Concluding remarks

When this project was originally conceived the research team stated its intention to engage children in the process. However, we must concede that our expectations at that stage of the project were overwhelmingly understated — both in the level of interest we thought that children might have for participating in research and the amount of time and resources we needed to allocate. However, we believe that our project was both more rigorous and valuable as a result. As 'experts' in their lives and as observers of many adult-child interactions, children were able to provide poignant and important reflections on both their experiences as homeless children and also as subjects and contributors to research design and delivery. The impact that our report (which is primarily a collection of narratives) has had on the homelessness community and policy-makers has been significant and has also attested to the value that is placed on hearing children's voices directly. We still have much to learn about how to best conduct research with children, however spending time with children themselves and allowing space to critically reflect on our practice and their feedback allowed us to make some significant progress. We are greatly in debt to the children who gave us their time and energy.

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Attachment 9A

Charter of Rights for Children and Young People involved in research

You have the right to have your say



We believe that children and young people should be involved in any research that focuses on their lives

You have the right to participate in a way you like



It's up to you if you get involved in the research or not and how you want to be involved.

You have the right to be treated well



We will respect you for who you are and treat you well

You have the right to privacy



We will not identify you in our reports unless you give us permission.

You have the right to confidentiality



If you tell us that you aren't safe, that you are being hurt or if we are worried about you we will need to tell someone about it. Otherwise people won't know which specific things you told us.

You have the right to not be discriminated against



We will not treat people badly because of who they are or where they come from

You have the right to benefit from the research



We hope that our project will make things better for children. We will give you a gift for participating

You have the right to stop participating



If you want to stop working with us you can at any time.

You have the right to complain



If you're not happy you can tell us or our supervisors and we'll take it on board.

WANT MORE INFORMATION?



If you would like any more information about your rights you can talk about them to one of our researchers. If you're not happy with how you have been treated or anything about the research you can contact Morag on (02) 6209 1225.

Your Rights

A Charter of Rights for Children and Young People involved in Research.

We are committed to making sure that children and young people who are involved in our research have choices, are protected and get the most out of being a part of our projects.

You have the right to be informed



We will help you understand what you're being asked to do. We'll use child-friendly words and activities

You have the right to not be hurt



We will not hurt or tease you and we will stand up for you if others do



Reflection 1

Robyn Fitzgerald and Anne Graham

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on this paper. The following reflections are informed by our current work at the Centre for Children and Young People (CCYP) at Southern Cross University. We share with the author a close interest in the ethical and methodological challenges that arise in researching with children.

This paper describes a research project undertaken in 2005–06 which explored children and young people's understandings and experiences of homelessness. The paper takes as its starting point the idea that it is critically important to include the views of children as both participants and as researchers, but that doing so involves a number of ethical and methodological challenges. The paper describes how these challenges arose in relation to the participation of children and young people in two aspects of the research: first, as consultants or advisors to the project (through a Children's Reference Group) and, second, as participants in the research project itself.

The following reflections on this case study from Moore, Macarthur and Noble-Carr are influenced by our own work at CCYP. Since opening in 2004, we have undertaken research with children and young people about a range of issues that concern them, including separation and divorce, living in out-of-home care, schooling and education, as well as undertaking research exploring their understandings and views of participation and citizenship. We are also supported in our work by a youth consultative group, Young People Big Voice (YPBV), which comprises eight young people aged between 13 and 20 who provide us

with advice regarding the research education and advocacy activities of the CCYP.

There are many things we liked about this research project. The first is the reflexive and child-inclusive approach adopted by the researchers to the development and refinement of the research methods. A central feature of this approach was the establishment of a children's reference group. This group provided advice to researchers in relation to techniques in interviewing children, creating 'child-friendly' research spaces and ways researchers can show children that they are listened to and respected. We particularly liked how children in the reference group were invited to provide feedback and advice to individual researchers about their interview technique. This is one of many examples which illustrated the commitment of the researchers to accountable and transparent approaches to working with children in a research setting. The children's reference group also provided advice to the researchers about the research tools, and we were impressed with the commitment of the researchers to ensuring that the children's feedback was responded to. We also liked the range of research methods used in the study itself, including the audio-visual methods (such as photographing safe spaces) and hosting a children's activity day.

The researchers' reflections on the relational nature of children's participation are a second impressive feature of this paper. The section 'Engaging children by engaging workers and parents' is illustrative of the wider emphasis in the paper on the relational nature of children's participation, and how relationships with adults and peers affect children's participation, in this case in a research setting. The emphasis on the important role adults (such as parents and caseworkers) play to either support or resist the invitation and facilitation of children's participation is useful, as is the way the paper highlights the need for researchers



to engage productively with adult gatekeepers who play such an important role in whether and how children's voices will be heard in research and, ultimately, in social policy. The study itself also makes an important contribution to the 'evidence' base for children's participation by reporting a number of benefits of children participating in research for children and their families.

In any future dialogue with the researchers we would be interested to ask the following questions about the study:

- What challenges, if any, did the research project present in terms of seeking approval for the study from the university ethics committee?
- We would love to hear more about the children's activity day, including its purpose, what children and families thought about the day, and its role in the study?
- What would you say are the key learnings arising from your study regarding the relationship that exists between children's protection rights and participation rights in research settings?
- What ethical dilemmas remain unresolved or unsettled for you as a result of having undertaking this project?

Reflection 2

Roz Walker

I am delighted to have the opportunity to comment on the implications for practice of the project undertaken by Tim Moore and his colleagues in Melbourne throughout 2005 and 2006 which provided impetus for the discussion Think Tank on 'Involving Children and Young People in Research' which was hosted by ARACY and the New South Wales Commissioner for Children and Young People.

Brief description of the paper

The project describes the research processes and findings of engaging children and young people aged seven to 18 years in the research to obtain their understandings and experience of homelessness with family members. The findings were used to inform policy-makers and program providers on how to improve their support for children and families. Twenty-five children currently living in Canberra participated in semi-structured interviews, a children's activity day and a photography exercise where they were asked to take photos of places where they felt safe, of things that were 'child-friendly' and 'what makes a house a home'. They included the advice and voices of the children and young people who participated in the study, particularly the children's reference group, to present the findings.

The paper also describes the challenges encountered by the researchers and the strategies they used to overcome the ethical and methodological issues inherent in involving children and young people who are vulnerable in research.

Relevance to my own work

This work has similarities/parallels to the work I have been involved with young people in Hedland, many of whom are vulnerable, at-risk young people albeit not specifically homeless although some children involved are homeless. The experiences intersect with the interrelated factors that our research is about. The work reinforces the conclusions we have reached about the need to include young people in all stages of research as they bring a unique point of view to the process. They have a perspective about their experiences that needs to be taken into account by practitioners and policy-makers if we are to make a difference to their lives. Importantly in the work we are doing, 85 young people in a community survey felt that shire service providers are not listening to or meeting their specific needs — highlighting the need to do so in order to provide effective service.

Points of impress

There were several aspects that impressed me about this study. First the genuine, empathetic and passionate engagement of the research team, and their sensitivity and ability to reflect the nuanced complexities involved in engaging young people in research.

I was impressed by the processes to genuinely engage young people in the research which included establishing a reference group. However, reference groups can be a process of lip service and what impressed me most were the processes to overcome this. The research team held workshops with children and young people to develop a greater understanding of how children wanted to be consulted about sensitive issues.

As the paper notes '[t]he children's reference group played an integral part in the development of the project and provided invaluable advice and expertise that helped guide and direct the research process. A number of activities and tools were significantly changed after feedback from the children and proved to be the more engaging of tools used'.

This commitment to develop and adapt tools fitted with our own experience where the youth development framework — which serves as a planning, implementation and evaluation tool — was changed and developed substantially through the contributions of young people.

The contributions to research findings and outputs conform and reinforce the need for 'a flexible and reflective research methodology' to make changes as the project progresses and in accordance with children's wishes and ideas.

I was also impressed by the development of innovative methodologies that enable children to participate directly in the research in a sensitive, ethical and effective way. In particular, the importance of building in incentives and to engage young people in activities that are fun and affirming of their participation.

What can we learn from the study?

This study emphasises the difference in children's perceptions, understandings and expressed needs to those identified by stakeholders working with them. The findings also challenged the way that homelessness had been understood, showing homelessness as not feeling safe, supported, informed and connected to family, friends and community rather than not having a house. Children contested the approaches used by services to support families experiencing homelessness, and requested to be supported to understand their

family's situation and to talk about the things that they had experienced and needed.

Importantly, the study emphasises the need for workers to regard and treat children as clients in their own right and to take their wishes and needs into account in their response to children and their families. These findings confirm the value of directly engaging children in research and have potential learnings for policy-makers as existing SAAP guidelines and processes do not regard and children in this way.



10. Consent as a Source of Selection Bias and the Need for a Better Approach Process to Manage it

NSW Commission for Children and Young People

Ethical dilemmas

The role of a sample of children and young people is to represent a larger population of children and young people. There are ethical issues related to those in the sample, such as their decision to participate or not, and there are issues about the entitlements for those they are being selected to represent, such as the target population's voices/opinions/needs being heard through this process of representation.

Dilemmas are created if these different rights are in tension. This is illustrated in our work using random sampling. If a sample of young people is selected to represent their larger population and they are selected randomly, the sampling achieves its objective as long as all those selected participate or are replaced with others selected through the same random selection process. The introduction of consent can introduce problems: more broadly problems of selection bias.

Selection bias occurs when data is collected in ways which systematically distort it — where some factor determining the outcome of interest is

also at play in determining whether those affected by it will be included in the final sample or not (Heckman 1979; Shadish, Cook and Campbell 2002; Rosenbaum 2002; Winship and Sobel 2004; Rosenbaum 2005; Nichols 2007). The mechanisms of (reasons for, causes of) consent, then, are of interest where they may include factors that have substantial associations with the outcome of interest — for example where young people most at risk of something don't want to talk about it and hence are less likely to consent to do so.

As long as failure to give consent is random in relation to the outcomes of interest, then no bias is created by the act of failing to do so. But if there are significant mechanisms behind the propensity or likelihood to give consent then there is a possibility that the sampling objectives will be frustrated.

Failure to give consent can be of two forms: *refusal* ('No'), which can be active, such as marking the 'No' option on the consent form and returning it, or *passive*, such as not returning the consent form because consent is not being given; or *simple non-response* (a consent form is not returned, but not because consent is withheld). A non-response can be a form of refusal — where non-response is meant to be the same as a 'no' — or it can be due to other things, such as forgetting to send the consent form in, not understanding the request, etc.

The mechanisms of *refusal* are likely to be different to the mechanisms of *non-response* where refusal is not the reason.

Where the mechanisms for consent are related to observable factors, selection bias models and the like might be useful in managing the bias (Vella 1998; Fu, Winship and Mare 2004; DiPrete and Gangl 2004). But if the propensity to consent is related to unobservables (things the analyst doesn't have measures of) then the bias can't be managed. A primary

strategy for managing the problem of selection bias is to first identify the factors that may substantially affect both selection and outcome, and measure them. Not all such factors can be identified, or measured, so that the selection bias needs to be managed in other ways as well. Important among these are ways to reduce non-response and refusals — to ensure that those selected for inclusion according to design are in fact included.

Problems of selection bias exist across a range of research designs, and non-response bias has long been recognised as a problem for all sample-based research. The capacity to manage that bias determines research success or failure.

Complications are added for children and young people because gatekeepers are inserted into the consent procedure such as parents and school principals. These gatekeepers are asked to consent prior to the possibility of consent being passed to the child. Using parents as an example, a child's participation is contingent on the parental decision. That raises its own ethical dilemmas in the possible tensions between parent responsibilities and rights, and children's rights. Where parents' consent filters the procedure, not only are the mechanisms of refusal and non-response for the child to be taken into consideration, but also the mechanisms of refusal and non-response for the parents.

Evidence of a biasing effect for parental consent

The NSW Commission for Children and Young People undertook research into children's experience of work. In the course of data collection, procedures changed which incidentally provides information on the difference in the effects of active and passive consent for parents —

just one of the elements identified above, but perhaps sufficient to demonstrate that biases created through the consent process do exist and can be substantial.

Initially, data collection followed the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) State Education Research Approval Process (SERAP) requirements, with both active parent and child consent. The initial returns from parents were disconcerting, even when followed-up by schools: non-response rates to the parental consent forms appeared to range between 30–85%. As a result, the research agreement with DET was renegotiated to allow the Commission to sample children directly, using only their active consent and not the active consent of parents. Parents were still notified and given an opportunity to refuse participation for their children — but only passively.

There is, then, data from 498 children from 12 schools obtained under active consent from both parents and children (parent active consent group) and data from 1548 children from 17 schools obtained with active consent for children only and passive consent from parents (parent passive consent group). Schools were systematically sampled from the same frame using the same procedures. This allows simple comparisons of both the students and their responses under both conditions.

After adjusting for the fact that these students were selected through a cluster design (schools first and then students within schools), there are strong differences in the outcomes of interest: primarily whether they work or not.

For the parent passive consent group only 30% (95 CI: 27–35%)⁹ said they worked, while for the parent active consent group 69% said they had worked (95 CI: 65–73%). The parent active consent group appears to disproportionately include students that work. Perhaps parents made a decision that if their child does not work, the survey had nothing to do with them and hence they wouldn't respond to the consent request — it was irrelevant.

If students who work are distinctive there could be differences in their responses to other questions — the differences being either because they work, or because there is something special about them that leads them to work. Our evidence, scant as it is, suggests that there may be such differences: in particular, those that work are significantly more active across a range of activities, both organised and otherwise. There may be a distinctive mechanism relating to working or not that is then also implicated in the selection mechanism — but in this case, not yet in an observable manner.

Do children and young people make informed consent decisions within common consent procedures?

Obtaining formal consent is taken as ethical practice which enables individual children to exercise their rights to participate in research. However our research with children has raised two issues in particular which suggests that the situation is not as clear-cut as it might first appear.

These are:

- Does the consent procedure, as is commonly practiced, really serve the interests of the child with respect to their rights as individuals to participate in research or not?
- What are its impacts on the rights of the children they are selected to represent?

Fundamental to the notion of informed consent is an assumption of rational and considered decision-making: the pros and cons for a particular decision, or range of alternative decisions, are articulated, evaluated, and a decision made on that basis. Therefore that decision represents what children really want to do given the choices before them, given the reasons for doing so. But do or how do children understand what those choices are and the nature of the decision they are being asked to make? Do young people refuse to participate because they understand the issues of participation in a particular piece of research and have made 'an informed decision', or are there other mechanisms involved and consent is mostly not a rational decision of the type envisaged?

Arguably, few adults are rational decision-makers, let alone children. Certain elements of this rational decision-making model might come into operation, but mostly in imperfect ways. Instead, decisions are likely to be formed expeditiously and expediently, most often with an eye to what significant others are doing.

In our experience, when children are asked why they have refused or otherwise not participated in a study, explanations are likely to be 'because I didn't want to'; 'because it's too boring' (presumably the expectation of what would be in store); 'because I couldn't be bothered';

9. CI = confidence index.

or ‘what for?’ Decisions are heavily swayed by what others are saying and doing, particularly when the consent process occurs in a group setting. Non-participation is not consequent to ‘an informed decision’, but more a relatively unthinking impulsive response with no further reason for doing so — except that everyone else is or that the survey is taking place in class and the teachers seem to want the students to take it.

Young people may not be making a considered choice of whether to participate or not, but simply reacting to a more impulsive feeling that they didn’t want to, with no real explanation — and that if they didn’t have to, they wouldn’t.

This then leads to a critical question: is this ‘choice’ (which is really more a response than a choice) an exercise of the rights of children? Or is it a ‘pseudo-decision’ that effectively disenfranchises those young people from participating in research that may affect their own lives or the lives of other young people similar to themselves — but they haven’t understood that.

The rational decision-making model implied by current consent procedures stands in tension with current models underpinning the direction of research with children and young people, which are essentially constructivist, i.e. both communicative and developmental. We increasingly share a notion that children and young people have capacities to participate in research, though there are variations in those capacities. In many instances those children and young people need active support in developing those capacities so that their participation is real and not tokenistic. If they are not to be treated simply as the objects of research (who nonetheless need to sign a formal document of consent before the research can proceed), but rather as real participants, then they first need to be engaged in the purpose of the research, how

it might be meaningful to themselves or to others like them, and then understand how important and useful their contribution would be to it. Then, they can make ‘an informed decision’.

Much of the refusal of participation by children and young people seems to us to indicate a failure of engagement, often connected with a sense of irrelevance — ‘what has this got to do with me?’

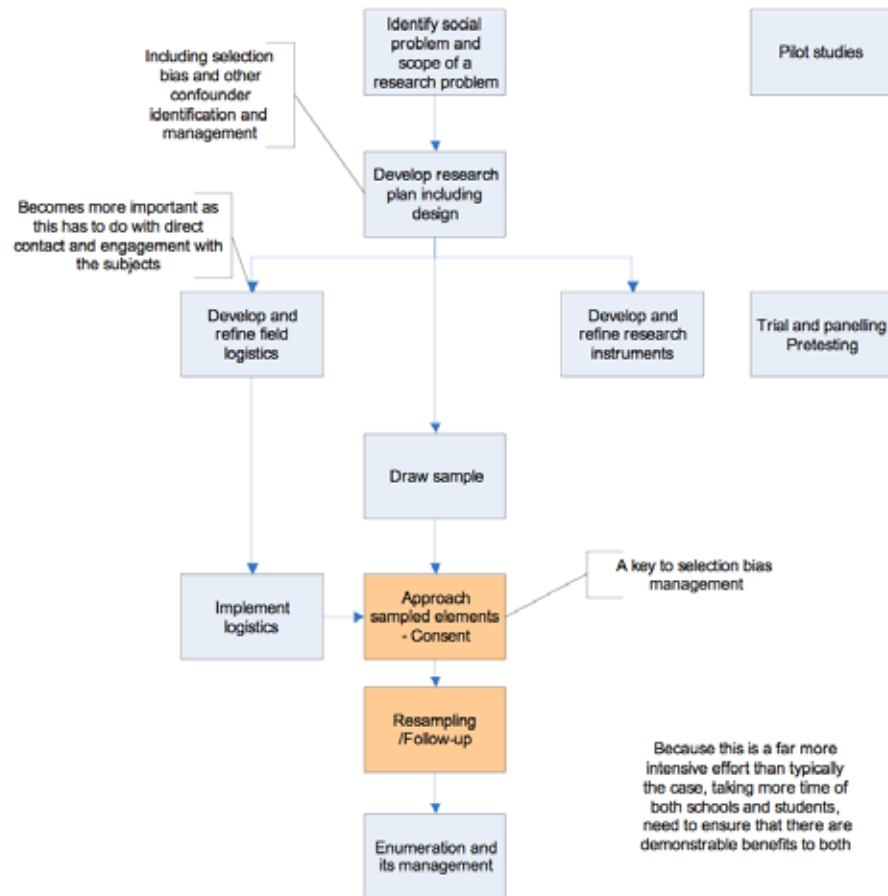
Developing that initial approach stage of an engagement is unlikely to be a simple thing: such as might be conveniently achieved through common consent procedures. Meaningful consent, and the real exercise of the child’s right to participate or not, can probably only be achieved within the course of an *authentic approach* — it needs to be a real process rather than a procedural gesture.

This inevitably suggests a need for more time, more resources, more effort in the approach phase of research (see Figure 10.1).

Too often consent is effectively a passive, *pro forma* process — a précis description is handed out, which the child may or may not understand, and the consent is signed or not. The result is not really informed consent but something far less than that, which can lead to effective disenfranchisement both of the sampled young person and all those that young person is meant to represent.

If, in fact, the current consent procedure does not enable the real exercise of those rights, but something else even detrimental to them, can the current consent procedure really be called an ethical practice? If it’s not a real ethical practice, but it can damage the ethical interests of both individual children and those they represent, then should it be a practice at all?

Figure 10.1. From problem identification to data collection.



Our view is that the current procedure is not an ethical practice, and is damaging to the rights of children and young people. That does not mean that we don't accept a need for consent, rather that there needs to be a real process of engagement with prospective subjects, within the course of which consent can be given. That process of engagement will be costly, as the procedure of dropping off consent forms and picking up consent (the convenient *drop-off, pick-up model*), is replaced by a model of genuine engagement. But this should become a new benchmark.

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Reflection 1

Rony Duncan

This paper asks the question ‘are our current consent procedures with children and young people unethical?’ It provides a definitive answer — yes! I believe this paper needs to be read by all members of ethics committees in Australia.

The paper draws on a fascinating ‘natural’ experiment that occurred as part of a research project. This natural experiment allows an exploration of the concept of selection bias as a consequence of our current consent procedures. The research project that is described in the paper entailed a change in consent procedures half-way through the project. For the first half of the project, young people were recruited as participants (to provide information about their work habits) and active consent was sought from their parents. For the second half of the project, passive consent was sought from their parents. This actually resulted in different ‘types’ of young people being recruited — a consequence that has important implications for research findings. When active consent was sought from parents, 69 per cent of the young people recruited were working. However, when passive consent was sought from parents, only 30 per cent of the young people recruited were working.

This implies that our current research processes with children and young people may be systematically excluding certain types of young people from research. If current methods of gaining consent are altering the type of data we are collecting we have a serious problem. It begs the questions, how does our current system need to change in order to avoid this?

Debate is ongoing about the need and appropriateness of gaining parental consent for research with adolescents. This paper offers a vital piece of empirical research to inform the current debate and progress it.

Reflection 2

Sharon Bessell

This paper examines the problems of an apparent selection bias in a study of children's work undertaken by the NSW Commission for Children and Young People (the Commission) and the role of consent. In this study, a significant proportion of parents did not return consent forms. As a response, the Commission renegotiated an agreement with the NSW Department of Education and Training whereby parents were no longer required to provide consent. Instead, they were informed and 'given the opportunity to refuse participation for their children — but only passively'. Active consent was sought from children, within the school setting. Interestingly, the results of the study differed markedly between the group for whom active parental consent was required and the group for whom parental consent was waived. The basic argument is that the consent process introduced a selection bias into the study and should therefore be reconsidered.

The issue of consent in research with humans has long been debated, and the dilemmas are particularly acute when children are involved. A specific challenge for researchers is the multiple layers of consent required when undertaking research with children. The paper raises several interesting and important issues around consent, four of which I will reflect on here:

1. Does the selection bias that may result from parents withholding (actively or passively) consent represent an ethical issue?

2. When should parental consent be considered necessary?
3. Are children and young people able to make an informed choice about consent?
4. Does the individual child have a responsibility to represent other children?

Does the selection bias that may result from parents withholding (actively or passively) consent represent an ethical issue?

The representation of the withholding of consent as an ethical issue is thought-provoking. I would agree that serious ethical dilemmas arise when children and young people who wish to participate in research are prevented from doing so because adults withhold consent. Such a situation may also violate children's right to express their views and have those views considered seriously. The issue of selection bias seems, however, to be somewhat different in nature. Here the problem seems to be one of rigour and legitimacy of findings rather than one of ethics per se (recognising that there are important areas of overlap between the two). Certainly, if researchers were to present the findings as rigorous, knowing that there had been a problem with selection bias, issues of professional ethics would arise. It seems, however, that the burden of responsibility falls primarily to the researchers, initially to ensure that there is no selection bias within an ethical framework and then to present findings in such a way as to make clear any sampling and methodological problems that arose.

When should parental consent be considered necessary?

The issue of parental consent is a vexed one. In some cases, seeking parental consent *may* expose children to certain risks — for example, in a study of children's experience of abuse it seems incongruous to seek consent from a parent who is themselves an abuser. It is, however, often difficult for a researcher to know who is an abusive parent, and it would be unethical to involve (particularly young) children in research about abuse without parental consent. The research discussed in this paper does not seem to be of a highly sensitive nature, but the broad principles remain relevant.

The age of the children participating in the study is not discussed in the paper, but is one important factor when thinking about parental consent. It is certainly difficult to argue that young people who are making a range of decisions about their lives (including, for example, about medical care) may be unable to decide for themselves whether or not they wish to participate in social science research, particularly when there are no foreseeable negative consequences.

Perhaps we should, however, be a little cautious in abandoning the concept of parental consent — or should at least first engage in robust discussion of the pros and cons. Several questions arise from this paper. First, we need to know why parental consent was not forthcoming from some parents. Did they actively decide not to provide consent, and if so why? Were they disinterested or apathetic? Or was it that they simply never received the consent form which presumably was sent home from the school via children?

Second, did parents see the research as irrelevant to them and their children? If so, this may have been disinterest, or may have been related to the information provided. Third, is it possible that parents did not

return the consent forms because their children indicated that they preferred not to participate? Such an explanation may not be considered likely in some quarters, particularly when parents are seen as gatekeepers from whom consent is to be gained if children are to be accessed. It is perhaps possible, however, that parents were led by their children's preference — particularly if children felt pressured to consent in the school environment. Perhaps parents simply did not bother to read the forms. Whatever the reasons (and there are likely to be several) it seems that we need to know more about parents' reasons (or lack of reasons) for not providing consent — particularly if we are advocating a shift from active to passive or no consent.

Are children and young people able to make an informed choice about consent?

The paper asks whether children are able to provide informed consent, suggesting that 'arguably, few adults are rational decision-makers, let alone children'. Based on my experience of conducting research with children and young people (and indeed adults) from a wide range of ages, backgrounds, experiences, and cultures I would agree that some children and young people — like some adults — find it difficult to understand the nature of some research. Most children and young people, however, do (in my experience) have the capacity to understand what is being asked of them, so long as the information is presented in an accessible manner and there is time to fully explain and answer questions if necessary. The point is well made that research processes need to be adapted in order to ensure that children and young people have the necessary information and time to make an informed decision — but I would argue that consent remains an important part of that process. As it is pointed out, signing a form does not equate to informed consent.

The important question is asked of why children and young people might refuse to participate in research, noting that some children and young people may not want to participate because they see the research as boring or irrelevant, or simply because they cannot be bothered. Such attitudes are frustrating for the researcher. We may be left without an adequate sample, or with an unrepresentative sample. We may need to spend more valuable time seeking out alternative participants. We may see much needed data slipping away. Nevertheless, I would argue that children and young people have the right to refuse to participate in our projects — regardless of the reason. To us as researchers, our research is of great significance; but children and young people may not see it in the same light. If we want children and young people to share their views and experiences, it could be argued that it is incumbent upon us — as researchers — to engage them, and to present our research as interesting and relevant. It is difficult to mount an ethical argument that children and young people should participate because we consider it important.

In my research, I have certainly encountered children and young people who do not wish to participate (and the associated frustrations noted above), but these are a minority. More commonly, I am struck by children's and young people's enthusiasm for sharing their ideas and making their views known.

Does the individual child have a responsibility to represent other children?

This paper makes the argument that the rights of children collectively are at stake within the research process. This is certainly the case, and speaks to the importance of rigorous and robust research. It is noted at the outset of the paper the possible tension between the decision taken by individual children and young people invited to participate in research and 'the entitlements of those they are being selected to represent'. This tension is seen as arising when individual children and young people do not wish to participate and feel no responsibility to do so. This is an important point. It seems, however, that the responsibility for representativeness falls to the researcher, not to the participants. To prioritise the collective entitlements, either real or assumed, of all children over the rights of individual participating children seems to increase the potential for exploitation and abuse of power within the research process.

Finally, the paper concludes with the important point that too often children and young people's consent is, at present, passive. The argument is made for renewed understanding of the dynamics of consent and for genuine engagement with children and young people. This call is well made. In searching for more responsive and meaningful models we need, however, to take care not to 'throw the baby out with the bathwater' (to use a somewhat ageist colloquialism). Consent remains an important component of ethical research, and this paper is useful in challenging us to think deeply about a range of important issues.



11. Involving Children in Research about their Health and Wellbeing

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Introduction

This paper will describe and discuss two case studies of projects conducted by our team that have involved children in research about their health and wellbeing. It will give an overview of methods used, discuss research findings, explore challenges and success factors, and make suggestions for future projects.

Project 1: Exploring barriers to social inclusion for children aged nine to 12 years from diverse cultural backgrounds (Davis et al. 2007; Davis et al. 2008)
— Elise Davis, Belinda Davies, Kay Cook, Elizabeth Waters, Lisa Gibbs and Naomi Priest

Background

Social inclusion is increasingly on the national and international policy agenda, and is recognised as a key determinant of mental health (Rychetnik and Todd 2004; Victorian Health Promotion Association 2005; Herrman, Saxena and Moodie 2005; Davis et al. 2005; Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care 2000; National Crime Prevention 1999).

However, until recently, discussions of social inclusion/exclusion have largely taken an adult-centred approach (Phipps and Curtis 2001) despite it being highly likely that children experience social inclusion/exclusion quite differently from adults (Ridge 2002). For children, social inclusion is defined as the 'social process through which the skills, talents and capacities of children are developed and enhanced so that all children are given the opportunity to realise their full potential, and to fully participate in the social and economic mainstream' (Donnelly and Coakley 2002, p. 2). There is growing consensus that social inclusion for children includes participation in social activities, social networks and school activities (Phipps and Curtis 2001; Ridge 2002; Adelman and Middleton 2003).

The critical need for research on social inclusion/exclusion of children involving children themselves has been recommended in recognition that children are best informed about their own lives and are therefore

best placed to report on the issues that are meaningful to them (Ridge 2002; Adelman, Middleton and Ashworth 2003). In this way, exploring children's experiences in research acknowledges that children have their own views and judgements that have the same moral legitimacy as those of adults (Fine and Sandstrom 1988). As well as these issues of ethics and values raised by involving children in research, there is also the need to explore appropriate methodologies for doing so that are respectful of children and with which children are comfortable.

There is limited understanding of children's experiences of disadvantage and social exclusion (Attree 2004), including how their experiences vary by cultural group (Backett-Milburn, Cunningham-Burley and Davis 2003; Milbourne 2002) or whether there are varying protective factors against the experience of social exclusion for different cultural backgrounds. Such knowledge is important in order to develop culturally appropriate social inclusion promotion programs.

Aims

This study aimed to identify the factors that contribute to social exclusion for Australian school-aged children from three cultural backgrounds using child-centred methods. This study was the first study internationally to involve children in examining differences and similarities in factors preventing children of diverse cultural backgrounds from being socially included.

Methods

Twenty-four children aged nine to 12 years from three cultural backgrounds were recruited via primary schools in areas of Melbourne that were identified as being of low socioeconomic status with a high

proportion of immigrant families. While neither financial disadvantage nor cultural background are synonymous with social exclusion, both are discussed in the literature as being closely linked (Hayes, Gray and Edwards 2008). The cultural backgrounds of the children were children whose parents were born in Australia and spoke English at home (nine children); children whose parents immigrated to Australia and spoke Chinese (Mandarin or Cantonese; nine children); and children whose parents immigrated to Australia and spoke Arabic (seven children).

Interviews were conducted at family's homes or at the child's school. Parents were asked to be in a separate room from the child during the interview as the researchers felt this would enable children to speak more freely and reduce the potential for parents to influence children's responses, as may occur if parents were present during interviews. This occurred for all but four of the interviews conducted with children from Arabic-speaking backgrounds, where one parent was either in the room or in close proximity at the parent's request. An interpreter was present at three of the interviews that were conducted with Arabic-speaking background families and all nine Chinese-speaking background families. The role of the interpreter was to assist in communicating with the child's parent, ensuring that the parent understood the aims of the study and was comfortable with their child being interviewed. An interpreter was not present at four of the interviews with Arabic-speaking background families, at the request of each parent, who felt themselves and their child were confident in speaking English. In this study, decisions about the presence of interpreters during interviews were predominantly made by parents. Ensuring that children also have a role in this decision-making process is an important consideration for future studies of this nature.

Eight primary care givers of the nine English speaking children were also interviewed for this study (two children aged 9–12 years in the

same family were interviewed) to explore similarities and differences in parental and child responses. All care givers were mothers, and six of the eight mothers were single parents.

Different interview guides were developed specifically for speaking with adults and children. While these provided general guidance, the interviews were designed to be conversational in nature and participant's responses guided the progress of interviews (Esterberg 2002). In order to build rapport with children, questions initially were descriptive in nature, such as encouraging children to tell the interviewer about what they did in a typical week, where they did activities, and with whom. Questions then explored what children did or did not like about their activities, whether they were happy with how they spent their time, and if there were other activities they would like to be doing. A full guide for the interviews with children is provided in Attachment 11A.

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and thematically analysed to identify themes arising from the data.

Results and discussion

Children from all cultural backgrounds described limited social interactions, and limited involvement in school activities and community activities. They were also able to identify individuals, institutions and structures responsible for acts of exclusion. Barriers such as bullying, economic resources, parental permission, lack of time and inability to attend school camps, differed depending on the child's cultural background. Arabic- and Chinese-speaking children were less likely to describe the impact of financial difficulties on their participation in activities, possibly because of the importance of respect for parents and adults within these cultures.

This study found that children as young as nine years were able to answer questions about their social experiences (refer Attachment 11A). It was also found that it was possible to discover information about their views of barriers to exclusion without resorting to direct questions which could highlight negative experiences. A rich description of children's experiences was able to be obtained verbally. Exploring other methods of data gathering such as use of visual media through photographs, movie-making, or encouraging children to keep diaries or journals about their experiences may be useful for future studies in this area.

Parents also described their children as having limited participation in school and community activities, and identified many similar barriers including financial resources and bullying. Conversely, parents also described concerns about child safety within the neighbourhood and insufficient community facilities such as parks as also limiting their child's social participation, although children did not raise this issue. While children identified cost as a barrier to not being able to participate in activities, parents also described not valuing some activities such as school camps and hence not being worth the financial cost. Children also described how they self-excluded from activities due to concern about their family budget, and not telling their parents about activities they wanted to do.

This study highlighted similarities and differences in children's and parents' perspectives on experiences of social exclusion and the need to incorporate both viewpoints in gaining a rich description and in developing solutions. Future research with children and parents of other cultural backgrounds is planned to explore these issues in more detail and develop appropriate interventions to address issues raised. Involving children as active participants in designing the research questions, data collection tools, and analysis of the results, as well as in developing solutions to issues they

identify will be an important aspect of future work in order to move beyond involvement of children in research as participants to engaging them as active agents in the research process. While the interview guide used with children in this study did enable rich information to be discussed, exploration of how children felt answering the questions, whether there were other questions that should or should not be asked, the use of data collection tools other than interviews, as well as their perspectives on using interpreters, would also be worth further consideration.

Project 2: 'Think Aloud': Using qualitative methods to explain discordance in parent-proxy and child self-reported health related quality of life (Davis et al. 2007) — Elise Davis, Caroline Nicolas, Elizabeth Waters, Kay Cook, Lisa Gibbs, Angela Gosch, Ulrike Ravens-Sieberer

Background

Health-related quality of life (HRQOL) is increasingly used as an outcome measure in medicine and health fields and there are now many generic and condition-specific instruments for child HRQOL (Bjornson and McLaughlin 2001; Davis et al. 2006). Many of these include both parent/proxy and child report components (Davis et al. 2006), however parent/proxy reports of HRQOL are only moderately correlated with child reported HRQOL (Eiser and Morse 2001). Little is known about why these scores differ (Davis et al. 2006). Where parent/proxy HRQOL is used to guide clinical decision-making, understanding these differences is argued to be particularly important, and both researchers and users of

outcome measures have called for qualitative research to explore how and why scores are different (Vance et al. 2001).

Aims and methods

This study used qualitative methods to explore differences in parent and child reports of HRQOL, focusing on three potential explanations. These were that parents and children: base their answer on different experiences; use different response styles; or interpret items differently. A 'think-aloud' technique (Forsyth and Lessler 1991) was used in which participants were asked to verbalise their thoughts while responding to questions from a standard HRQOL instrument (KIDSCREEN; Ravens-Sieberer et al. 2001).

KIDSCREEN is a generic HRQOL instrument targeting children aged eight to 18 (Ravens-Sieberer et al. 2001). It consists of 10 dimensions: physical wellbeing, psychological wellbeing, mood and emotions, self-perceptions, autonomy, parent relations and home life, peers and social support, school environment, bullying, and financial resources. This study used the 27 item version of KIDSCREEN, constructed as a shorter version of the KIDSCREEN-52, with a minimum of information loss and with good psychometric properties. KIDSCREEN-27 measures physical wellbeing, psychological wellbeing, autonomy and parents, peers and social support, and school environment.

The KIDSCREEN items assess either the frequency of behaviour/feelings or, in fewer cases, the intensity of an attitude. Both possible item formats use a five-point response scale, and the recall period is one week. Rasch scores are computed for each dimension and are transformed into T-values with a mean of 50 and a standard deviation of 10; higher scores indicate higher HRQOL.

A convenience sample of 15 parent–child pairs was recruited. Children were aged eight to 12 years and attended six government-funded schools in low and middle socioeconomic suburbs. Qualitative interviews were conducted in the family home by two researchers. Parents and children were interviewed simultaneously in separate rooms to minimise parental influence on children’s responses, and participants were asked to share their thoughts with the interviewer while considering their responses.

Prior to commencing the interviews with the children, researchers spent 10–15 minutes talking to the child about their day and their interests to build rapport and help them feel comfortable. Children were often keen to show researchers their favourite toys or games, although a few children were quite shy and longer was needed to help them to be comfortable talking to the researcher.

The interviewer used three prompt questions for each item based on the responses given, including *‘tell me why you chose [response]’*, *‘why didn’t you choose [higher/lower response]’* and *‘what does [item] mean to you?’*. For example, for the item ‘has your child felt fit and healthy’, if a parent only responded that their child ‘seldom’ felt fit and healthy, the interviewer would facilitate the think-aloud process by prompting *‘tell me why your child seldom felt fit and healthy’*, *‘why didn’t you choose never or usually?’*, and *‘what does being fit and healthy mean to you?’*.

Qualitative content analysis was carried out by two researchers to identify patterns of responding and definition of terms used by parents and children, and a list of inductively derived response types and styles developed. This allowed for comparison of styles and responses between parents and children.

Results and discussion

Concordance across parent–child pairs was examined. Two dimensions of concordance were examined: parent and child choosing the same answer categories on KIDSCREEN, and parent and child using the same reasoning behind their answer.

A full discussion of concordance patterns between parent and child in terms of rating of items and parents of reasoning across the items of KIDSCREEN is not possible here and is reported elsewhere (Davis et al. 2007). This study did find that differences between parent/proxy and child reports of HRQOL may be related to variations in response styles with several differences between parents and children identified. Children often provided more extreme scores (never, always) while parents rarely did so, explaining that they felt they didn’t know enough about their children’s lives when they were not with them to provide such definite answers. Children tended to rate items and then provide an explanation, while parents tended to discuss the item and then select their answer. Children also tended to rate items based on a single example while parents considered multiple examples. Parents also usually tended to try and answer questions based on what they thought their child would say.

This study found that parents’ and children’s responses to HRQOL items are often based on different reasoning. This suggests that even if parents and children report similar scores, this does not necessarily indicate concordance. Similar scores may in fact be coincidental if parents and children are using completely different reasoning styles for their answers. These results highlight the need for caution when interpreting concordance scores and the need for more application of think-aloud techniques in the development of questionnaires in order to accurately reflect the views of both children and parents.

Final thoughts and discussion

These projects highlight two examples of involving children in research as participants, and provide examples of differences in information gathered when exploring the perspectives of children and parents. While involving children in research can be challenging, particularly when working with children and families of different cultural backgrounds, the added depth of information gained, as well as the importance of valuing the unique perspectives of children about their own lives, means that doing so is an important task. We are keen to explore further ways of involving children in research as more active agents in the research process itself and in developing solutions to issues and challenges they experience in their daily lives. Doing so presents particular challenges when working within the constraints of health research funding and systems that can limit the length of time available to researchers to build relationships with children. Further development of infrastructure and systems that are supportive of respectful and rigorous child-centred research is important to move this critical area of work forward.

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Attachment 11A

Interview Schedule for Children

We want to know what your life is like and what type of things you do. We are going to ask you a few questions about your life. If you don't want to answer any questions that is completely fine, just let me know and I can move on to a different question.

Activity and Participation

1. Can you tell me what type of things you do in a typical week? (i.e. school, activities, sport, hobbies, catching up with friends).
2. For each activity: Who do you do this activity with? How do you get to the activity? Tell me any good or bad things about the activity? What do you need to do this activity (i.e. soccer boots)?
3. Why do you do these activities instead of other activities?
4. What other activities would you like to do? Why do you think you aren't involved in these?
5. Are you happy with the way you spend your time? What else would like to be doing?
6. How do you spend your weekends?
7. Do you sometimes go to birthday parties/movies?
If not, why not?

School

1. Tell me about your school. What is your teacher like?
2. What are the good things about school?
3. Is there anything hard about school? Anything or anyone you don't like?
4. Do you feel that you fit in at your school?
(Are you comfortable?) Why or why not?
5. Do you go on school camps/excursions? If not, why not?

Social Networks

1. Tell me about a time when you talked to someone about a problem/difficulty you had. I don't want you to tell me about what your problem was, but can you tell me why you chose that person to talk to and how talking to them made you feel?
2. Are there other people you talk to about your problems as well? Tell me about them.
3. Tell me about your friends (including children you go to school with). What is it like to hang around with them? What do you think your friends think about you?
4. Do your friends often come over to your house? Do you go to other people's houses? How do you feel about the amount of time you spend with your friends?
5. Do you have friends in your neighbourhood that you play with? If so, how often do you play with them?



Reflection 1

Reesa Sorin

'Involving Children in Research about Health and Wellbeing' by Naomi Priest reports on two projects that have been conducted 'to engage children in research about their health and wellbeing'. Assuming that 'children are best informed about their own lives', the first project, 'Exploring barriers to social inclusion for children aged nine to 12 from diverse cultural backgrounds' involved interviews with 24 children, nine with Australian-born parents, nine with Chinese-born parents, and seven with parents born in an Arab country. I am not sure whether they were chosen because they were children who felt excluded. Parents who were Australian-born were also interviewed. Findings included that 'children as young as nine years were able to answer questions about their social experiences' and 'it was possible to discover information about their views of barriers to inclusion without resorting to direct questions which could highlight negative experiences'. With similarities and differences in child and parent responses, it concluded that there is a need to 'incorporate both viewpoints in gaining a rich description and in developing solutions'.

The second study, 'Think Aloud: Using qualitative methods to explain discordance in parent-proxy and child self-reported health related quality of life' took the idea of differences in child and parent reports further. Fifteen child-parent pairs with children between eight and 12 were interviewed in separate rooms of their houses, using questions from 'Kidscreen' but asking them not only to answer, but to verbalise the metacognitive processes that led to their answers. The study found that 'differences between parent/proxy and child reports ... may be related to

variations in response styles'. For example, children provided an answer and then an explanation whereas parents 'tended to discuss the item and then select an answer'. The study found that parents' and children's responses are often based on different reasoning, so even if they had similar scores, their reasons for choosing their answers were different. It [the study] advocated for 'more application of "think-aloud" techniques'.

Relationship to my own work

This paper deals with children in middle childhood, whereas my work is with younger children, in early childhood. However, my own child went through his middle childhood years and is now an adult. I work in education; Naomi works in health. So her experience is as a researcher and health expert, whereas mine is as a researcher and teacher. I think this may account for my concern about some of the strategies used in the studies described.

Issues/points about the study

As an early childhood educator, a major concern is child safety. In the first study, nine to 12 year olds were interviewed in their homes or at the child's school, with the parent's present, which seems safe enough. But the parents were asked to be in a separate room. Four of the Arabic parents must have objected, so stayed in the room or in close proximity. In the second study, parents and children (aged 9–12) were interviewed simultaneously by different researchers in different rooms. I recognise that these children are older than early childhood, but I am still uncomfortable with them being isolated from their parents, and wonder why it was only the Arabic parents who objected. I think this is an issue that Naomi could further discuss in this paper.



I particularly liked the 'think aloud' technique. Even if children answered first and then reflected on their thinking process, they did so and their responses provided a deeper insight into their thinking, which in turn highlighted the 'need for caution when interpreting concordance scores' as the same answer can result from very different processes.

What can we learn from the particular emphasis of the study?

In fact, the 'think aloud' technique was my key learning from this paper, and one I will take into my own research. I would, however, examine issues such as separating children and parents and only interviewing parents who are Australian-born and proficient in English.

There may have been a wealth of other strategies and learning from these studies. However, they are not reported in this paper.

Reflection 2

Deborah Harcourt

Focus

Naomi Priest's paper presents two case studies about children eight to 18 years' health and wellbeing. The case studies focus on social inclusion/exclusion, seeking children's experiences of social exclusion and disadvantage so that culturally appropriate social inclusion programs could be developed. The studies aimed to uncover the anomaly between parent and child reports on health-related quality of life as little is known about why the reports so different. The paper aims to present the methods that were used, examine challenges and successes of each project

Relationship to own work

I can make connections to data collection tools and the affirmation of children's understandings.

Points of impress

First, I am impressed that the health sector has begun to ensure that there is a space for children's voices to be heard in matters of health. Project 1 focuses on children of different cultural backgrounds, which begins to broaden the invitations to be heard. The paper examines the complexity of research with children and research with non-English speakers in an English speaking environment and exposes some of the challenges involved (e.g. needing to conduct interviews through an adult interpreter). It also raises the real issues of 'cultural collisions',

particularly around sensitive issues (money, relationships) where respect is paramount to the child.

In Project 2, a researcher interviewed a child and a parent and exposed the issue of time to get to know a child — highlighting that 10–15 minutes is not sufficient to build a research relationship.

Summary

The paper acknowledges the importance of the child's voice — this demonstrates that fields outside of education are 'listening'. We need to consider cultural sensitivities as well as methodologies that support children's participation, relationships and time as crucial issues.



12. Learning from Learners — Early Childhood Voices in Research

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I first began talking with children when I was a child. Their thoughts informed me and helped to trigger my imagination as my learning and development grew and took the directions that it did. As an early childhood educator, I continued to talk to children, about how they perceived the world and what they wanted and needed to learn. Fortunately, in my experiences as an early childhood teacher, curricular decision-making has been open enough to allow me, operating quietly in one classroom, to accommodate children's voices. I am pleased that the Queensland Early Years Curriculum is written as a play-based, collaborative one that encourages children's input into their learning. This is based on the Reggio Emilia and new sociology of childhood's conceptualisation of the agentic child.

The agentic child is capable and competent, learning and growing through interaction with others (Corsaro 1997). Within this construct, childhood has social standing of its own; children are positioned as 'being' rather than 'becoming' (James, Jenkins and Prout 1998). Gandini (1993, in QSA, 2006) states: '[c]hildren are strong, rich and

capable. All children have preparedness, potential, curiosity and interest in constructing their learning, negotiating with everything their environment brings to them' (p. 10). Adults — such as teachers and parents — become co-learners who negotiate, challenge and guide while sharing power with children (Woodrow 1999). Research or any other relationship between adults and children is with children rather than about them. Power is negotiated between the researcher and child participants in data collection (Fasoli 2001). Children's voices are given serious consideration (Sorin 2003).

Research in early childhood education generally involves children in some capacity, whether it is how they respond to various pedagogical initiatives, how their parents or teachers interact with them or what understandings they bring to a situation. Unfortunately in the past, much of this research has given children limited voice — positioning them as innocent, incompetent and in need of an adult voice to confirm their place in the research. When I began my doctoral research into preschool (three- to five-year-old) children's emotions, I included children through a focal group interview and case studies, but assumed that teachers and parents would be better informants. At best I had hoped that children would recognise some emotion words and confirm that they had experienced the emotion.

What I found was that many children described experiencing a range of emotions, often not apparent to their parents and teachers; and that their descriptions of experiences and expressions of emotions not only confirmed their understanding of the emotion, but also enriched the data collected by this research.

Children provided data in the form of words, dramatisations, drawings and chants. I began to see children as agentic and capable of

participating as reliable informants in the research process. Follow-up cross-country research into children's emotions welcomed child-input as focal to the study.

Since my research into emotions, I have been involved in other research projects where children were active participants in data collection. These include conceptualisations of childhood research, metaphors for teaching and learning research, and school readiness research. The methodology for each of these research projects is described below, followed by a discussion of benefits of research with children.

Methods

My emotion research investigated the presence of eight basic emotions in preschool-aged children (focusing on the emotion of fear), how young children demonstrate emotions and how adults respond to these displays. To collect data, I attended each of four different types of early childhood venues for a half day per week over a period of six months. From the onset I was introduced as a PhD student and early childhood teacher and my research was explained to all stakeholders. My role was that of participant observer/interviewer. I have many years of experience as an early childhood teacher, and as a participant I assumed similar responsibilities to those of other staff in that I interacted with children and parents, set up and delivered various activities and input into planning for future sessions. Over the course of time, and with this background, I developed good rapport with children, parents and staff and became accepted as another teacher in each of the venues (Irwin and Johnson 2005). All interviews were held in the early childhood venues, with parent and teacher interviews held mainly in staffrooms

or in classrooms before or after the school day. Parents and teachers were given a written checklist, which asked whether each emotion had been observed in the focal child. They were instructed to tick 'yes', 'no' or 'unsure' and were given a section in which to comment (optional).

Children were interviewed in focus groups of four or five, within the classroom context. This was to create a comfortable situation where children participated in the focal group activity with others, while the rest of their classmates were also participating in various classroom activities (Irwin and Johnson 2005). No child was removed or isolated. Questions were verbal and included:

Do you ever feel [happy, sad etc.]? This question requires only a 'yes' or 'no' answer, so is relatively easy for a young child and as a way to begin an interview. Irwin and Johnson (2005) suggest that 'rather than opening the interview with the traditional open-ended questions, we have found that a series of direct questions can help a child to begin to engage in the interview process' (p. 825).

If so, what makes you feel [happy, sad etc.]? This question requires more thought and an answer that relates to a child's personal experience.

When you feel [happy, sad etc.], *how do you show it so that other people know?*

Responses included: *I feel angry when my brother is hurting me and he, and I'm tired and I'm having a sleep and Jason just says 'Matthew, Matthew, look at this! My face gets angry. [Makes face and clenches fist]. That's when they get even pinker. That's what happens to my arms when I get angry*

(Matthew¹⁰, age 5; Sorin 2003). Children were encouraged to respond to questions in any way they chose, whether it be verbal, making a face or gesture, drawing, dramatising etc. If a child did not understand a question, I tried to explain, and this may have influenced their responses (Irwin and Johnson 2005). It may also have provided an opportunity for children to learn the language of feelings, an important skill in the development of emotional literacy. If a child was not interested or unable to respond, they were free to withdraw from the interview.

During my time in the early childhood classrooms, I wrote extensive observations, which helped me to understand and interpret data collected. As I got to know the children, teachers and families, I was approached to intervene in a few situations, including ones where children had exhibited a great deal of fear. My written anecdotes and work samples collected from these interactions became case studies for my research. For example:

I read Wade the story, 'I'm not scared'. When the child in the story said he isn't scared of ice skating, Wade said he's not even scared of roller skating. The child in the story is scared of the dark in his room. Wade told me that he has a television in his room and he watches the Simpsons as he goes to sleep. The boy in the story is afraid of monsters in his room. Wade remarked: 'He might be dreaming' (Sorin 2001)

Conceptualisations of childhood research examined the images preschool-aged children, parents and early childhood educators have of childhood and young children. Participants were recruited from two kinds of prior-to-school services in Australia and in Canada; one within a school context and one operating separately from a school. One service had a high indigenous population while the other was largely non-indigenous. I attended each service largely for data collection, but as an early childhood teacher I also participated in classroom activities between interviews. As before, adults were interviewed in staffrooms and children were interviewed in their classrooms during free play time. If a child chose not to participate because they preferred to play (Irwin and Johnson 2005), their interview was rescheduled or cancelled.

Participants were asked to describe childhood as they experience(d) it as a child. Adults were further asked to describe childhood as they see it today. Rather than set questions, I used a narrative inquiry approach, asking participants to tell me stories. Adults were asked to think back to their own childhoods and also to reflect on childhood today. Children were asked to tell me about what it is like to be a child; what they perceive are the good and bad aspects of childhood. In narrative inquiry, data collection 'is a collaboration between researcher and participants' (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, p. 20) where the researcher's voice and subjectivity are recognised as stories are constructed and reconstructed from peoples' lived experiences (Daiute and Lightfoot 2004). Through this method, the idea that 'assisting a participant in finding words or concepts might compromise the integrity of the data' (Irwin and Johnson 2005, p. 826) could possibly be overridden by the collective narrative where researcher's and participant's stories scaffold each other.

10. All names in this paper are pseudonyms to protect participants' privacy.

An example of a child response when asked about being a child is: 'It's a bad life for me because I don't get everything that I want. I don't get everything. Sometimes ... I get some lollies and stuff, but if my mum doesn't have money, she can't get me some' (Sorin 2007)

In my metaphors for teaching and learning research, year 1 students and third year pre-service teachers were asked to draw and describe their metaphors of teaching and learning. Both the adult and child learners were workshopped about metaphors — what they are and how they can help to describe and understand concepts, using pedagogical strategies appropriate to each group and positioning me as teacher as well as researcher. Participants were then asked to create a visual metaphor that could be supplemented with a story. One child drew himself as a soccer player, kicking the ball towards the goal. He said: '[As a learner] *I'm quick and I keep getting scores*'.

My school readiness research explored the concept of readiness for learning and development in the school years, and how community services — particularly those funded by the national Communities for Children initiative — can work in an integrated way to help all stakeholders become ready. Input came from community partners who run programs within the initiative, but also from Emma, a child in her first year of formal schooling, and her mother. I could see the value to including a child's voice in this research as child agency is an important consideration in the school readiness process (Sorin and Markotsis 2008).

Emma already knew and was comfortable with me because I had volunteered as a teacher for a half day per week in her prior-to-school venue in the year before she began formal schooling. The interview was informal and was held in her home, with her parents and two brothers

present (Irwin and Johnson 2005). While I had intended to only interview Emma, her mother, a pre-service teacher, had a great deal to share and the conversation between the three of us added much to the data. Irwin and Johnson note 'parents scaffolding of stories added a richness and completeness that might not have been accessible on first or even subsequent meetings' (2005, p. 827). Emma told me that on her first day of formal schooling, she felt '*shy, because I didn't know any of my friends ... I didn't cry but my mum cried*' (Sorin and Markotsis 2008).

Learnings

From my experiences, I have found a number of benefits to involving children in research. They include: children's voices can be deep, rich and insightful; their input can fill in gaps, or even contradict adults' responses; participation in research can support children's learning; and research with children can support our evolving understanding of child growth and development and early childhood pedagogy. Each of these benefits is discussed below.

Children's voices can be deep, rich and insightful

Including children's voices in data collection into emotions produced richer and more meaningful data. Their comments helped me to realise that rather than children not understanding emotions, their understandings were at varying levels. They were often able to describe emotions, situations that trigger emotions and emotion displays quite vividly, and using other forms of expression besides words.

Avral (four years): [I feel sad] sometimes, when I have bad dreams. It makes me cry

Aidan (four years): [I feel sad] when Holly [sister] snatches my things off me. Holly scratches me, too. If she scratches me, I'll push her over. 'Cause I think someone pushed me over and I think I cracked my head

Evan said he shows fear 'by opening my mouth'

A number of children made facial expressions or gestures to communicate their understanding of various emotions. Others drew, chanted and dramatised their emotion experiences. Brett (aged 2), drew a picture of bears and other creatures that frightened him (refer Figure 12.1), then chanted to the creatures to 'go away'.

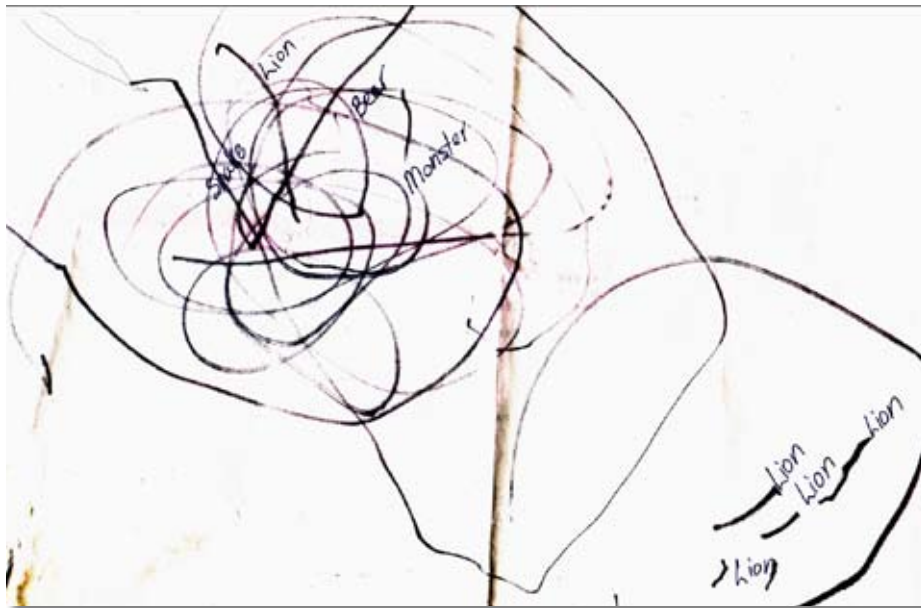


Figure 12.1. Brett's picture of creatures that frighten him.

Wade, five, drew a picture of the giant under his bed (refer Figure 12.2). I picked up the drawing and spoke to him from the giant's perspective, dramatising the situation:



Figure 12.2. Wade's picture of the giant under his bed.

Reesa: I like you and I think you like me.

Wade: I don't like you because you are horrible and brown.

Reesa: I'm horrible, but lots of people are brown.

Wade: Not brown like Aborigines, brown like giants.

Reesa: I like living under your bed, and you never tell me to go away.

Wade: Go next door to the neighbour. He's scared of monsters.

Reesa: I like your house better, but I'd really rather be in my own house. But you haven't sent me to my own house.

I suggested to Wade that we mail the giant back to his house at the top of the beanstalk. He liked the idea. He folded up the drawing. I got an envelope and drew the house above the beanstalk and said I'd mail the giant back to his house, on my way back home. But he had to be sure he wanted to send his giant home. Wade said yes, he was sure, so I took the envelope with me (Sorin 2001)

Data collected from my conceptualisations of childhood (Sorin 2007) research were examined in terms of the ten constructs of childhood. Both children and adults described childhood in ways that suggested various constructs. Some rich child voices included:

The Miniature Adult: Erin said: 'sometimes I get to go to my dad's work and I get to work there and I like sweeping the floors'

The Agentic Child: 'Mum lets me choose which ride I want to go on. Mum lets me tell her what time [I go to bed]. She only gives me choices, like 8 o'clock or 9 o'clock or at 10 o'clock, and I picked 10 o'clock' (Tegan)

'It is like natural children and they play and speak to someone and they like to do stuff and that is all I want to do' (Pedro)

Metaphors for teaching and learning brought out further insightful thoughts from children. Children in year 1 (mainly six year-olds) related their learning styles to animals and objects, as they described their learning as fast, slow and steady, strong and successful, or multi-tasking. Examples of metaphors (drawn and described) that demonstrated 'fast' learning were:

Cheetah — 'I am fast'

Brachiosaurus — 'I'm a fast learner'

Speed Car — 'I am fast'

Tiger and Leopard — 'They learn quickly and they have their prey'

Soccer Player — 'I'm quick and I keep getting scores'

Shark — 'I'm fast when I am learning'

Dolphin — 'I'm quick as a dolphin' (Sorin 2008)

When I interviewed Emma for my school readiness research, she gave a detailed account of a visit she had received in her school classroom from her prior-to-school teachers:

'I gave them a big cuddle ... I was thinking about them and then they just came ... I was doing the work [about] what I did on the weekend and they walked in. They said, 'How are you going?' I said 'yes' [going good] ... they said hello to my friends ... Then they went. I felt very good because I missed them' (Sorin and Markotsis 2008)

Children's input can fill in gaps, or even contradict, adults' responses

On several occasions in my research the child's voice brought up issues not mentioned by adults or even contradictory to adults' responses. For example, a number of teachers and parents were unsure if they had noticed the emotion of 'surprise' in the focal child. Many more children than adults reported this emotion, which may be due to adults not recognising children's expression of surprise, mistaking it for another emotion, or the child's display of the emotion not yet reflecting cultural emotion display rules.

Children described emotion displays in a number of ways, from verbalisations to actions. Many of them described or used facial expression as a means of showing emotion. Neither parents nor teachers noted facial expressions as ways that children display their emotions. Five-year-old Sam said he felt surprised when 'somebody good gives me a big motorbike or something'. He went on to describe the facial expression he made to show his surprise: '*Just put a hole in your mouth and do it*'. He then proceeded to make a face to show surprise. Other children, rather than looking for words to describe their facial expressions, made a face to reflect the emotion they were describing. No parent noted facial expression as a fear display and only one caregiver alluded to this, noting that children show fear through their body language (Sorin 2001, p. 285).

One of the ten constructs used in the conceptualisations of childhood research was the child as evil. While parents in this research didn't generally present their children as evil, some alluded to misbehaviour. Celeste said, '*We try not to let her have as much influence as she has. She tends to rule the roost*'. Preschooler Tessa filled in the gap of what gave

her mother that impression. She admitted to being 'naughty' at times, because it was easier to be naughty than to be good:

Reesa: Give me an example when it is easy to be naughty.

*Tessa: When I'm supposed to do something, I don't do it ...
When I am supposed to choose my breakfast and I don't get it.*

Reesa: So why don't you?

Tessa: Because I only get it when I am hungry (Sorin 2007)

Data, in the form of drawings and narratives from pre-service teachers and year 1 students in the metaphors of teaching and learning research (Sorin 2008), showed a contradiction between adult and child perceptions of learners. For example, pre-service teacher Kasey constructed a colourful patchwork quilt, embellished with a collage of words that reflect her beliefs as a teacher. She noted that '*my patchwork is only a small sample as I am growing as a teacher and I will constantly add different "patches" throughout my career*'. Her metaphor focused on herself as teacher: roles, views, beliefs and values. Learners are only mentioned in passing, as a kind of target for the many skills: '*teaching is new ideas, providing support, being a role model, being there for the kids*'. Preservice teachers in this research mainly focused on themselves as teachers and their pedagogy. The ones who included learners in their metaphors generally positioned them as weak and dependent on teachers before they could take responsibility for their own learning and lives. Year 1 students, on the other hand, focused their metaphors on themselves, with little or no mention of teachers or teaching; unanimously presenting themselves as strong, powerful, independent learners. This mismatch in perception could manifest itself in teaching practice that limits rather than extends student learning. Research that includes children's voices

can fill in gaps, offer alternative perspectives and ultimately enhance teaching practice.

Participation in research can support children's learning

Being part of the research can be a learning experience for children, not only learning about research, but developing skills and understanding concepts through interacting with others. It may also be a limitation, in that the researcher is prompting the child's understanding (Irwin and Johnson 2005). I asked Cameron, a particularly articulate preschooler, if he has experienced feeling 'interested':

Cameron: Sometimes I think, when I think something's interesting. What does interesting mean anyway?

Reesa: It means like something you really want to do. It looks like fun. Or it looks like a book you really want to read or a game you really want to play.

Cameron: Well I go 'I want to play with that. I want to play with that.'

Reesa: What kinds of things make you feel interested?

Cameron: Uh, Playstation (Sorin 2003)

By offering Cameron an explanation of what 'interested' means I was able to help him to relate this new word to his previous experience of the emotion. He was then able to describe a situation that triggered the emotion as well as his way of displaying the emotion. Not only did this enrich my data collection, but it also helped Cameron to expand his emotion understanding.

Conceptualisations of childhood research facilitated children's reflection of what it is like to be a child and how they feel in relation to their worlds. Metaphors of teaching and learning research was more challenging. I had found it difficult enough to get pre-service teachers to look at their practice metaphorically. I wasn't sure how I would convey this concept to six-year-olds. As I sat in the teacher's chair in front of the portable whiteboard, waiting for the children to come in from morning tea, I picked up a texta and drew a mouse in one corner of the whiteboard. I waited. When the children were sitting in front of me, looking up curiously at the class visitor, I pointed to the drawing of the mouse and introduced myself by saying, 'this is me'. After the initial silence, there were a few giggles, and I asked them why I thought I was a mouse. Answers included: 'because you are short', 'you have brown hair', and then went on to describe mouse qualities, such as moving quickly and being timid and afraid. I acknowledged that I was feeling a bit timid and afraid because I was in a new class in front of children I didn't yet know. The mouse was a metaphor for how I was feeling. I read them a story I had brought that used metaphors in a playful way, and then we discussed the concept of metaphor and how they could use it to describe something. I asked them to think about themselves as learners — and to think about a metaphor that would describe themselves as learners. Each child chose a metaphor and drew it and then, in most cases, narrated a story of themselves as learners. Not only was I able to gather data, but for most of them a new concept was understood and, with input from their teacher, followed up in later lessons. Data collection then became a learning experience for the children as well as a source of rich data for the researcher.

Research with children can support our evolving understanding of child growth and development and early childhood pedagogy

Using the voices of children in my research has been a learning experience for me, and hopefully for other adults who have read and participated in my research. Besides enhancing the data through child participation, there has been much to learn about child growth and development and early childhood pedagogy. This learning has helped me to reconceptualise childhood as a time of powerful and active child involvement.

In my emotion research I found that adults, particularly teachers, were unaware of the breadth of children's emotions. This may be because many situations that trigger emotions occur outside of the early childhood classroom. But without this knowledge, teachers might assume that a child lacks experience and understanding, and may act on behalf of a child who is perfectly capable of acting in their own right.

The conceptualisations of childhood research and the metaphors for teaching and learning research, through numerous examples, have reinforced for me the ability and agency of young children. But it is the school readiness research that has uncovered one of the most powerful lessons for teachers, albeit through Emma's words as recollected by her mother:

Emma actually said that to me the other day, 'I don't want to go to school' and I said 'why not?' 'Because you have to draw things' and I was surprised, I said 'because you like drawing.' 'I do like drawing. But I like drawing what I want to draw, not what I'm being told to draw ... I had to draw flowers and I didn't feel like drawing flowers.'

And I thought in a lot of ways that's what school is. She's always been able to be quite flexible. In kindy they are a lot more able to express themselves and follow their own creativity. If you don't feel like participating in the cutting and pasting activity, you don't have to. Emma has got the message that you have to do certain things ... Kids know they have to do certain things (brushing teeth, going to bed) but maybe they consider that some things are their domain, like drawing and colouring-in and play-based things seem to be their world and it's not usual that they are controlled in that world (Sorin and Markotsis 2008)

Concerns and limitations of research with children

Upon closer reflection, I find concerns and limitations in my research with children. These include child contributions, eliciting information without biasing the data, the role of the researcher, and child comfort and safety.

Not every child was able or willing to contribute to the research. However, neither is every adult. All participants should be treated respectfully and allowed to participate as much as they can or are willing to. Very young children do not always have the vocabulary or comprehension to contribute through language, as discussed earlier. Certainly the researcher can provide words, but data can be collected in other ways than words. For example, children may draw, dance, chant or gesture as ways of responding to research questions. Through the Reggio Emilia movement, the 'hundred languages of children' (Edwards, Gandini and Forman 1998) — or multiple ways of learning and expressing — are increasingly being acknowledged.

Data analysis may have to be examined, as it is more straightforward to code words than movements, but this is not impossible with a range of research tools and may actually provide the opportunity for collaborative analysis between children and adults.

It can be difficult to elicit information from children whose language is formative. By offering words, some would say that the researcher is leading the interview, or biasing data collected. However, in narrative inquiry this issue is addressed by viewing the data as a collaboration between researcher and participants. Researchers' voices are acknowledged rather than silenced and the output becomes a collective retelling.

The role of the researcher needs to be considered. I am fortunate in that I am an experienced early childhood teacher and can fit easily into an early childhood setting. I am able to collect data, observe and co-teach as a participant in the classroom. For example, I generally take part in the early childhood classroom on a few occasions and get to know participants before beginning data collection. I get permission from parents and staff and make sure they understand my research, have their concerns allayed and feel comfortable with me collecting data with the children. When interacting with children, I position myself at their eye level and present ideas in a play-based context. Researchers without this background or experience may not think about these issues, and might present in a more clinical and possibly intimidating way when they collect data.

Child comfort and safety issues are critical to researching with children. I generally collect data inside the early childhood classroom, with other teachers and children present. I would never remove a child from the classroom on their own; at best I would hold a focus group session

that included several children in a venue within close proximity of the activities of the classroom, such as in the outdoor play area or in a hallway. The interview conducted in Emma's home was upon invitation from her mother, and was conducted in the family living area, with her mother and two brothers present. While other data may have been gathered by speaking with the child one-on-one, the safety and comfort of young children is a paramount concern.

Conclusion

Research with children can go beyond eliciting data, to supporting and scaffolding children's growing understanding. It also helps researchers, teachers, parents and other adults to better understand children and childhood. There are limitations and concerns, such as how much a child can contribute and how to elicit information without biasing the data. Here I suggest using multiple modes of expression and involving children in data analysis. Researchers who work with young children should have some understanding and experience of working with young children in various early childhood settings. Most important, child comfort and safety must be assured. Children, their parents, educators and other professional staff must feel and be safe at all times.

What a researcher chooses to 'hear' and how it is interpreted are determined largely by the researcher's subjectivity (Gibson 1998). With often a large mass of data collected, decisions must be made about what information fits the purpose of the research and the conceptual framework and what is superfluous (Miles and Huberman 1994). MacNaughton and Smith (2001) remind us that 'our choices affect whose voice is heard in our work and whose voice is silenced' (p. 35). Children's voices must be heard.

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Reflection 1

Robyn Fitzgerald and Anne Graham

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on this paper. The following reflections are informed by our current work at the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University. We share with the author a close interest in pursuing research that includes the views and perspectives of children and young people, including the ways in which we interpret children's narratives and represent their experience.

This paper draws upon the author's experience across four research projects to argue the importance of including young children in research. Drawing on understandings from the work of Reggio Emilia and the new sociology of childhood, the author focuses attention on the important benefits of including children in research: children's voices can be deep, rich and insightful; their input can fill in gaps, or even contradict adults' responses; participation in research can support children's learning; and research can support our evolving understanding of child growth and development and early childhood pedagogy. The paper concludes by suggesting that the benefits of including children in research outweigh the limitations, but notes that further work needs to take place in relation to the ways in which the narratives of children are interpreted.

A key feature of this paper is the accessible way in which it is written, incorporating a skilful use of the children's narratives to illuminate how they influence and negotiate their learning environments. At the end of the paper, the reader is left enriched by this reporting of children's interpretations of their everyday lives, as well motivated to explore new research questions that emerge from their narratives. The author's use of metaphor as a research tool is also very interesting.

A second positive feature of the paper is the way in which the author reports her own role in the research, specifically how participating in various research projects prompted a reconceptualisation of childhood as a time of 'powerful and active child involvement' and of the child as 'perfectly capable of acting in their own right'. The strong relationship between the author's conceptualisation of children's agency in research and the rich insights children were thus able to generate is well illustrated. The author also highlights the corollary situation — that when adults do not respect children and invite them to participate, they are often 'unaware of the breadth of children's emotions' and may act on behalf of a child without knowledge of the child's emotions, when children may themselves be capable of acting in their own right.

We concur with the author that while the benefits of including children and young people in research outweigh the limitations, there are a number of practical and ethical tensions that accompany the realisation of children's agency in research settings. In our work we have been influenced by the work of writers such as Dahlberg and Moss (2005) who argue that including children in research calls for a certain kind of ethical research practice — one which is comfortable with the provisionality and messiness that listening, reflecting, interpreting and engaging in conversation and dialogue with children inevitably bring. However, we are increasingly of the view that the growing recognition of children in research requires scrutiny of the interpretative frameworks that shape such recognition. For this reason, we would like to encourage the author's further reflection on the ethical and methodological challenges encountered throughout the four research projects.

With this in mind, we would be interested to engage further with the author in relation to the following questions:



- What ethical considerations arise for researchers and for children when we present children's narratives?
- How do we maintain an ethical balance between hearing children's accounts and protecting them from harm?
- What ethical issues arise in the analysis and interpretation of narrative data?

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Reflection 2

Kate Bishop

Reesa reflects on a number of research projects spanning emotions, metaphors for teaching and learning and school readiness, carried out with children in early childhood settings. She identifies a number of strengths of participatory research from her experience including providing deep insightful data which can fill gaps and contradict adult assumptions while supporting children's own learning and increasing their understanding. She also reflects on concerns and limitations including child contributions, the role of the researcher, child comfort and safety, and eliciting information without biasing the data.

Questions around the influence of age-related considerations and their impact on participatory research would be interesting to explore further. Although the author does not make the claim, the paper suggests that there are particular considerations for involving early childhood age groups in research. This includes the discussion surrounding the ethical balance between hearing children's accounts and protecting them from harm; managing the need to explain the concepts for research with children before they are discussed as part of the research with children; balancing the benefit of in-depth familiarity with early childhood teaching practices, programming and settings; and managing bias.

This paper explores the author's conceptualisation of children and their agency alongside the ethical considerations for this research. The paper is richly illustrated with examples of children's narratives which are engaging to read and make the reader acutely aware of the immediacy

and involvement of childhood and the capacity of children as active agents in their own experience even in this youngest age group.

In reading this paper initially, I was impressed by the breadth of subject areas that Reesa has explored in research. In responding to this paper I asked Reesa to consider problematising the experience of implementing her research projects and to write about the challenges she had faced and overcome within each project in relation to implementation and practical considerations as a further extension to the paper.

The paper made me conscious that there is a wealth of knowledge that researchers develop and seldom write about concerned with the practical experience of implementing research. Alongside the conceptual and methodological challenges of participatory research, the practical challenges of implementation and follow-through are just as powerful in their impact on participatory research and its outcomes. Such knowledge should not be left out of any evaluation of participatory research which seeks to improve the experience of participatory research.



13. Involving Young People in Research in Hedland — From Ideas to Action: A Praxis Model

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Introduction

This paper describes our experiences working with young people in Hedland in the Pilbara using participatory action research (PAR) to empower young people to transform their lives and create a more socially just, caring and responsive community. Over the past two

years the fieldwork has taken place in the community and various forums engaging with over 300 young people including at-risk, 'hard to reach' young people (approximately 80% of whom are Aboriginal); approximately 75 stakeholders who work with these young people, and a further 50 people in social service sectors who want to link with these young people. Throughout the project we have adopted community development processes and transformative strategies (Freire 1993) which promote individual and group empowerment, aspirations and leadership. The project emphasises doing action research *with* young people in a way that fosters genuine partnership that will ultimately lead to the empowerment and resilience of young people and reconciliation. The work has two distinct aspects — the processes and outcomes involved in doing action research with young people and the goals, purpose and content of the programs and activities being implemented. This paper focuses on the processes involved in doing action research with young people from their initial engagement in the research to their involvement in the key events and outcomes. These include presenting their issues to stakeholders, the ongoing development and refinement of the Hedland Youth Development Framework (HYDF) and the development of the Hedland Youth Development Plan (HYDP). It does not discuss the merit or effectiveness of specific early interventions and preventative strategies; although there is ample evidence that confirms the efficacy of such approaches — that is the subject of another paper.

Hedland is a mining town situated in the Pilbara in northern Western Australia (WA). It is one of the major centres servicing the region with a population estimated at 11,748 (ABS 2006). Social programs and infrastructure are provided by industry, non-government agencies and the three tiers of government. It is a highly diverse, multicultural community with an Aboriginal population estimated at 13.6% compared

with 2.2% of the population nationally. Young people under 19 years comprise over 47% of the Aboriginal population, and this proportion is expected to increase dramatically by 2016 (Taylor and Scambary 2005).

There are significant employment opportunities for young Aboriginal people with all mining companies setting targets to increase Aboriginal employment rates over time. The main industry stakeholders BHP Billiton Iron Ore (BHP BIO) and Fortescue Metals Group (FMG) are committed to improve Aboriginal employment and education outcomes by 2012. However, for a range of complex interrelated reasons, meeting these targets remains a key challenge.

In 2006, when this project commenced, the situation for young people and especially for young Aboriginal people in Hedland was perceived as quite dismal — high crime rates, vandalism, high absenteeism from school, bullying, poor academic outcomes, underage drinking, smoking and substance use, unemployment and marginalisation, and a spate of youth suicides. Media representations of young people in Hedland were often negative and focused on the more antisocial aspects of their behaviour. A community survey conducted by the Town of Port Hedland (ToPH) Shire confirmed that young people felt marginalised and disenfranchised within the community (ToPH presentation 23 Nov 2007). The shire's strategic plans, while youth focused, were developed with little consultation with young people and did not represent or enable young Aboriginal people's voices and involvement.

How it all started

The PAR initiative evolved through the relationships forged in 2006 by a group of us involved with young people. Several programs and projects recently commenced provided the basis for our work. These included the South Hedland New Living urban renewal program and the BHP BIO Health Partnership with Kulunga Research Network (Kulunga) at the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research (TICHR). The Kulunga-TICHR-BHP BIO *Staying on Track* project involves working with young Aboriginal people and relevant agencies to address substance use in Hedland, Newman and surrounding areas. The *Staying on Track* project is an example of translating the findings of the WA Aboriginal Child Health Survey (WAACHS) into local practice; the information collected from young people aged 12 to 17 years in 2001 provides a solid evidence base for this project. The findings highlight the extent of substance use and the range of factors influencing the social and emotional wellbeing among Aboriginal young people in Hedland (Silburn et al. 2006; Zubrick et al. 2005). These findings were also disseminated to key stakeholder groups in Hedland, giving impetus to the need for community-wide action to address the education, health, social and emotional wellbeing outcomes of young Aboriginal people.

While these programs were important, the commitment and participation of individuals and groups has been critical to the success of this broader PAR initiative. In 2006 we began a dialogue to bring our respective work with young people in Hedland together in a more collaborative, purposeful and developmental way. Several other stakeholder groups were also concerned to see genuine changes for young people in Hedland. Over the following weeks and months connections were made, relationships established and visions shared

between groups and many of the young people with whom we were involved. We felt strongly that young people needed to be a key part of the process if we were going to make a difference to the factors influencing the health and wellbeing outcomes of young people in Hedland. These initial concerns and aspirations for change resulted in the establishment of two groups to give direction to the research and action initiatives for both young people and stakeholders — the Hedland Youth Stakeholder Action Group (HYSAG) and the Hedland Youth Leadership Council (HYLC).

The HYSAG has 19 representatives from key agencies and the HYLC has between 12 and 28 members at different times. HYSAG comprises key actors from the main agencies providing programs, skills and on-the-ground engagement, and is the focal point for our respective work with young people. TICHHR provides the research model and evidence base and facilitates the data collection, analysis and dissemination. South Hedland New Living and the Town of Port Hedland Shire Council provide a 'legitimate' and strategic avenue to ensure young voices are heard by the key stakeholder groups and agencies that can make a difference.

Over the past 18 months HYSAG and HLYC have run a series of workshops and forums to explore and address a range of issues identified by young people including racism, marginalisation, boredom, high levels of substance use, and poor education and employment outcomes. The resulting youth-focused programs and initiatives encompassed within the Hedland Youth Development Framework include early intervention and prevention strategies, aspirational and strength-based approaches, and leadership and mentorship strategies.

Key achievements by young people

The creation of HYSAG and HYLC has elevated children and youth issues to a strategic policy level for government and industry. Youth policy is directly linked to the viability and sustainability of community and industry. HYLC has demonstrated that young people are willing to commit to action and to participate and provide leadership for community transformation. Some of their key achievements include:

- Co-facilitating the stakeholder forum 'Our Youth, Our Community, Our Future', introducing Professor Fiona Stanley as keynote speaker to 140 attendees across 75 stakeholder groups including senior management representation from key agencies and industry groups and the council.
- Establishing a new youth representative model. HYLC has independence from local council and is supported by multiple stakeholders across the community.
- Representing HYLC via a non-voting permanent seat on the ToPH Shire Council to report and advise councilors on issues impacting upon young people within the community.
- Recruiting a voluntary membership of Indigenous and non-Indigenous members over 18 months, representing a significant contribution to reconciliation for the region and Western Australia.
- Facilitating youth events in the community and advocating action on key social issues in the community via Artz Against Racism, Swim for Life, Propel Art and other activities.

- Providing local and regional representation on key forums and key issues including Pilbara Regional Aboriginal Justice Forum, Local Hedland Aboriginal Justice Forum and a permanent advisory seat at the shire table.
- Advising Australian Government on Youth Suicide Prevention culminating in a \$240 000 grant for a local NGO.

Involving young people in research

The initial phase of the research involved engaging with stakeholder groups and young people 12 to 25 years; describing the research aims and enlisting the support of stakeholders to participate in addressing the issues for young people; inviting a small group of young people in HYLIC to participate in the research; and sharing existing research findings from the WAACHS with all stakeholders.

Throughout the next phase we worked with young people to define the issues and scope of the PAR initiative. We employed a range of strategies to generate young people's interest and maintain momentum and action. These strategies include workshops and events to provide young people with information, skills and opportunities to share their knowledge and maintain their motivation. Other activities include:

- Conducting a range of coaching or mentoring exercises and creating notions of agency with young people
- Obtaining agreement about what young people wanted to do about their issues, and who they wanted to share them with
- Involving young people in developing the Hedland Youth Development Framework — which encompasses the elements of voice, fun and events, futures, leadership, place and space, and work

- Determining a calendar of events to keep young people engaged in positive activities that meet their identified expectations, needs and aspirations and fulfil a preventative function.

Strategies to give young people a voice

In March 2008 HYSAG and HLYC members facilitated the youth workshop 'Shout Out'. More than 30 young people from Hedland and a remote Aboriginal community attended the workshop. The young people (mostly Aboriginal) discussed the WAACHS findings for Hedland outlined in a report produced specifically for the BHP BIO *Staying on Track* project (Shepherd and Walker 2007). The workshop participants were provided with information regarding what Aboriginal young people 12 to 17 years old in Hedland had said in 2001 and asked to consider whether the issues were still the same, or had changed. They identified five key issues facing young people: boredom, alcohol and drug abuse, the need for greater access to fresh food with good nutrition, lack of access to youth amenities and the need for increased employment opportunities for young people. Importantly, these young people identified racism as a major barrier to employment and other opportunities. The participants agreed to communicate their issues and priorities, needs and aspirations at the second stakeholder forum.

In addition to planning and practising their presentation for the forum, participants explored a range of media to further develop their skills and confidence and to facilitate their voice. Many of the young people at the 'Shout Out' workshop identified hip hop and street art as something they wanted to learn to develop and convey their ideas and perspectives to the broader Hedland community. They also explored the possibilities with a drama teacher of incorporating their ideas for street art with drama improvisations of key issues. Hip hop, rap, playback

and improvisational theatre and street art are potentially important and culturally relevant media for Aboriginal young people to have a voice or convey a message. Social scientist Tony Mitchell (1998) claims that many young people see hip hop, graffiti and street art as a means to create their own voice in their own way, and as a way of conveying messages about their concerns to the broader community. Young people's ideas and messages are grounded in their everyday lives and experiences and can provide important information for service providers and policy-makers. Some commentators have described young people using these strategies for social action as 'organic intellectuals' (Mitchell 1998).

Similarly, researchers adopting PAR approaches have also been described as 'organic intellectuals' in the Gramscian tradition having an 'active participation in practical life, as constructor, organiser, "permanent persuader"' (Gramsci 1971, p. 10 cited in Burke 1999, 2005).

Working with key stakeholders

Over the past 18 months HYLC and HYSAG members have worked with key stakeholders and facilitated community forums to explore the issues and challenges in providing services to young people; enlist further stakeholder support and advocacy of the issues identified by young people; and identify champions to advocate their issues.

The first stakeholder forum, 'A Call to Action', was held in November 2007. Over 60 stakeholders explored 'what is needed to ensure engagement of stakeholders and the development of youth is sustainable in Hedland?' Stakeholders completed 'a mapping and gapping' exercise to ascertain what they are currently doing and what they could do in the future. This information was collated and incorporated into the proposed Hedland Youth Development Plan.

The second stakeholder forum, 'Our Community, Our Youth, Our Future', was held in May 2008. Approximately 120 people attended this forum and Fiona Stanley gave a keynote address. Members of HYSAG and HLYC co-facilitated the workshop using the Hedland Youth Development Framework (refer Figure 13.1) to achieve the forum aims which were:

- Facilitating a targeted integration of youth programs and services through HYSAG and through their commitment of all agencies to the proposed Hedland Youth Development Plan
- Harnessing the energy and commitment of stakeholders to adopt a strategic, collaborative and coordinated approach to youth development by targeting services to specifically address identified youth needs and aspirations.

The opportunity to have Professor Fiona Stanley give the keynote address at the forum while making the documentary *Risking Our Kids* occurred at a crucial point in this project — reinforcing the critical role of champions in galvanising community action. Fiona Stanley's national and international prominence was inspirational for young people and stakeholders alike. She emphasised the importance of positioning children and young people at the centre of community. Feedback from forum participants confirmed they had gained an increased understanding and appreciation of the work HYSAG and HYLC are doing; there was greater recognition that a community can make a significant difference by listening to and acting upon the voices of young people and each person's contribution is critical. There was sense of pride within the community, evident in the discussions taking place among the various groups. Stakeholders participated in the workshop with a visible and renewed willingness and commitment to work in a more integrated and responsive way to address the issues highlighted by the young people.

Figure 13.1. Hedland Youth Development Framework (Hedland Youth Stakeholder Action Group and Creating Communities Australia 2008)



The Hedland Youth Development Framework

The Hedland Youth Development Framework was developed by HYSAG with considerable input by HYLC members, and feedback from forum stakeholders. It encompasses the key components that need to be addressed to achieve empowerment and transformation for all young people, but especially Aboriginal young people. Central to the model is a commitment to Aboriginal social justice and broader social justice. It has been refined and articulated as illustrated in Figure 13.1 and integrated into the HYDP.

The framework has evolved over time extending from five to seven domains identified by both HYSAG and HYLC members as critical elements to address the social, cultural and structural determinants that influence health and social and emotional wellbeing of young people and the community as a whole. The 'Executive Management, Research and Consultation' provides the coherence, evidence and process essential to the successful implementation of the Hedland Youth Development Framework.

The Hedland Youth Development Plan

The HYDP outlines the prevention and early intervention programs and strategies identified or affirmed at the 'Our Community, Our Youth, Our Future' forum for implementation in Hedland. These programs and strategies are intended to decrease the priority risk factors and increase the priority protective factors indicated in WAACHS (Silburn et al. 2006). The framework for evaluation provides both a blueprint and evidence base for local action.

Practical and ethical issues of engaging with young people

Despite the successes both HYSAG and HYLC are aware of the challenges in maintaining youth and stakeholder engagement that need to be constantly monitored and addressed. This includes identifying resources to provide executive management, strengthening the capacity of the youth services and broader NGO sector, and facilitating real buy-in (financial support) from all tiers of government and industry.

Some of the enabling conditions necessary to secure successful outcomes through PAR involve maintaining engagement, facilitating empowerment and generating enthusiasm and ownership of the issues by both young people and the key stakeholder groups. An essential element of PAR is communicating and disseminating information as part of the education process to inform the community and seek their commitment and involvement in positive social action to address specific issues wherever and whenever possible.

The practical and ethical issues of engaging young people in research include developing appropriate processes to support and empower them. This has involved mentoring young people and providing information and opportunities for them to develop and share their views with relevant community stakeholders. Both HYSAG and HYLC have assisted young people to identify various ways for their voices to be heard and acted upon, work with the diversity of the group, develop empathy and trust, interpret and validate different points of view among their peers, balance competing demands, maintain momentum, motivate young people to stay involved and manage the potential for key issues to snowball or diffuse as new issues emerge and new people move in and out of the process.

While there are ethical and practical dilemmas to be addressed, engaging children and young people in all stages of research can enhance the reliability, validity and ethical acceptability of research (Kesby 2000). This includes involving young people in setting the research agenda and defining the research questions, interpreting meaning and advising on the content and wording of questions, and incorporating their views and perspectives and including their voices within the research. HLYC members have been involved in all phases of the research: contributing to formulating research questions; carrying out peer interviews; collating, analysing and prioritising information (Shout Out); using data collection techniques including photographs (Photovoice) and videos (Propel Art); presenting findings (PowerPoint presentations, stakeholder forums and the ABC documentary *Risking Our Kids*), and disseminating results. This young people as researchers approach provides considerable motivation and commitment by young people to the issues and to thinking critically and constructively about finding solutions to their own problems.

At the initial youth workshops the majority of Aboriginal young people spoke of their experiences of marginalisation and racism '*every day and every where they went*' in Hedland. However, through the PAR process many of these young people have shifted their focus to address these issues in a productive and proactive way. Over the months, many young people have reflected and shared ideas and reframed the issues to achieve 'Harmony in Hedland'. This has given these young people a sense of agency and resilience — they have written and performed a song, sent a letter to the ToPH Shire Council and participated in an Artz Against Racism workshop, Photovoice and a hip hop workshop.

Conclusion

Engaging young people in social change and transformation is critical to developing social and human capital, and achieving a civil, socially just society. Our experience affirms that PAR is a particularly effective and ethical model of practice to achieve these goals, promote skills and provide young people with opportunities and voice to determine their future directions. The ARACY Seven Principles provide a blueprint for action for children and young people; they remind us that everybody has a stake in supporting young people to be empowered, socially responsible citizens with agency and voice to be future leaders and active, contributing members to society (ARACY). However, stakeholders also need to adhere to National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) ethics and principles of doing research with young people (and in this instance with Aboriginal people) and act in accordance with the Human Rights Charter for the Rights of Children and Young People (UNICEF).

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Reflection 1

Rony Duncan

This is a thought-provoking paper that demonstrates what is possible when the right people are engaged over a long-term commitment with a holistic view of youth health and a desire to do justice to the concept of participatory action research (PAR).

The paper tells a story about PAR in Hedland. It describes a project that continued for over two years. Three hundred young people, 75 stakeholders and 50 people working in social service were involved — an incredible achievement with some phenomenal outcomes. Two key groups were formed as part of this process: the Hedland Youth Stakeholder Action Group and the Hedland Youth Leadership Council. What the paper does beautifully is convey the *process* of PAR in all its complexity and chaos.

The paper caused me to reflect on the differences between theory and practice when it comes to engaging young people in research in a non-tokenistic manner. The reality of a successful research project that entails true participatory action is complex, messy, constantly evolving and creative. The question is, how can we convey this to funders and ethics committees? If we are committed to engaging children and young people in the way that current theory invites us to, we require time, money and flexibility. This simply does not match with the stipulations and details required by ethics committees or with the timelines set by funders.

Papers like this one, which focus on the process of research, are a vital step in increasing awareness about what research with young people is like on the ground. An important story to be told.



Reflection 2

Tim Moore

I am very pleased to reflect on Roz Walker's paper which focuses on a participatory action research project conducted in Hedland, Western Australia submitted as part of the Involving Children and Young People in Research Think Tank.

In 2007 I was involved in a research project with the Aboriginal community in the ACT and in Wreck Bay NSW in which we talked with Indigenous children and young people about their experiences in the out-of-home care system. In conducting that project I was reminded of my own limitations as a youth worker and researcher and the great need to have skilled and committed people working alongside Aboriginal communities to help understand their experiences, challenges and to forge new ways forward. With that project in mind, I was heartened to read about the progress that Roz and her team had made in an isolated but vibrant community.

Brief summary of the research contexts

Roz's project was conducted within a culturally diverse and economically challenged community in Western Australia. The project developed out of a partnership between a number of programs who were working with vulnerable young people; a partnership that proved to be instrumental in enabling the project to occur and in sustaining outcomes for all involved. The project included a number of youth-friendly activities and opportunities for young people to express themselves about issues that were important to them. As active participants, young people felt

a level of engagement in the project and enjoyed choosing methods of engagement that they believed were not only youth-friendly but also ones that provided them with experiences (such as photography and drama) which they might otherwise not have enjoyed. Young people were actively engaged as partners in the project and felt some satisfaction at being part of a process that would have positive outcomes for young people and their communities while developing skills and experiences that they valued.

Engaging communities, engaging young people

The project I was involved in, mentioned above, commenced only a few weeks after the Howard government announced its 'intervention'. As such, there was some wariness in parts of the community about having a team of researchers talking to children about sensitive issues. Although we were already committed to working closely with the local community in conducting the research, the need and value of doing so soon became evident — with children and young people feeling more comfortable and engaged when encouraged by elders and key community members.


Community engagement also was a key component of Roz's work and appeared to be the catalyst for progress. Driven by a partnership of services working for young people, the project engaged a whole range of players including government, business and other community members. The level of trust and a shared commitment to ensuring not only the success of the project but also in increasing opportunities for young people was therefore fostered. It would appear that researchers can learn a lot from this PAR project in how such participation can be maximised and sustained beyond the life of the project.

Providing opportunities for inclusion

In her paper, Roz suggests that the local community had already developed a youth participation strategy but that this did not allow for the meaningful participation of Aboriginal young people or others who were already excluded from community involvement. As a youth worker, the trend of only engaging easy-to-reach young people (who are often those who are already 'active citizens' and who participate in leadership programs, lobbying activities and other youth initiatives) has also concerned me, as has the view that all young people can speak on behalf of each other or present a homogeneous view. Like Roz's team, it also has concerned me that young people who are most in need and — being unashamedly biased — most deserving of opportunities to build skills, to enjoy opportunities for community acknowledgement and to feel like valued members of the community are excluded from the process. As a researcher working within an institute with a limited budget and short timeframes I appreciate that sometimes these young people are more difficult to contact and remain in contact with, are less confident about their skills and the value of their engagement, and who may need more assistance with reading and writing, but our experience has been that when involved their input is nothing but exemplary. Young people in our studies have often commented that having a young person who knows the scene, who naturally empathises with their situation and who understands some of the unsaid issues that exist is both reassuring and valuable. It has been with some pride that we have watched our peer leaders become sought-after researchers within the local community, national guest speakers and successful community workers after completing work with us (these young people were already champions so we can't take full credit!).

The need for reflection

At the ARACY Think Tank, a number of researchers talked about the need to develop projects that were not only participatory but also robust in design and delivery, and the challenges that researchers face when meaningfully engaging children throughout the research process. In reading Roz's paper, it seems as though an action research model may be best for those of us who are grappling with this challenge. By constantly reflecting on the ethics, on the effectiveness and appropriateness of certain methodologies we may come to a situation where we don't ask 'what are we willing to sacrifice?' but instead 'how can we marry these potentially conflicting but also complementary needs in the most successful way?' Perhaps it is through a mix of methodologies that place the child at the heart of the research process and engage them in a variety of ways that meet both their needs and those of the project; and the further development of tools used within Roz's projects that enable young people to actively participate but also provide us with meaningful data which we can use to promote children's voices and make change in the communities and service systems within which they live. I look forward to exploring this further.



14. Enabling 'Looked After' Children to Express their Competence as Participants in Research

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Introduction

Children's participation is deeply grounded in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCROC). The UNCROC states that a child's views must be considered and taken into account in all matters affecting them, subject to the child's age and maturity (Article 12). Despite increasing recognition of the importance of listening to children's views and opinions, the perspectives of children are relatively absent in the field of out-of-home care (OOHC) research (Curran and Pecora 1999; Gilligan 2000; Gilbertson and Barber 2002).

Using examples from prior research, including the author's own PhD study, this paper suggests that restrictions on access to client information, and concerns about the possible harmful consequences of participation, can prevent competent children from freely exercising their choice to participate in research. Some steps forward that aim to balance

children's right to privacy and protection from harm with a responsibility to empower and support those who choose to participate in research are discussed.

What is participation?

Research which involves the use of child informants in OOHC may explore issues such as the child's placement history, the current placement, children's connectedness with birth parents and other family members (e.g. grandparents, siblings), substitute carers, foster siblings, the caseworker and agency, social and community supports, school experience, emotional and behavioural development from the point of view of the child, the child's developing identity and self-concept, and child satisfaction concerning their placement and other welfare services.

Research methodologies can involve semi-structured and unstructured interviews, focus groups, life stories and oral histories, questionnaires with some open-ended items, and other qualitative measures. Questions about child outcomes under different conditions invite quasi-experimental designs and may involve the use of objective assessments, such as direct assessments of child health and wellbeing, or observation techniques. For greatest validity, some questions are addressed with longitudinal designs, necessitating children's involvement over time. A *genuine* participation of children also means the involvement of children in formulating research questions, developing procedures and instruments, and participation in review activities.

Benefits of child participation

As with other forms of participation, involvement in research can be rewarding for the children concerned. It empowers children to have a say about what is important to them, and can increase their skills and self-confidence and enhance their connections to the community (Barber and Delfabbro 2004; Cashmore and Paxman 1996; Fernande, 2006; Mason and Gibson 2004; Spall, Testro and Matchett 1997). Adults extend their respect to children by involving them in meaningful ways in the research process. Participation may also benefit children directly if the planned interventions and issues specifically affect them, although benefits are more likely to be conferred to subsequent children.

The involvement of children can lead to better information. Drawing on the knowledge of service users can lead to more relevant research questions. Research involving children can also produce better understanding of their views and priorities, as well as how policies and services affect them (Save the Children 2001). Using child reports can also enhance data reliability, as there are a number of shortcomings to using proxy respondents in OOH research, such as lack of familiarity in the child and response bias (Halfon, Mendonca and Berkowitz 1995). There is also a role for direct assessments of children, as these techniques often have higher levels of sensitivity and validity than indirect assessments such as child or adult surveys.

Importantly, child participation can bring about more effective action. Where children have been involved in a research process, they can be more effectively involved in decision-making and follow-up action (Save the Children 2001).

Constraints to child participation

Participation can have real benefits for looked-after children, however privacy issues and concerns about harm resulting from children's involvement create considerable difficulties researching the OOH population. While acting in children's best interests implies some adult control of decisions regarding participation, existing protocols surrounding access to client information combined with the great caution that adults tend to exercise in approving contact for the purpose of research can deny capable children the appropriate choice and control in these matters.

Confidentiality and privacy issues

Laws and policies designed to protect children's identities tend to make the processes for contacting them lengthy and difficult. Researchers are rarely authorised access to potential respondents' names and addresses, so it is often only possible to access children and those who can authorise their participation in research such as birth parents and carers via the relevant department or child welfare agency.

Problems that can arise when researchers are unable to make direct contact themselves, or manage the recruitment processes undertaken on their behalf, have been highlighted in previous studies (e.g. Kotch 2000). Social workers can have competing priorities and may even be uncooperative if the recruitment protocol is time-consuming, has the potential to cause complications or if they feel the research itself is of little value or relevance to their work. Staff turnover, case transfers and placement instability can make the process of accessing the relevant social worker arduous.

Consent to contact children

The potential vulnerability of the OOHC population raises particular ethical concerns about whether participation is in the child's best interests. Children in care are more often vulnerable to various forms of discomfort and stress, and cognitive impairment, mental illness and trauma apply in many cases. Developmental assessments that involve challenging tasks and questions about sensitive topics, such as experiences of maltreatment, can pose an unacceptable risk to these children.

Clearance processes

At present, there are no standard guidelines or procedures for studies involving children and young people in care. It is left up to investigators, ethics committees and welfare agencies to determine the appropriate standards and procedures. As a result, the process of ethical clearance and official approval from the authority with custody of the child can be iterative and lengthy.

Not only are authorising committees cautious about approving research involving children considered to be vulnerable, it is not uncommon for research proposals to be subject to duplicate clearance processes. For example, the relevant university human research ethics committee must clear research involving university researchers, and research proposals involving statutory clients will almost certainly need the approval of the relevant government department and its ethics committee as well. Research protocols also need to conform to the requirements of individual CSOs, and in some cases this will involve yet another clearance process. When authorising committees have different policies concerning access to children and families, or concerns about different

aspects of the research methodology, it can be difficult to remain faithful to the original research design and uphold scientific rigour. These complications are particularly obstructive in cross-sectoral and cross-jurisdictional research.

Protocols for obtaining consent to contact children

Before researchers can contact children, consent in writing must be obtained from the person who exercises parental responsibility. The participation of children for whom the minister has parental responsibility is subject to the written consent of the delegate of the minister. For all other children, the consent of the person who has parental responsibility is required, which is usually the child's birth parent¹¹. Active consent may also be required from other authorities/agencies and individuals such as the CSO providing the placement, the child's carer (if not the child's legal guardian), the children's social workers and other professionals who are familiar with the particular sensitivities and vulnerabilities of the cases, such as lawyers and judges. In addition to seeking adult consent, it is also necessary to obtain the child's approval.

If each individual authorising children's involvement in research has the power of veto, the consent process can be time consuming and unproductive in terms of response rates. This is especially true if active consent is required. The approval of birth parents is a particular issue here, as birth parents may not have contact with their children, or only limited contact, and can prove very difficult to locate.

11. It may also be viewed as appropriate and consistent with policies that aim to promote parental involvement and children's ties to their biological family to consult parents who do not have legal guardianship. .

The requirement for advance consent for the release of contact information combined with the fact that researchers are unable to manage the recruitment process directly has seriously hampered research in the past (e.g. NSCAW Research Group 2002; Gilbertson and Barber 2002). For example, the experience of the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Wellbeing (NSCAW)¹² with active consent to contact families was so challenging, and response rates so poor, that the decision was ultimately made to include only those agencies that did not require active consent (NSCAW Research Group 2002). Even with a 'passive' consent protocol, which requires individuals to sign and return a form if they refuse to allow a child to participate in research, the NSCAW study reported a response rate of only 56%, or 727, completed interviews from 1291 children who were originally selected for the study.

In the author's own Victorian PhD research (Wise 2007), approximately 12 months after recruitment began, efforts to involve foster children were eventually abandoned, as the consent protocols simply could not be accomplished in practice. It was a requirement that written approval (or active consent) be obtained from each child's foster carer and caseworkers (agency and statutory workers), the director of the CSO supporting the child's placement, the relevant regional child protection manager from the Department of Human Services, the responsible delegate from the Department of Human Services, and birth parents with ongoing legal responsibility for the child. If any party did not provide their consent, contact with the child was not possible.

12. The National Survey of Child and Adolescent Wellbeing is an ongoing longitudinal study involving a nationally stratified sample of children (N=5504) in contact with public child welfare services in the US 'child protective services (CPS) study', and a separate sample of children (N=727) who had been in a foster care placement for 12 months or more at the time the sampling began for the 'one year in foster care (OYFC) study' (NSCAW Research Group 2003).

Of the 54 children aged six years and above whom carers had initially approved to take part in the research, only 8 (14%) actually provided information to the study. In 40 cases, at least one party who had authority over a child's participation in the study did not return a consent form, effectively halting the process of recruitment at that point. In a further four cases, although all permissions were obtained, so much time had passed that children had moved placements, and were ineligible for the research. Contact was actively denied in only two cases, with workers citing concerns about potential negative consequences for the child or the timing of the research in relation to a stressful event, such as a court hearing.

Making contact with and obtaining approvals from these various people was an administrative challenge, as caseworkers and regional managers of child protection services often did not release information when requested (or were very slow to respond to requests for information, even after numerous reminders), did not return completed consent forms, or did not pass on information to birth parents in a timely manner.

However, there is evidence to suggest that even when it is possible to avoid restrictions on privacy and consent, participation of children in OOHC in research is low. For example, the Queensland Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian conducts a foster care survey every two years administered by the Commission's community visitors during regular contact with children (Tennant 2008). Blanket consent is obtained from the directors-general in the departments of Child Safety and Communities where they may be the guardian responsible for the child or young person, and children's consent is obtained prior to administration of the survey. Although it is difficult to determine precise response rates due to the constantly changing number of children and young people in foster care and the length of

the fieldwork (approximately two months), it is estimated that response rates for the 2006 and 2007 were 30–40 per cent (e.g. 756 completed interviews from 1942 possible respondents in 2007; pers. comm. with principal research officer 29 October 2008).

Adult's involvement in preventing children from participating in research

Researchers (e.g. Berrick et al. 2000; Heptinstall 2000) have noted that adults with the power to exclude or include children in research have a natural tendency to protect vulnerable children from the suspected adverse effects of participation. In some cases, children's participation may be deemed unsuitable because of legal proceedings either pending or underway, or because the placement is considered vulnerable or fragile for other reasons.

Denial of access has been an issue in several out-of-home care studies (e.g. Berrick et al. 2000). In Australia, Gilbertson and Barber (2002) report non-response rates of 72.5% and 82% in relation to studies on placement instability involving disruptive young people in care in South Australia. They attributed 41 per cent of their loss of participation being due to denial of access to children at the agency level. In her study of looked-after children in London, Heptinstall (2000) reports a non-response rate of 59% (15 of the original sample of 37 children).

Towards appropriate participation of children in care

Negotiating access to children

Research involving children in OOHC is usually only cleared with the strictest limits imposed in terms of access to identifying information. It is also often necessary to obtain active consent from a number of authorising agencies and individuals before children can be contacted about their participation. While such protocols are designed to protect children, they may be limiting the participation of capable children. Guidelines that balance the need for personal protection of privacy with the need to facilitate access to data for research purposes appear necessary.

As discussed earlier, problems emerge when researchers do not have direct control over the recruitment process. An approach whereby researchers are provided with a database of client, carer and family contact information, including details about who has legal guardianship and the resulting legal right to consent to the child's participation, would greatly overcome barriers to access related to administrative issues. An 'opt-out' process (whereby sample members have the opportunity to signal an unwillingness to be contacted before information is released to researchers), restrictions on the form of contact (i.e. written or via telephone), and strict requirements for data security may help address privacy and confidentiality issues.

Guidelines for researchers and other stakeholders as to what consent is legally required to authorise children's participation in research in different circumstances (i.e. according to who has parental responsibility) would also be helpful. Advice surrounding the extent to which birth parents, workers and others with a stake in a child's case should be involved in decision-making and the conditions under which 'active

consent' is also needed. A particular issue here is whether researchers are authorised to contact children if birth parents with ongoing guardianship are not traceable or available to provide their informed consent.

As discussed above, there is a natural tendency to protect children, even though the risks of participation may be low. If those in authority are to empower children to make their own decisions where possible, proxy decision-makers need to be better informed of their ethical responsibilities to children, which may involve developing some statements of reasons for inclusion and exclusion of children in qualitative methods and direct assessments. Information about the outcomes of children's participation in research may also lead to better-informed decisions regarding children's participation in research.

Research that enhances children's safety and wellbeing

Participation of children is only justified when it is expected that the results of the research will improve services to, or the circumstances of, children in OOHC. Thus, it is important that research considers how the research will benefit children, and that investigators have the skills and experience to develop and implement the research effectively.

Although ethics committees determine when research proposals are ethically acceptable and in accordance with relevant standards and guidelines, it may be beneficial to develop a national statement of ethical practice regarding research participation of children in OOHC, addressing informed consent, appropriate training of researchers, methods used to collect child self-report data¹³, engaging respondents and maintaining their

focus, creating the right environment for children, protocols for managing respondent distress, directly questioning children about maltreatment, mandatory reporting requirements and breach of confidentiality, debriefing, and the involvement of children in research planning activities, either individually or by organisation (see Berrick et al. 2000).

If professionals and organisations are to meaningfully engage with the idea of child participation, they also need to have a stake in the research and consider it a priority. To this end, it may be helpful to establish local and national policy and practice priorities and agreement about the most important research issues to be pursued. Here, the participation of children is essential in order to gain a perspective of what issues are important for them.

Finally, appropriate child participation in OOHC research will be advanced by closer collaboration among child researchers, including the exchange of information, experience and methodologies and cross-fertilisation of ideas.

Conclusion

While research as a whole has generally ignored children, children in OOHC are especially invisible. There are several barriers to accessing children in OOHC for research purposes, such as gaining the confidence and assistance of authorising committees, professionals and organisations, limits surrounding release of information, and onerous requirements on consent to contact children. While these constraints exist to protect children's privacy and safeguard their best interests, they can prevent children from deciding for themselves whether or not to cooperate, and prevent the voices of children being heard.

13. For example, empowering children may involve exploration of alternative methods of obtaining children's views and perspectives that are better suited to their styles of communicating, such as a greater focus on visual, rather than verbal, techniques.

Guidelines are needed that spell out safe and ethical participation of children in OOHC, as well as protocols that will lead to the effective involvement of children and young people in research processes. The latter should focus on the release of client information and authorisation of children's participation in research, including when it is ethical to include and exclude children from qualitative research methods and direct assessments. Guidelines and standards should be developed in collaboration with child researchers, review committees, peak bodies, universities, government and non-government organisations, and the children and young people themselves. Ongoing information exchange and collaboration among key professionals and organisations is the vital ingredient for progress in this area.

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Reflection 1

Jan Mason

This paper focuses on the fact that '[d]espite increasing recognition of the importance of listening to children's views and opinions, the perspectives of children are relatively absent in the field of out-of-home care (OOHC) research (Curran and Pecora 1999; Gilligan 2000)'. Wise identifies the importance of listening to children in OOHC and refers to obstacles to children's participation in research in this area, illustrating them with examples drawn from out-of-home care research and her own PhD. In identifying that these obstacles cluster around: first, restrictions of access to client information and second, concerns about negative consequences of participation for children, Wise has highlighted two issues referred to as of concern in a number of papers presented at the Think Tank.

A listing in the paper of issues where children in OOHC can contribute is an important reminder that children are the experts on their own lives. It is also useful to acknowledge that such a list is adult-generated. An important place to start research with children in OOHC could be by asking them what areas they think are important for research, so that they are enabled to contribute to the development of a research agenda that is meaningful to them. In this context it is important that Wise places emphasis on involving children in the development of research questions and methods.

Wise argues that appropriate child participation in out-of-home care research will be advanced by closer collaboration among child researchers, including the exchange of information, experience and

methodologies and cross-fertilisation of ideas. This is also a major point made in an article on this topic by Christensen and Prout (2002), where they suggest that child researchers should dialogue on ethical issues and dilemmas and, from this process, develop a set of strategic values, within which individual researchers would be able to anchor their everyday practice. The Think Tank could be an important step in this direction in Australia. The other major point made by Christensen and Prout is that these strategic values would then provide a framework for the other dialogue fundamental to an ethical approach to research with children — the dialogue between researchers and the children they are researching. The initiation of this latter dialogue poses adults researching with children with a challenge. An even greater challenge may be that of implementing the outcomes of such a dialogue, should they imply that adult researchers need to alter the way we do research with children.

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Reflection 2

Roz Walker

The discussion paper by Sarah Wise offers an insightful discussion of her experience of working with children in out-of-home care. I found Sarah's paper interesting and instructive and was pleased to have the opportunity to consider and offer a commentary for the discussion on the practical and ethical implications for practice at the Involving Children and Young People in Research Think Tank.

Summary

Sarah's paper discusses the ethical and methodological issues of children's participation and consent for children in out-of-home care (OOHC). It highlights tensions between the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCROC) commitment to take account of children and young people's views on all matters affecting them, subject to their child's age and maturity (Article 12), with the concerns of ethics committees, practitioners and other stakeholders in protecting these children from potential harm. Sarah discusses the implications when children's views, opinions, perspectives and experiences are not included in the research to inform both policy and practice for children in OOHC.

Sarah Wise suggests that restrictions on access to client information, and concerns about the possible harmful consequences of participation, can prevent competent children from freely exercising their choice to participate in research. The paper argues for strategies that would balance children's right to privacy and protection from harm with a responsibility to empower and support those capable to participate in research.

Relevance to my own experience

This paper outlines the onerous recruitment and consent process and the need to develop strategies and processes to make the processes more streamlined and realistic — so that issues of benefit and harm can be considered in a more balanced way. Sarah highlights how the process has actually prevented her being able to pursue an area of research.

This is consistent with an area of my own research with ADHD where the entire research process ground to a halt because the recruitment process around consent from parents to participate in the research became difficult for health practitioners and parents and carers to implement. I have recently surveyed 10 medical practitioners who have confirmed that the process was problematic but that they had families who would like to participate in the research — but the steps required to provide active consent on their part had stalled the process.

What can we learn from this study?

I am interested in the issues too around notions of research (rather than specifically development assessment) that involves asking questions about sensitive topics, such as experiences of maltreatment that can pose an unacceptable risk to these children.

It may be important to provide a justification in research proposals regarding the need to look to the research that has been able to show the benefits of research participants being involved in such research. It raises issues of the value of therapeutic narrative research being undertaken which enables participants to gain access to counselling support and assistance if they require it. Research undertaken in WA around SIDS found that people participating in focus groups welcomed the opportunity to tell their story.

Issues of ethics and consent

This paper differs considerably in its approach to my own paper in that it focuses on the ethical dilemmas involved in doing research with young people in out-of-home care who are vulnerable.

This is an important paper as it highlights the necessity for ethics committees, stakeholders, services providers, foster carers or carers to consider specific processes that simultaneously safeguard children and young people and at the same time give them the opportunity to share their experiences so that services can be improved in the future. It highlights the responsibility researcher/practitioners have to simultaneously protect children from harm and enable their opportunities for disclosure of their experience. Sarah suggests the need for greater exchange of information and discussion as well as the development of specific ethical guidelines and processes for the conduct with children and young people. It generated considerable and lively discussion at the Think Tank which had similar parallels to discussions I have been involved in around the critical importance of specific ethical guidelines for doing research with Indigenous people.

Major themes and considerations





Major themes and considerations

In this section the major themes and considerations that emerge from the discussion and the papers are summarised under three headings: research approaches and methodologies, ethics and consent issues, and implications for practice. The aim of this summary is to provide overall implications for practice and some directions for action.

Research Approaches and Methodologies

Although the nature of the research discussed in each paper differs widely, a number of key operating methodological principles including approaches and characteristics are recognised as essential to the successful implementation of participatory research including:

- Respectful engagement with children and young people
- Trust and relationships
- Choice, flexibility and adaptability in research design, approach and implementation
- Reflexive research designs
- Transparency and accountability in research processes
- Benefits to children and young people
- Strategies for disengagement from the research.

Respectful engagement

Respectful engagement allows children and young people some possibilities for participation on their terms and opportunities to exercise choice and control over the research and preferably the whole research process — from its inception to the dissemination of findings. Research based on respectful engagement is often collaborative and includes a commitment to taking the views of children and young people seriously.

In practice, tensions exist between the participatory research outlined in many of the examples of research with children and young people and meeting the expectations of funding bodies which have a controlling hand in research. In reporting the experience of Young People Big Voice (YPBV), Fitzgerald and Graham state that the young people who participated emphasised the benefit of the processes and the experience of inclusion both in the group and in decision-making forums. The group appreciated the opportunity to develop personally and participate in activities that had the capacity to bring about change in their communities. They enjoyed their role as advocates or advisors and providing feedback on an ongoing basis but they were not as interested in committing themselves to research.

The authors state that ‘an important aspect of our work with YPBV has been to base our conceptualisations of what ‘meaningful’ and ‘relevant’ participation might be on the views and perspectives of young people themselves’ and that they had to respect that ‘young people do not always want to participate as researchers’. However this poses a dilemma for the research centre of which the group is part in that ‘it has become increasingly apparent that the current strong emphasis of the YPBV on *process and inclusion* doesn’t really align with funding programs that are assessed on *project outcomes*’.

This example highlights the difficulties in managing the agendas of adult researchers and young people as participants and the competing needs which will result in challenges to respectful engagement. As Mason highlights, much research with children and young people is by necessity adult-initiated and prescribed ahead of the research process for grant purposes. This poses a challenge to true collaboration from the outset of the project as the embedded hierarchy of adult authority in children's lives is already in play.

Promoting children and young people's rights to exercise control over the data that are ultimately included in the research analysis can also create tension. While there is agreement that this is an inalienable right of participants, it also poses a dilemma for the researcher who may consider the 'story' or evidence as a particularly salient aspect of the possible learning from the research that, if removed, could reduce the quality of the overall research findings.

Trust and relationships

Successful research requires children and young people to form trusting relationships with the researchers ahead of and as part of the research process. This covers the need for accountable, transparent, flexible processes which can respond to children's involvement, and recognise and respect their input and ideas. They are also research processes that anticipate the need for careful management of those relationships across the research process and at the point of disengagement.

Successful research also includes anticipating the importance and the role that adults play in research with children. Most papers report the struggles and processes involved in negotiating with adult gatekeepers to complete research with children and young people. In their paper

on research on young people's experience of homelessness, Moore, McArthur and Noble-Carr emphasise the relational nature of children's participation and how influential relationships with adults can be on children's participation. They also emphasise the need to recognise and anticipate the roles that adults such as parents, teachers and caseworkers can play in resisting or facilitating children and young people's participation in research. Engaging positively with these groups can promote the participation of children and young people.

This paper also illustrates how important a positive research experience can be for parents and surrounding adults as well. 'An unanticipated by-product of being engaged in this project seemed to be that some families felt that [they] could now talk about their experiences openly and resolve any challenges that had been highlighted [during the research process]' (Moore, McArthur and Noble-Carr).

Community engagement and partnerships can facilitate children's agendas and can refocus research issues for children as community issues, requiring community support and response. Walker's paper reports an action research project completed with the Aboriginal community in Hedland, Western Australia. Engagement between young people and community groups through the research produced mutually beneficial outcomes.

Sorin, Dockett and Harcourt each report on research completed with children in early childhood and they reveal another challenging balance — that of managing children's agency with their dependency (sometimes occurring simultaneously) that is relevant in particular to this age group and has implications for children's contributions, the role of the researcher and managing bias in the data.

Choice, flexibility and adaptability

The capacity of children and young people to be able to choose how, when and if they engage with research was a consistent theme across the papers. Projects tended to be successful when they could accommodate variation in age, gender, cultural interpretation or differences, research contexts and individual interest.

Accommodating this variation presents real challenges for researchers. Providing choice and flexibility requires researchers to be adaptable and responsive. This does not mean that researchers should expect to radically alter research questions and research designs but it may mean that the capacity to answer research questions at the end of the exercise has been altered by the outcome of the methods used. It requires tolerance that desired outcomes may never be reached or may be quite different from those envisaged — and being able to see this as positive. It may also require greater amounts of resources and time to be invested than originally envisaged and this has implications for funded research and meeting the deadlines and outcomes that have been predetermined.

Anderson describes a project completed in the UK, which sought to evaluate the Tower Hamlets Children's Fund, which provides services for disadvantaged children aged five to 13 years. This was an adult-initiated project where mentoring by adult researchers 'scaffolded' children and young people's ability to carry out the process of research including developing questions, methods, conducting qualitative interviews and contributing to the analysis (scaffolding is a process where adult researchers provide the support and training required to enable young researchers to complete a research task). In the end the project is described as a great success with benefits for the research team, the

children and the Tower Hamlets Children's Fund programs.

However, in his summary of the experience Anderson notes that, overall, the research was extremely resource intensive and the actual time involved in support of this level of children's participation was not covered by the original budget. It may be unlikely that funders would support the true cost of this kind of research project, especially, as he reports, because the data generated through peer interviews was 'often basic and the quality was at times poor'.

Brown, Collits and Scholfield also discuss the challenges of managing the balance between youth-led research and reaching the benchmarks of rigorous research. Again the inherent tension between the value to children and young people and how this is estimated and perceived by them and the benefit for adult research agendas is evident here. Reconciling the benefits for children and young people and the need for particular outcomes for adult researchers remains a major challenge. It is likely that children and young people will estimate the quality of the experience differently from the way quality is understood by the adult researchers involved in any project.

The challenge of adaptability was discussed in several forms. Bessell reports on a large-scale international project conducted simultaneously in nine countries on children's views and experiences of physical and emotional punishment. She refers to the significance of the methodology in being able to support the adaptability in research methods that was required in this project to accommodate variation in cultural beliefs, values and experiences. She cites the example of a 'protection tool' that was developed as a method aimed 'to encourage children to think about the positive things in their lives at the completion of research on confronting issues'. The method involved a picture of an

umbrella divided into five segments for children to fill in, identifying important people and special memories to each child. However in one country involved in the research, umbrellas are used to beat children and so the tool had to be changed as these children would have trouble equating an umbrella with protection.

Priest also reports on the need for cultural flexibility and sensitivity. Brown, Collits and Scholfield discuss the impact and influence of working in remote rural communities and how they had to overcome the challenges associated with isolation and distance from their research participants. Sorin, Dockett and Harcourt reflect on the adaptability that may be required in response to age and individual interest in each of their papers.

Reflexive research designs

Self-informing reflexive research designs which enabled researchers to modify and learn from the process of research during the process itself are emphasised as a benefit to the development of researchers and participants, as well as to the research.

Moore, McArthur and Noble-Carr used a continuously reflexive process to ensure their own and the children's experiences of research were used to develop and evaluate research methods and processes — including how the reference group convened to collaborate on how the research project should itself be conducted. They also asked participants about the experience of being part of the research, and how it could be improved.

At the second workshop, by trialling the various games, discussions and one-on-one activities, children gave feedback on the research tools. After modifying the interview design, children were interviewed by one of the researchers.

Some days later, they were contacted by another member of the team and were asked about how the interview had been conducted, the effectiveness and 'child-friendliness' of the tools and the personal style of the interviewer. From this feedback tools were again modified before being used with other children (Moore, McArthur and Noble-Carr).

While it is recognised that a reflexive process may lead the research into areas that are not entirely synchronised with the initial research project, such processes allow children and young people to improve the integrity of the research process by grounding it in what is important to them.

Bishop notes that participatory research needs to be self-informing to enhance its efficacy and value in children's lives. This process, by necessity, must involve children and young people's reflections as well as the researchers' reflections.

Transparency and accountability

Transparency and accountability in participatory research with children and young people are fundamental to building trust, promoting continued engagement and supporting children and young people 'on the journey' with the researchers.

The greater the degree of transparency and accountability, the greater the respect and recognition of children's views and involvement. Children and young people report seeing transparency and accountability as a measure of the worth of their involvement in the research or consultation process. Several papers report children and young people using the evidence of follow through on their participation as a measure of the success of their participation (see Fitzgerald and Graham; Moore, McArthur and Noble-Carr).

Of benefit to children and young people

What constitutes benefit and how should it be understood? Benefit for children and young people functions on two principal levels: benefit to the children and young people actually involved in the research and benefit for children and young people as a whole through the capacity of the findings to bring about change for common good in children's lives.

Many papers include a list of benefits for the children and young people involved in their research as recognised by both the researchers and the participants. These included opportunities for personal development, experiencing participation and inclusion, having individual opinions and approaches valued and validated, increasing their skill base, effecting change, and participating in decision-making processes.

Bishop reports that the definition of what constitutes 'benefit' is generally defined by adults. She suggests that more time be spent understanding what constitutes benefit from children and young people's perspectives as this can only improve the chances of researchers being able to ensure that children and young people experience benefits through research. Such an approach may promote fewer discrepancies between what adult researchers and children and young people regard as benefits. In many of the papers the point is made that for children and young people the process of participation can be of greater interest, benefit and value than the actual outcomes of the research itself, for example.

Translating research findings into changes in policy, practice or service provision is one major ambition of participatory research. Within the papers and during the Think Tank there was considerable discussion around what sorts of changes ought to be promoted and how the effectiveness of these changes could be assessed. Questions canvassed included: Who is listening to the findings of this research? Is participatory

research working in children's favour? What does giving children a voice really mean? Fitzgerald and Graham argue that while the enthusiasm for children's participation is evident, the evidence for change in children's daily lives does not match.

While several papers note the potential benefits for children and young people of engaging in research, Dockett discusses the potentially negative experience of participation when views are sought but not utilised to any extent. In such instances participation may be perceived as tokenistic, disrespectful and of limited benefit.

Having an exit strategy and a plan for disengaging

Disengagement from research relationships is just as important as engagement. Some research involves the development of strong personal bonds between researchers and children and young people, especially when the research is with vulnerable populations. When research concludes, how these relationships are managed can present ethical dilemmas for both the researcher and the children and young people involved.

Mason discusses the need to give children and the project some closure — but at points that suit the children during the process, with some children choosing to remain involved until the very end. Managing a strategy of staggered disengagement such as the one described by Mason in the paragraph below is most likely a reality for most participatory research projects and needs to be anticipated so that leaving a research project is a positive finish at any point.

Quite early in the research process the researchers involved in fieldwork signalled a dilemma around engagement with children and young people. What ethically were their

responsibilities for maintaining relationships with the children and young people they had effectively engaged? This dilemma was in part resolved by the extent to which we provided choices in the project — some of the children and young people disengaged themselves by choosing not to continue into the final focus group stage. For those who did participate in this final stage, we conducted thank you, certificate-giving ceremonies. This process provided, in a concrete way, the opportunity for participants to 'wind down' and experience a sense of closure. An opportunity was provided to those children and young people involved in the final groups, who had an interest in the presentation of the project findings, to provide input into the structure of the summary report. Three accepted this opportunity and contributed to the way the findings were presented (Mason).

Ethics and Consent Issues

This section discusses some of the ethical issues, and issues surrounding the management of consent when researching with children and young people. Ethical considerations are paramount in children's research and their management can be very influential on the research that is ultimately completed with children and young people.

Protection and safety versus participation

Ensuring the protection and safety of all involved is an essential characteristic of participatory research. In practice, managing the need to protect children's safety, privacy and confidentiality while at the same time facilitating their participation presents a number of challenges.

This is evident in the challenges faced by researchers when negotiating with gatekeepers to gain access to children and young people. In protecting children, gatekeepers can remove opportunities for children and young people to decide for themselves whether or not to participate. There is no intention to demonise gatekeepers; examples were offered during the discussion which illustrated why gatekeepers might rightly choose to 'keep gates closed', such as in the case of vulnerable populations whose privacy and confidentiality needs protection. However, it was argued that it should not be entirely up to adults to decide for children and young people what is an opportunity and what is not. There needs to be a balance between recognising children as competent and yet also vulnerable.

This led to a discussion about the risks of research such as introducing children and young people to topics and negative things previously unknown to them. The Think Tank agreed that the emphasis should not be '*risk — therefore don't*', it should be '*risk — therefore manage*'. There are risks associated with all research. For the participants these risks may include the risk of harm, the risk of disclosure, loss of privacy and confidentiality, loss of control over information and its use, and emotional distress. For the researcher the risks may include risk of harm, failing to complete the task, loss of funding, and failing to get access to participants, meet sample size and meet time constraints. The presence of risk should not in itself prevent research from proceeding. It is not always possible to recognise and remove risks in research but advance consideration should enable risk minimisation and management in most cases.

The role of ethics committees

Ethics committees determine what kind of research will be conducted and which children are eligible to participate. Ethics bodies tend to be risk averse and can prevent research being conducted that poses limited risk to children and young people but that may ultimately be beneficial.

A recommended solution to this is to become more involved with ethics bodies, with some participants reporting greater rates of success for participatory projects and fewer tensions with their ethics committees from having done this. An emphasis on the need to support ethics bodies' understanding of the culture of participatory research rather than just going through cycles of changes with them was recognised. It was felt that they needed to be assisted to understand the larger culture of participatory research and its ethos. There were also recommendations for research projects specifically devoted to understanding the experience of participatory research from the perspectives of all groups involved (including ethics bodies, researchers and participants), which would have the potential to improve mutual understanding of the research process and the relationships between all those involved.

While guidelines for ethics bodies have become more sensitive to what is described as 'low risk social research', it is felt that many still position children as lacking competence and capacity. Whenever this is the case, projects which assume children's competence and capacity will continue to struggle to get through ethics approval processes.

Privileging children's experience, having children's competence and capacity recognised, and the worth of participatory research recognised by ethics committees and other gatekeepers remains a major challenge — particularly in light of the time and resource constraints that accompany all research projects. Few research projects can afford to be

stalled for long by any step of the research process such as gaining ethics approval or gaining access to participants, as most projects are funded for the most expedient rate of completion.

There is also the added consideration and concern expressed in relation to research with children and young people which accompanies the need for adaptable and flexible research methodologies. The implications of this at the ethics permission level means that renegotiating aspects of the project with ethics committees also has the potential to impact the research project by stalling it for long periods of time, again challenging resource and time constraints.

Impact of consent processes

The process of consent may not only prevent children from participating but also bias results. The paper by the NSW Commission for Children and Young People discusses the major impact that the type of consent can have on the children who ultimately participate in research. A study in which the consent process changed part way through the data collection process is described. The change was from active consent — which required both parents and children to return forms and give consent; to passive consent — where both parents and children still had to give consent but parents only had to return consent forms if they did not want their child to participate. This ultimately had a major impact on the 'types' of young people who participated across both types of consent process. The project explored children and young people's experience of work. When active consent was sought from parents, 69 per cent of the young people recruited were working. However, when passive consent was sought from parents, only 30% of the young people recruited were working. The example illustrates the potential of consent processes to impact the data collected and ultimately the findings from the

research. It also illustrates that these processes have enormous power in determining which groups of children participate and that these processes themselves may be systematically excluding some groups which should be allowed to participate. It was felt that studies such as this one provide vital evidence to take to ethics committees to argue the case for a revised approach to consent.

One solution to this situation was to engage in rapport-building exercises with groups such as schools to be carried out ahead of consent processes and the research exercise, to ensure a non-response or a rejection of the research is an informed decision. This again poses challenges with ethics committees and ethics approval processes as this contact should not really be made until the project has ethics clearance, yet this contact could play a vital role in shaping the project and contributing to its success once it is running.

This argument was continued in relation to children giving informed consent or refusal. It was felt that without rapport-building exercises and solid relationships with gatekeepers such as schools, children's understanding of the process and of any one project could only be limited as the information transfer was not a reliable process in many instances. It was also felt that if it were possible to develop children's engagement with the process of a research project ahead of the consent process, it would increase the likelihood that children are in a position to give either informed consent or informed refusal.

In both Dockett's and Harcourt's papers, the need to continually revisit consent or assent with children and young people throughout the research process was stressed as good practice. While this gave children the opportunity and choice to refuse to continue their involvement at any point, in Harcourt's case it also allowed children to enter the research process later after initially refusing to participate.

Implications for practice

Participatory research requires research practice that often diverges from the familiar traditional approaches. Some of the practice implications are discussed below.

Messy, complex and resource intensive

Some of the major challenges identified in participatory research with children and young people were:

- Gaining ethics approval for innovative participatory research projects
- Balancing the expectations of researchers and participants
- Developing research methods and methodologies that facilitate the benefits of participation as perceived by children and young people and the benefits valued by researchers
- Reaching children and young people and facilitating their access to research processes
- Managing to help children and young people acquire skills through the research process, and exercise those skills expediently without compromising their experience and learning and without adding too much unanticipated time and cost to the research project
- Managing the representation of children's voices
- Disseminating research findings.

Participatory research is messy because it needs to be flexible and adaptable; it's complex — logistically, methodologically and ethically;

and it is resource intensive, absorbing a lot more time and money to execute than other kinds of research.

This kind of research can be difficult to sustain because ethics committees and funders need to understand its nature and the premise from which it is built. However those who have experienced participatory research feel that, despite this, the outcomes achieved make it worth it.

A greater shared understanding of the issues, complexity and considerations is required if research of this type is to have a smoother passage and culture clashes are to be minimised, for example between bodies involved in research such as ethics committees and gatekeepers such as schools and service providers. Another challenge for researchers is to become better able to argue for the merits of the research and the research outcomes. The pressure of cost and time constraints could also be improved by giving greater attention to the chain of information that accompanies all research projects and their management.

Taking children's views seriously

Questions were raised such as: What does giving children a voice mean? Who's listening to the findings? How is the voice of children being judged? Is it working in children's favour? Will the results act to encourage or discourage research with children? Can the weight of results bring about change in children's lives? How does children's research count? How do we value it?

Participatory processes are being used in research with increasing frequency but there is limited 'evidence' of the uptake of research findings for the benefit of children and young people. The term 'evidence' is used loosely as it is not entirely clear what sort of evidence would be appropriate. The uptake of research findings which shows recognition

of children's views and which could be used to affect children's daily lives is not happening proportionately to the research being completed. While knowledge transfer is recognised as being difficult to facilitate and achieve, a greater focus on this is needed. As indicated earlier, benefit for children and young people involved in research needs to occur on a personal level for participants and for children and young people as a whole. There needs to be a greater emphasis on the process of translating research findings into positive changes in children's lives.

Maximising participation and maintaining data quality

Making the research processes simple and accessible for children and young people while at the same time producing rigorous research results is a challenge. At times it was felt that facilitating the process of participation had become the dominant part of the experience for both researchers and participants at the expense of the need for robust research results (see Anderson; Fitzgerald and Graham). The dominance of the process of participation was not the problem. It was the loss of balance between the outcomes for the children who participated and the needs of the researchers that posed the challenge.

The experience of research with young people as researchers and the implications of this for the research results were also discussed. Some children and young people were not comfortable discussing some topics with peer researchers and this ultimately influenced the data and the findings from the research. However some participants felt that having young researchers involved in the project had elicited information from participants that would not have been made available to adult researchers.

Supporting the participation of children and young people

A greater amount of time needs to be spent establishing strategies and ethical practices with children and young people themselves and defining mutually beneficial projects. Overall, a greater investment is required in supporting children's engagement so that they have a greater comprehension of the research process and are truly 'on the journey' with researchers.

Understanding the value of participating in research from children and young people's perspectives and how this may vary across different types of research, different contexts and cultures needs to be improved.

Strategies for supporting children's participation include building relationships with both children and young people and surrounding adults, educating children and young people about research, investing more time involving children and young people in the research process itself, and in the development of research.

Moving Forward





Moving Forward

Points of Action

At the end of the Think Tank discussion, the group identified some points of action for moving forward. These included:

- Build capacity of children
- Build understanding and knowledge of gatekeepers
- Build knowledge and capacity of researchers
- Increase the influence of research.

Build capacity of children

Strengthening children's understanding of and engagement, inclusion and participation in the research process by:

- Integrating research projects with school curricula to make the research process more relevant to them and more integrated with their everyday learning and experience
- Training children and young people to be researchers
- Involving children and young people in processes which evaluate the experience of research.

Build knowledge of gatekeepers

Work more closely with gatekeepers by:

- Engaging them in dialogue
- Providing face-to-face presentations and question and answer sessions
- Having researchers with knowledge of child development sit as members on ethics committees
- Researching ethics bodies and other groups consistently involved in participatory research to understand the issues surrounding participatory research from all perspectives
- Facilitating the exchange of information and understanding across the whole research process and with everyone who is involved.

Build knowledge of researchers

Build knowledge by:

- Developing specific components covering research methods with children and young people for university courses which could be developed by any number of groups and offered as distance or short courses as well as part of mainstream courses
- Encouraging the completion of more participatory research
- Developing good practice guidelines to promote researcher integrity and researcher's understanding of the issues involved in research with children and young people, similar to the National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines for research with Indigenous people.

- Documenting the process of completing research with children and young people to build up a legacy of experience and enable the process to be better able to be self-informing and reflexive
- Continuing discussions and development of a collective understanding of the issues surrounding the experience of participatory research with children and young people with Think Tank participants. Options suggested included online forums and further meetings (one option for 2009 being the Social Justice and Change Research Centre's November conference — 'Children as experts in their own lives: Developing child inclusive research, policy and practice').
- Publishing the proceedings of the meetings.

Increase the influence of research

Focus on improving the efficacy with which research findings bring about change in policy or practice in children's lives by:

- Publishing research findings more broadly, not just in academic journals
- Looking for new forums and new ways of disseminating research findings
- Developing collaborative research projects which involve groups from several sectors which have the capacity to influence children's lives.

Appendices



Appendix 1

List of Participants in the Think Tank — 11 November 2008

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Appendix 2

Literature Review: Ethical and Consent Issues in Involving Children and Young People in Research

Introduction

This review seeks to examine the ethical and methodological contexts in which research conversations have begun around the world in relation to children's¹⁴ capacities to act as protagonists in their own lives. Many contemporary studies across a range of disciplines have established children's competence in articulating their views and opinions, and their ability to report on important issues in their lived experiences of childhood. They have also established that it is highly possible that the way children experience childhood and how adults (education, health care, welfare and legal professionals, researchers, parents, and community members) perceive it to be experienced contrast between the actual and the expected. While these studies have offered significant opportunities for adults and children to share their expertise and develop

14. For the purposes of this paper *child* or *children* or *childhood* is used to refer to persons from birth to eighteen years.

new shared understandings about children and childhood, they have also presented considerable challenges to the research community in terms of the ethical implications of methodologies that consider the possibility of the child standpoint (Morrow 2005).

The ethical, legal and moral imperative

The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCROC) is widely regarded by the international community as the most comprehensive statement on children's rights and provides a foundation for developing policies and practice about children (United Nations 1989). It resonates with emerging paradigms such as the sociology of childhood (Mayall 2002), where children are seen as social actors (Wyness 2000) with the agency to actively participate in their society (Danby and Baker 1998; James and Prout 1997; Woodrow 1999) and contribute valid opinions as capable citizens (Invernizzi and Williams 2008; Neale 2004).

Many research projects (Dockett 2007; Einarsdottir 2007; Fleer and Quinones 2007; Harcourt 2008; Hayes 2007) have focused on the participatory rights offered in Articles 12 and 13 of the UNCROC (United Nations 1989). These articles provide the mandate for child agency and are referenced by researchers as the significant platform for the inclusion of children's voices in research (Harcourt 2008). As an argument for including children in research, Article 12 from the UNCROC is often used as an 'unquestionable good' (Lundy 2007, p. 931) held out to be endorsed by the research community. Lundy suggests an abbreviated meaning, conveyed as 'child voice' and, representing the notion of children's rights to express themselves in matters that concern them, does a disservice to both children's rights and those encapsulated in Article 12. As an incomplete summary, the use of element-specific phrases such as 'voice

of the child' or 'the right to be heard' undersells the potential for impact. Sloth-Nielson (1996) has suggested that presenting 'child voice' as an undeniable positive to be endorsed by all, may indeed be a precarious side effect of the children's rights discourse. As well-meaning as these terminologies might be, they do not convey the provisions made in the Article in their entirety and thus have the potential to diminish the full extent of the right. Article 12 reads in full as:

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the rights to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

Lundy (2007) urges us to focus on Article 12 as providing children with assurance of their rights. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, which monitors compliance with the UNCROC, has identified gaps between the international commitment by some states and the reality of practice. For example, in its first report on the United Kingdom in 1995, the committee soundly criticised the UK Government for its failure to solicit the views of school children in matters that concerned them. Again, in 2002 the committee reported that the UK Government was still to systematically consult school children in matters that affected them and that the government should take action in order to ensure 'the meaningful and effective participation of all groups of children in society'

(p. 7). In response, the research community needs to demonstrate its assurance to children through an active commitment to involving children in research, not just as 'an option which is the gift of adults, but a legal imperative which is the right of the child' (Lundy 2007, p. 931).

Compliance with Article 12 is therefore an ethical, legal and moral imperative (Lundy 2007) and mandates that children must be involved in decision-making processes on matters that concern them. This is a non-negotiable and permanent human right afforded to children. By ratifying the UNCROC (1989), a country undertakes legal obligations to accord children their rights. With a commitment to involve children in the decision-making and policy environment, a community can provide the structure and procedures that enable their participation, should it view the child as a competent and capable contributor. It is this commitment that shapes the ideas the community has about children. The wish to listen to, and involve, children originates within this context and leads to structures and procedures that can support the involvement of children (Langstead 1994).

In terms of research activities, proactive strategies need to be taken in order to invite and encourage children to engage with the research enterprise (using child-initiated and/or adult-initiated topics) and it must also demonstrate that it has a tangible benefit for children. This can be achieved firstly by asking children if the research topic actually matters to them, and if the outcomes will have an impact on their lives (Hill 2006). While many studies exist relating to the issues affecting children, there are limited studies that directly present the child's standpoint (Cook-Sather 2002). Schoolchildren involved in a study in Northern Ireland (Kilkelly et al. 2005) overwhelmingly reported that not having a say in decisions made about them was the single most important issue to them. In assessing the relevance of an issue to children, some suggest it would follow that

the issues should be identified by the children (Hicks 1996; Thomas and Campling 2000). However, care should be taken that the full responsibility of research topics is not placed with children, nor should adults be encouraged to abrogate their responsibilities. A balance of child-initiated/child-supported topics or areas of concern and those of adults should be strived for. Studies about children from an adult perspective include adult bias and assumptions about what children think. While many researchers espouse the importance of including children's voices they also express concern as to the practical, ethical and procedural methods to enact this goal (Moore, McArthur and Noble-Carr 2008).

Kulynych (2001) notes that younger children are not seen as reliable reporters — even of their own experience — and as such we rarely ask them for their own perspective (Thomas and Campling 2000). Children, on the other hand, may be more knowledgeable of the adult world than in previous years (SL Smith and Wilson 2002), but adults cannot profess a reciprocal knowledge of children's perspectives. As noted in a report by UNICEF (2001):

Some of what the children say will make adults uncomfortable. They speak eloquently and painfully about violence and injustice, about discrimination and not being heard. But they do also tell of many positive things: how much they appreciate love and support, how hopeful they are about the future and how, despite current difficulties, they very much want to contribute to building a better world for all (p. 5).

Ethical context of competence

Cocks (2006) suggests that little discussion has examined how a child's competence is measured and assessed by the researcher. Significantly, Article 12 of UNCROC assures children of their right to express their views, which is not dependant on their competence to express a mature view, rather that they have the competence to form and express a view (Lundy 2007). That is, it is not dependent on the child's age and maturity. That element is specifically linked to what action may be taken on those views, applying to the obligation to give views their due weight — being heard and listened to by those who involved in decision-making processes.

The ethical implications of methodologies used when considering children's views on matters that concern them is influenced by how researchers 'see' children. If there is an image held that 'sees' the child as a competent social actor in their own right, then they can also be viewed as a reliable participant in the entire research process (Hill 2006). This rejects previous notions that children cannot provide reliable information (Dockett and Perry 2003) and invites the opportunity for children to provide the 'missing perspectives' (Cook-Sather 2002, p. 3). It also counters an apparent cultural reluctance to take children's ideas seriously (Morrow 2005, p. 153). The United Nations General Comment No 7 (2005) notes that to achieve participation rights for all children, adults must 'show patience and creativity by adapting their expectations' (para 11). Children must be afforded the opportunity to demonstrate their competence as research participants in all aspects of the research enterprise, including the design of data collection tools, equitable representation, data analysis and dissemination (UN General Comment No 7 2005).

How researchers 'see' children impacts on all aspects of the research process. Using interactive and participatory methods respects children's developing capacity to engage with the representation of ideas and opinions. It is these methods that directly impact children when we ask them to participate in research projects (Bessell 2008). In conjunction with the methods or tools that are employed to support children's participation, Bessell (2008) also suggests that a rights-based, participatory methodology is what 'offers the potential to transform the way in which children are involved in research' (p. 1). For example, seeking equity in recruiting the research population — i.e., ensuring representative participation of all children including, for example, children with special educational rights, children at risk, children with English as a second language, Indigenous children and children with chronic illness — demonstrates the researcher's commitment to 'seeing' all children as having the competence and the right to participate as research collaborators (Cocks 2006). In addition, validating the research data through seeking children's input during the analysis ensures that the power imbalance often evident in the interpretation of data is addressed (Morrow 2005). When the research is finally ready for dissemination, the researcher then holds responsibility to ensure that children and their views are respectfully represented with the focus on children's competence as research participants and holders of valid views and opinions. Therefore research methods and methodologies employed must uphold children's rights to actively participate as reliable and capable informants.

The notion of assent

As an outcome of the Nuremburg Code of Ethics (see Weindling 2001) the voluntary consent of a human participant in the research process is absolutely essential. Along with other disenfranchised groups, children have been amongst the most heavily represented 'victims' of research (Coady 2001). A primary key to ethical research is *informed consent* and, in the case of any person who has not reached the age of consent, *informed assent*. Any potential participant, in any research process, must be given the right to decide and determine whether it is in his or her own best interest to participate. In discussing ethical considerations Valentine (1999) also identified the process of consent as a key area of concern when working with children. Valentine asserted that children's capacities to consent are contextual and relational, rather than developmental, but only legally valid when considered 'in the best interests of the child', however that may be defined.

When using the term assent (as opposed to consent) Cocks (2006) explains it as a 'sensitive gaining of a child's agreement' (p. 257) and that which is representative of the relationship of trust that develops between the researcher and the researched. This notion of assent increases children's accessibility to research without having to negotiate adult-orientated measures of competence in language and definable methods. Bessant (2006) notes the legal inconsistencies within Australia as to what defines a child or young person and argues that the fixed age rule is outmoded for research. Traditional ways of 'knowing' children are considered redundant and, as human beings, children have human rights and should be afforded those in the same way other people are (Bessant 2006). Bessant suggests that the evidence that children are maturing earlier presents issues for consent, which are no longer

simple or straightforward, and notes that while a developmental view of children is convenient it is significantly flawed.

There are many challenges when engaging in the process of seeking children's informed assent. It would appear that this is often a hurried process with little emphasis placed on ascertaining whether children are being empowered to make an informed decision to participate, or not to participate, in the research process (Harcourt and Conroy 2005). If researchers want to work with children rather than on children, consideration must be given to establishing a shared meaning about the purpose of the research to be undertaken (Dockett 2007; Robbins 2003). This must include discussions about the roles and responsibilities of those participating in the research project, how data will be gathered and analysed, and with whom it will be shared. If children understand that they are being invited to be partners in the research project, there is a window of opportunity for the adult to provide a research space for children to share deep thinking rather than superficial responses. If opportunities are provided for responsibility and initiative through a shared power base, there is the potential for developing active democratic citizenship.

In seeking children's assent, Cocks (2006) noted that children's competence to do so can be impacted by several factors. The researcher and the way they approach the child may make the child feel uncomfortable or intimidated. Even things such as the height difference between an adult and a child can impact the tentative relationship. The circumstances of the request to participate may be proposed as a fait accompli. Researchers may unconsciously use a language of power, which implies that the child will participate. When the researcher phrases requests such as, 'I have come to get your permission', or 'I have come to get you to sign that you agree', the intention may be to seek permission,

however the request is posed as an already negotiated agreement (Harcourt and Conroy 2005). Children, particularly within a classroom climate of obedience, appear to be disempowered, finding it challenging to decline the researcher's request.

Edwards and Aldred (2000) have suggested that thoughtful consideration needs to be given to the specific context in which children are supported in their understandings, in order for them to make an informed decision about their participation. Familiar surroundings, such as school or home settings, may be optimal contexts in which to initially engage with children. Danby and Farrell (2005) also suggested that the 'researcher and potential participant consider the possibility of the [research] conversation and what it might entail' (p.49). Harcourt and Conroy (2005) affirmed this and added that it is essential to ensure that the aims and the purpose of the research are fully explored with children. Adults must be conscious of the language, or other forms of communication, which will be used to support the child's decision-making. This is often a complex, and sometimes messy, process that must be given serious consideration by the researcher, particularly if the researcher is unfamiliar with working with children.

When children participate in shared research projects with adult researchers there is tremendous potential for constructing meaning about actions, events, places and relationships that impact on children and thus informing the research enterprise. Tayler, Farrell, Tennent and Patterson (2005) noted that research requires 'sustained social engagement' (p. 143), and we believe that the time needed to develop the research relationship cannot be circumvented. Rinaldi (2006) reminded us of the significance of the *pedagogy of listening* — listening with intentionality, creating authentic opportunities for children's thinking to become apparent. In many situations, children

may not have previously been asked their opinion. Children, like adults, need time to reflect on the question being posed, in order to offer an informed response. As such, the process of negotiating meaning, or co-constructing understandings, about what adult and child will be working on 'together' must be given greater emphasis. We must acknowledge the time it takes to establish a relationship that results in sufficient trust and security for the child to share opinions and viewpoints. As researchers struggle with tight timelines, time (or the lack of it) may be one of the most significant elements in negotiating true partnership agreements. Here we remind ourselves of Bessell's (2008) stress on the methodologies adopted when researching with children, and the challenges offered by a rights-based, participatory approach.

As an additional challenge, Balen et al. (2006) question the protocols that currently exist when seeking informed assent from children. These include the consent of significant gatekeepers, including parents, school principals, classroom teachers, welfare officers, and government departments. 'Young people ... have the capacity to make a voluntary choice about involvement in research and it should be their informed consent that we are seeking, not [just] the consent of their parents' (p. 43). If we are to position children as active participants in the research enterprise — one which seeks their ideas and opinions about matters that concern them and whom will receive benefit from the research — then it is their rights that should be respected and given as just as much weight as those of the (adult) gatekeepers. The requirement for parent consent means that research in sensitive areas, such as child abuse, adolescent sexuality or drug use, is less likely to gain parental consent, even if the children are willing to participate. As a result, research projects in these areas, although necessary, are either severely constrained or not researched at all (Bessant 2006).

Alderson (1995) and Valentine (1999) agree that children must be better supported to opt in rather than out of research. Bessant (2006) reasserts that informed consent by the participant is essential but that the measure of explanation regarding withdrawal of consent needs more consideration so that children understand that their initial consent is not a one-off and final decision (Valentine 1999). It is equally important that children are adequately informed that their decision to withdraw at any time will be accepted without consequence. Such assurance is important not only for the participants but must also be reinforced by any consenting adults (Hurley and Underwood 2002).

The ethics of relationships

In participatory research, trust is important and must be built (R Smith et al. 2002). McDowell (2001) asserted that the best code of practice is no substitute for respect for, and empathy with, participants to the extent that rapport is now considered more important than objectivity (McDowell 2001; Moore et al. 2008). Grover (2004) noted the importance of establishing trusting relationships to overcome the predisposition of the children to present what they believe they are 'supposed to say' in a research context (Mahon et al. 1996). The context — school or home — in which research is undertaken can shape the ethical implications of working with children (Valentine 1999). Structures of compliance, privacy and confidentiality all reinforce an already uneven power distribution in the research relationship. Mahon et al. (1996) argue that children need extra protection in research contexts due to the potential for exploitation of the power imbalance or a lack of understanding.

Although including children in the research process is considered to contribute to establishing rapport and trust, thereby breaking down

some of the power imbalances due to age and traditional social hierarchies (Alderson 1995), Mahon et al. (1996) suggest that the appropriateness of involving children as researchers remains at the discretion of the adult. Mahon et al. also suggest that younger children may be more suggestible to respond in a certain way. Thomson (2007) noted that the 'concept of the homogenised powerful competent adult' (p. 212) remains dominant within discourses on doing research with children and that researchers often describe children using 'an age based logic and convenient categorisation' (p. 211). Thomson also suggested that special measures in researching with children might be needed, not for reasons of competence or capacity, but because of children's marginalised status and traditional adult perceptions of children's competencies. In addition, the transitional status of older adolescents raises complex issues of power, ethics and status (McDowell 2001). A range of societal laws and expectations of older adolescents afford them adult status, yet in terms of their competence to provide consent for research they remain marginalised.

Although there is increasing recognition of the importance of listening to children, this emergent appreciation is not present in all social research. This is particularly noticeable in that which resides in the experimental domain unless directly identified in the pre-existing adult categorisations of the study (Grover 2004). Prominent studies such as the *National Survey of Young Australians 2008* (Mission Australia 2008) and the Australian Childhood Foundation's *Children's fears, hopes and heroes — Modern Childhood in Australia* (Tucci, Mitchell and Goddard 2007), report on the children's (predominantly adolescent) views on topics nominated by the researchers. Grover (2004) notes that even studies on children's understanding of human rights often use adult categorisations.

Lundy (2007) implores us to consider strategies for the development of meaningful and effective shared participation in research with children. Time cannot be overstated, and both adults and children need time to explore and understand the issues in research. Adults also need to overcome their resistance to including children in research and undertake training in communicating with children. However, when researching with children, over time a relationship of trust is built. We also need to consider what happens at the end of the research and children need to be aware that this particular relationship is not permanent. Further consideration needs to be given to the nature of research with children and the potential exploitative relationships that may have a negative impact on children, particularly those with special educational rights such as learning disabilities.

Power imbalances in participation

While it has been clearly established there is a growing emphasis on children as co-researchers (R Smith et al. 2002), a difficulty with directly commissioned (and some would suggest non-commissioned work in most cases) research prevails when children are only included after the topic has been identified (Moore et al. 2008). More studies are emerging that actively include children in the process of developing the research topic and much of the methodological discussion and emphasis has moved from the data analysis to the data collection phase of these studies (Moore et al. 2008; Fisher 2005; McDowell 2001; Valentine 1999; Alderson, 1995).

While more research now considers children's views and includes more children's voices (Coad and Evans 2008) there remains a scarcity of research that provides feedback directly to the participants prompting

McDowell (2001, p. 95) to ask 'for whom am I writing?' Such dissemination inconsistencies (Alderson 1995; Valentine 1999) create suspicion and discontent in the children's attitude to adults and possible future participation in research (Fisher 2005). Grover (2004) and R Smith et al. (2002) suggest that unequal power does not 'evaporate' when children at any age are involved and Smith (2002) notes that even 16- to 18-year-olds are rarely given the opportunity to discuss ethical implications, contribute to data interpretation, provide reflections on the data and provide input on policy implications. By virtue of the presupposed hierarchical relationship between adult and child, any power given or removed from children remains at the discretion of the adult (Valentine 1999). Such imbalances can be extended through parental coercion that can either block or enable research activity. When given opportunities to be heard, adults express surprise at the sophisticated responses provided by children that reinforces a hierarchy of expectation that they are unlikely to provide credible input (Thomson 2007).

Grover (2004) refers to one study by Davis and Bottoms (2002) where children were questioned about their feelings towards aspects of a project, in particular the investigators. The inclusion of the children's views facilitated clear methodological revisions that encouraged the children to question anything they felt was wrong in the context of the project. The resultant effect was the child participants' consideration that they themselves were competent informants to the process (Grover 2004). Mahon et al. (1996) also alert us to the possible expectation by children that the issues raised by them will be directly acted upon to their personal benefit. Such expectations can lead to disenchantment with adults when children do not experience any direct personal effect of the research. As such, it is essential that the full intent, objectives and limitations of any research be explained to children.

To have some control over how we are portrayed by others is an inherent right afforded to many adults but not so to children (Grover 2004). Children have no right of correction, particularly in relation to the stereotyping of childhood. Children are often not debriefed after a study due to an emphasis on group trends rather than individual cases, and this means the participants are treated as object of the study rather than participants (Grover 2004). Cullingford (2004) states that child participants tend to embrace the research experience and in fact relish the opportunity to state their view when consulted by adults.

Ethics committees

The relatively new nature of research with children has provided another significant challenge for researchers. This has been particularly evident when making application to ethics committees. Allen (2005) comments that, regrettably, ethics submissions are seen by many as a form filling exercise in order to fulfil the requirements for ethical clearance. Balen et al. (2006) refer to the 'barriers of protocols' (p. 43) that are often put up by ethics committees and calls for flexibility in their approach to research with children. Cocks (2006) asks the researcher to see ethical frameworks and methodological issues not as 'a posture assumed in order to satisfy academic and professional research' (p. 261), but rather a declaration of the position or stance they are taking in the research. David, Tonkin, Powell and Anderson (2005) agree with this approach and suggest we look to the rigorous ethics committee scrutiny as a positive experience; a way to improve how research with children is conducted. Allen (2005) also concurs and notes that the process of applying for ethical approval should be a 'process of reflecting upon ethical issues in a research design' (p. 15).

Many ethics committees have taken an 'extremely conservative position' (Allen 2005, p. 16), particularly when the research involves children or a research design that is unfamiliar to the panel members. It could therefore be useful for both the ethics committees and the researchers, at least at the organisational (e.g. university) level, to engage in a proactive 'culture of ethics learning' (Allen 2005, p. 22). Allen proposes that this could be achieved through features such as:

- The provision of guidance and tools that facilitate excellent and ethical research, including the legal rights/responsibilities of researchers
- An inclusive membership of ethics committees (i.e. multidisciplinary)
- Relevant advice on the different processes of the project
- Transparent, timely, predictable and standardised decision-making
- Research ethics is promoted as a research training and design process
- There is ongoing dialogue between all stakeholders.

If the ethics process is positioned as a collaborative, integrated approach by all concerned, we may see more positive outcomes in terms of high quality and ethical research.

Real names or pseudonyms?

Another challenge for consideration contests the traditional use of pseudonyms in research projects in order to protect the identity of those involved. Ethical considerations often dictate an assumption that those who are involved in the research would not want their identities to be visible to audiences. In contrast, Harcourt's (2008) study reports that, when given a choice, children will often elect to use their own names, initial or identifying symbol. The author reported a group of children aged five years requesting that their real names be used, because they indicated that using their real names says who they really are. They did not want to pretend to be somebody else. They wanted the people who read or heard about the research to know their names. In a negotiated compromise with the children, the researcher used the children's first names and used pseudonyms for the settings that participated. Clark (2007) also spoke on this issue noting that children may record their name, initial or 'signature symbol' as a declaration, or 'marker' of their presence. Ethically, this places another level of complexity within the relationship of collaborative research. Do we as adult researchers pursue the issue of anonymity as an accepted ethical practice? Or, do we begin a new dialogue which reflects an ongoing commitment to children's wellbeing, while responding to a new context of (collaborative) research with young children? We also need to consider children's understanding of the potential longevity of dissemination of the research outcomes, and perhaps a five-year-old informant may be less happy with their views and opinions being shared when they are 10 or 15 years old. We believe these are questions worthy of further consideration by the research community.

Protocols for research with children?

David et al. (2005) suggest that we consider developing a suite of protocols that relate to the research dilemmas challenging those who undertake research with children. These protocols can be used to 'speak' to the concerns of the gatekeepers of research, and can make assurances about upholding the rights of the child. The protocols may also establish specific standards of practice and approaches to research with children, which might not otherwise be explicit. Using David et al.'s (2005, p. 132) framework, the authors would like to propose:

- An examination of the research approach and how it respects children
- Why the research is being undertaken and what consultation with children has occurred in relation to the research question
- What is the likely impact of the research on children and what tangible benefit to children will ensue?
- What processes of consent and assent will be considered?
- How children's emerging competencies will be represented
- What will children's engagement be with data analysis?
- How will the research findings be disseminated and how will issues of respect for children and their views be addressed?

By considering the establishment of protocols, researchers make clear their accountability for their research with children quite clear. Protocols will offer parents, practitioners, children and other stakeholders a way of raising questions and concerns about the research within a framework of professional capacity.

Conclusion

As identified in this review, the challenges relating to ethical and consent issues in involving children and young people in research are numerous and require careful consideration — and yet are not insurmountable. As a priority, researchers must engage with the legal, moral and ethical imperatives offered by the UNCROC (1989) and in particular give Article 12 due and diligent consideration in its entirety. They must not only commit to inclusive practices but also maintain assiduousness in ensuring that children and young people are respected participants in the research process, from selection of methodologies to the dissemination and reporting of results. With these guidelines in mind, children will be offered opportunities to genuinely participate in research.

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