

Chapter 2

Conducting ethical professional inquiry alongside children: Children as fellow researchers

Carla Solvason

This chapter makes reference to child-based research that has taken place in many cultural contexts, from Iceland to Australia. Although this piece has a UK perspective, it is internationally recognised that children are entitled to use their own voice to explain their own understanding of their lived experience. This perspective is sanctioned through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) which states that children's views should be respected in matters affecting them and that they should be supported in finding ways to express those views. It is now acknowledged that adults are "not necessarily in the best position to represent children's viewpoints and experiences fully because children themselves have a unique perspective" (Mukherji & Albon, 2010). 'Listening' to children should not be an act of tokenism, and should not involve presumptions about factors, viewed through the lens of an adult (Dona, 2006). Roberts (2017, p. 142) stresses the importance of authenticity when listening to children, and questions whether, despite having "more mechanisms, more research funding, and better guidance to listen to children and young people... are we any better at hearing them, in the sense of taking account in a meaningful way what they have to tell us?" How can we, as early childhood professionals, find ways to truly listen and respond to the viewpoints of those in our care? This chapter explores how we can successfully research alongside children in a way that is not only gentle and nurturing, but also stimulates children to question and to challenge. It considers how we can provide children the opportunity to ask 'is this the best way?' just as we do in our own research.

Introduction

Research is central to our role as early childhood professionals; from the evidence based policies that scaffold our settings' processes to the reflective decisions that we make in our daily interactions with children. We are constantly asking 'is this the best way, or can we do it better?' Recently that we have come to acknowledge what seems so obvious, that children are the experts in their own lives and should be consulted about their experience (Einasrdottir, 2007). Although we are aware that the best research considers a range of viewpoints, often this 'range' is limited to our early years colleagues and sometimes parents, because of the ethical complications inherent in researching with young children. Yet for most early childhood professionals our espoused theory is to listen and respond to children's ideas. So how can we better align these two factors? In this chapter we consider how we can make "children...competent/ agentic actors in both formal and informal ethical processes" (Harcourt & Quennerstedt, 2014, p. 6) and how we can provide authentic opportunities to listen and value the child's voice .

Levels of Involvement

If you are considering collaborating with children in a research project then you must think carefully about the extent to which you are hoping to involve them. Landsdown (2005) identifies different levels of involvement of children in research. There is nothing to say that these apply only when researching with children; they are actually worth considering regardless of the age of your research participants, or partners. The levels are:

- Consultation- with the aim of eliciting the child's perspective
- Participation- where the child plays a role in the process of the research
- Self-initiation- where the children are the instigators of the research and the adults support them in this.

Most of our research, regardless of how 'collaborative' it purports be, stops at that first stage. We simply want to 'take' the child's view, in response to a set of questions that we have prescribed. We, as the researchers, have set and control the agenda. Roberts (2017, p. 143) discusses how "children's voices, edited and sanitised, become merely a tool in the adult armoury, used more for decoration than illumination." We frequently present the child's view through our own lens, to suit our purposes. Dona (2006) explains that we are all influenced by the socio-political and cultural environments that we inhabit, and we need to recognise that those environments look very different through the eyes of an adult as opposed to those of a young child.

Hart (1992) explores the idea of collaborative research with children by proposing a 'ladder of participation' which is similar to but more detailed than Landsdown's (2005) levels of participation. Hart's illustration identifies 8 stages, which move through non-participatory approaches such as manipulation and decoration, to child-initiated research where decisions are made alongside adults. Gallacher and Gallagher (2008, p. 500) explain that, 'It is no longer enough to simply reposition children as the subjects – rather than objects – of research; children should be engaged as participants in the research process, if not as researchers in themselves.' In actuality, these latter stages of involvement are rarely seen and can be extremely problematic for the researcher, because in handing over the ownership of the research and allowing children to take control, it may mean that preconceived goals for the research are not met (Dona, 2006). Gallacher and Gallagher (2008, p. 503) warn that "research participants might act in all sorts of unexpected ways, and that no amount of meticulously pre-planned and carefully applied technique will alter this". Unfortunately, we are programmed to view this as a negative, when it is actually part of the excitement of research. McNiff (2016, p. 16) likens all research to stepping off a cliff- you really have no idea where you'll end up. The whole idea of research is that we are stepping into unknown territory, it takes us to unknown places. If we already knew the answers, there would be no point in carrying it out.

Identifying the degree to which you would like to work with children when carrying out the research will help you to identify an appropriate methodology and methods. This decision will be influenced by your own ideology of childhood that underpins both your professional practice when interacting with children daily and any research that you might carry out. Whether you view children as vulnerable and in need of protection, or as competent agents; as social actors or 'becomings' (Einarsdottir, 2007) will impact upon exactly whose views you believe it is important to hear.

Ethical Approaches

In 2011 the British Educational Research Association set out clear guidelines to be followed by all educational researchers as they work through projects involving empirical data collection. These ethical guidelines are translated into the information and permission letters that are the backbone of almost all of the research that we encounter. In the UK the European Early Childhood Educational Research Association (EECERA, 2014) built upon this framework, making guidance that was more specific to the needs of the young children in our care. As you begin to explore ideas of ethical research more deeply, you realise that taking an ethical approach to researching with young children encompasses far more than simply gaining permissions. It starts by considering the questions that you will ask through your research, it is embedded in every respectful conversation that you have and extends throughout the data collection, analysis and feedback. Banks (2009) describes ethical professionalism as a way of being that goes beyond process and penetrates all that you do, but this is difficult to understand in relation to researching with children without teasing out some key steps within the research process.

Consent and Assent

It is important first to reflect upon the concept of consent with young children. To enable a genuine opportunity for children to give or withhold consent, there must exist a trusting relationships between the researcher and the participants. Einarsdottir (2007, p. 204) discusses how children are potentially “more vulnerable to unequal power relationships” than other groups. Gallagher (2008, p. 25) strengthens the point in stating that “child-adult relations are often characterised by domination and subordination.” Researchers have explored the problems of authority figures and fear of consequences that children may experience when they are included in research (for example, Punch, 2002 and Flewitt, 2005). Gallacher and Gallagher (2008, p. 506) even comment that “researchers are expressly taking advantage of children’s schooled docility towards such activities”.

The EECERA code of ethics (2014, p. 8) stresses that it is our responsibility to make well-documented steps to “reduce the power differential” when carrying out research. Their ethical code repeatedly refers to issues of power stressing as something we should be vigilant about not abusing. In an absence of genuine understanding, children are likely to be led by the adults whom they have a relationship with, and who usually make decisions for them. The influence exerted by an adult may be unintentional, but, Gallagher (2008, p. 16) explains that, “Even in the absence of coercion, children may rely upon cues from adults whom they trust”. This is why assent, discussed further below, becomes vitally important, but first we should be clear on formal methods of gaining consent.

Informed consent from parents/ carers

Before including any data about/from children for research in the UK, the informed consent of the parents or carers must be gained, as required by British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018). Within UK culture, parents or carers are seen as responsible for the welfare of children and so for making decisions concerning what is or is not best for their wellbeing. Therefore, having first gained consent from the gatekeepers of the setting within which you hope to carry out the research, the next step is to gain consent from parents. Although this may be obtained verbally, it is advised to retain a written version of the information that has been given to the adults as well as a signature to confirm that consent has been given; this helps to maintain a paper trail that demonstrates that appropriate ethical procedures have been followed.

From the experience of supervising hundreds of early childhood student research projects in the UK, a number of educational settings now have a ‘blanket’ consent in place. Regardless of any policies in place, it is still sound ethical (and respectful) practice to inform parents of any research that you are planning to carry out and to invite them to speak with you in order to clarify any queries that they may have. To this end, an information letter clarifying the purpose, approaches and aims of the research must be sent home to parents. Parents should always be provided the opportunity to withdraw their children from any activities at the setting. If your research involves a select group of children, or involvement in activities which are unlike the experience of the rest of the group, then specific consent will need to be sought from the parents of those sample children. All dialogue and decisions made between yourself and the gatekeepers of the setting with regards to this negotiation should be clearly recorded within your study.

In terms of consent from children, some researchers, for example Anderson (2004), have produced simplified information leaflets to share with the children. One of my students produced a wonderful letter that she shared with her Special Educational Needs children which is shown below (thanks to Orsolya Török):



I am a student.

(Insert a photograph of your place of study here)

This is the place where I am studying.



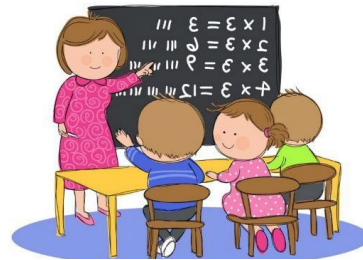
My job is to carry out a piece of research. I will need to write down what I have learnt.



I would like to complete this project in your class.



I would like to observe you while you are playing with your friends.



I would like to observe you while you are learning with your teacher.

Are you happy to take part in this project?



Yes, I am happy to take part.



No, thank you.

However even the most basic leaflet, letter or presentation will hold no value to a child too young to comprehend its meaning. Imagine, for example, that you are looking at the behaviours of children 4-6 months. This is where the concept of *assent* takes priority over consent.

Ongoing Assent from children

Even if permission has been gained from those adults responsible for the wellbeing of the children, it is still vital to gain assent from the children involved; and this needs to be done sensitively. Dona (2006) astutely points out that knowledge about *how* we should interact with children is just as important as the technical skills needed for a successful study when it comes to researching with children. Those who are attempting to understand children need to be in tune with them, which can only come from a sound professional knowledge of child development and the multiplicitous ways that children communicate. Gallagher (2008, p. 44) discussed how, during research with young children with special needs, every attempt was made to delicately elicit their views, but if the child “fell silent...changed the subject abruptly or moved to another part of the room” this was read as reluctance to take part and the research was halted immediately. He listened to and respected their body language, regardless of the impact that this may have had upon his data collection; and we should follow this example. Most children have not learned the layers of subterfuge employed by adults whose behaviour is moulded by cultural expectations and social cues. If they are not happy about the situation then they are likely to let you know. If the child is showing unease, lack of interest, irritation or fatigue at any point then the research activity should cease.

Sample and participation

Children have diverse perspectives, experiences and understandings. Choosing to involve some in research and not others can mean that this diversity is neither recognised nor respected. (Dockett, Einarsdottir & Perry, 2009, p. 289)

Of course such a view as that presented above could be taken of all research, not just research with children, but careful thought should be given to your sample and whether it adequately represents the ‘multiple realities’ (Frones, Jenks, Qvortrup, Rizzinin & Thorne, 2000) that children experience. Variables such as age, gender, culture and ability (to name but a few) must be considered, and the sample must fully represent the group that you are researching with. Something to consider is that if we are genuinely recognising children as “key researchers into children’s experiences” (Christensen & James, 2017, p. 5) then we should also be enabling children to take a lead in identifying a suitable sample. In Dona’s (2006) research article, which allowed children in Rwanda and Bangladesh to take the reins in the case studies exploring their experiences of migration, their choice of sample was sometimes unexpected. They ranged from interviewing children in pairs with their best friend (and when you consider ideas of support, confidence and authenticity, then the benefits connected with this become obvious) to asking neighbours about immigrant families. Their pragmatic reasoning was simple: ‘Who knows the research subjects well but does not necessarily have an emotional connection to them? Who will paint an unbiased picture?’ Their neighbours. Children’s ideas may not always be feasible, or they may not fit within ethical parameters, but they may surprise you with the clarity of their thinking.

You should think very carefully about ways that you can empower children as researchers -about the approaches that can be taken to enable them to feel safe that their views will be heard and respected. Einarsdottir (2007) carried out her research with 2-6 year olds in Iceland in order to better understand their views of their own settings. She argues that it makes sense to hold discussions with children in pairs or in a group because “children are used to being together in a group, and through interaction with other children they learn and form their views regarding their environment” (Einarsdottir, 2007, p. 200). She adds, most significantly, that children are more relaxed and *empowered* when they are with friends. This is something important for all of those researching with children to pay attention to. And remember, the group that you discuss topics with does not have to dictate the sample that you will record your data from, which may still

be just one or two children within the group. By making the effort for children to be surrounded by the people that will make them feel most secure will have a significant impact upon the quality of the data that you collect.

Approaches to data collection with very young children

The child's right is not dependent on his or her ability to *express* views but to *form* them.

(Butler, Scanlan, Robinson, Douglas & Murch,, 2003, p. 25)

Butler et al argue that if a child is able to formulate a viewpoint, then we should do our very best to find ways to hear that. Einarsdottir (2007, p. 199) discusses research that has revealed that "children, just like adults, hold their own views and perspectives, have the right to be heard, and are able to speak for themselves *if the right methods are used*" [my emphasis]. Regardless of how involved or empowered children may feel there still needs to be clear alignment between the information that we need to collect and the best methods of doing this.

Many of the existing ideas about collecting data from children stem from Clark's (2017) mosaic approach. This advocates a variety of child-friendly approaches to data collection in order to produce a composite picture of children's lives. The philosophical aims of your research and your beliefs concerning the role and voice of children, as discussed in the first section of this chapter, will be key to your choice of data collection tools. Your professional knowledge concerning the capabilities of the children that you work with, will also enable you to make appropriate methodological choices.

Many of Clark's (2017) suggestions for evoking children's views involve some form of artwork or symbolic creation or representation, key forms of communication with pre-literate children. They include:

- creating artwork through a variety of media such as traditional paper approaches, clay, natural materials or sand
- using props that the children can interact with, such as toys, dolls or puppets as prompts for discussion or to aid decision making
- taking photographs
- storytelling and role play
- the collection of artefacts
- simple questioning
- exploratory play
- walking tours and map making

In 2005 Clark discussed how children's artwork could be used as a form of expression and give us an idea of the child's perspective, but before this, in 2002, Punch stressed that the narrative and discussion that takes place during the production of that drawing is far more important than the adult taking the finished product and viewing it through their own lens. Merewether and Fleet (2014) presented similar reasoning for accompanying their child participants whilst they took photographs of their setting in Western Australia. They realised through doing this that the adult researcher's interpretation of the photographs taken could sometimes be something entirely different to the child's intended focus.

Einarsdottir's (2007) research with young children in Iceland used alternative forms of data collection such as those outlined above, but also interviews. These comprised of both group and individual interviews. She explained the benefits of group interviews:

Group interviews are based on interactions, so the children discuss the questions, help each other with the answers, remind each other about details, and keep the answers truthful. In the group interview, children can also ask questions and themselves serve as interviewers in that way. (p. 20)

Despite these benefits, she also observed that some children did not engage, so for these she used individual interviews based upon a series of photographs that the practitioner took of the child engaged in activities during the day. Although effective in eliciting views arguably both of these approaches are adult-led, as they are in response to prompts, artefacts and questions selected by the researcher. But surely to totally eliminate the researcher's influence would be to eliminate research itself? Gollop (2000) urges that the important aspect is not so much how we approach interviewing children but how we authentically listen to them and give them the chance to really be heard. Warming (2005, cited in Waller & Bitou, 2011) argues that there is a clear distinction between 'listening' being used as a tool and the children genuinely having a 'voice' by their concerns being acted upon. This is broached in the dissemination section.

Clearly there are limitations to all of the data collection approaches outlined above. The authenticity of young children means that they are unlikely to lie, per se, but they do have vivid imaginations whereby reality and fantasy often become entangled (Einarsdottir, 2007). Children like to challenge agendas and the need to conform, as Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) repeatedly found when they reflected upon their own research approaches with young children. They discussed how, when given the opportunity to draw or photograph, children would often simply draw and take photographs of things that they liked, rather than the prescribed focus of the researcher. Key is being prepared to work within the fluid realities of childhood. Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) came to realise that by letting go of the narrow view that children's unpredictability is a restriction and instead embracing it as a quality, it enabled some of their most fascinating insights to emerge from children acting in unexpected ways. Ongoing and genuine dialogue will help you to tune into the correct wavelength for communicating with and understanding each child.

The extent to which research participants should be involved in data analysis is problematic in all research, but can particularly be so in research with children. Palaiologou's (2013) examination of research literature representing activities with the under 5s, found that children would often rationalise the meaning of the artefacts collated through the research in vastly different ways to the logical expectations of the adult researchers involved. It is important to acknowledge the problematic nature of children's different subjectivities when analysing data collected from or with them, whilst we endeavour to "Represent the findings of all research accurately" (Early Childhood Australia, 2006). Inevitably the 'ownership' of the understanding of the data is entangled within individual ideologies, contexts, power and dominance. Although there is no simple solution to this, researchers should be mindful of and open about the extent to which their own choices and preconceptions as an adult may influence their final conclusions about the children's data.

Confidentiality versus Safeguarding

The need to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of children involved in research is well documented within all ethical guidance. Einarsdottir (2007, p. 206) showed particular sensitivity towards the children in her research, even describing how she felt guilty about discussing some of their pictures with the class teacher. She felt strongly that when researching with children the adult researchers should ensure that "the researcher does not betray the child's confidence with parents or teachers". But it may be that your responsibility to keep research data confidential conflicts with your need to share a concern. Things are not always straightforward. After a detailed exploration of all aspects of ethics, Punch (1994) had to concede that ethics is sometimes a swamp and that he was able to provide no map. In murky situations you cannot take a risk that you might later regret; any responsibilities that you may hold as a researcher are outweighed by your responsibility as a professional to guard children's safety. If a child shares information with you which causes you to fear for their safety, even within the parameters of your confidential research, then you must pass that information on to the relevant member of staff responsible for safeguarding within the setting. If further guidance is needed, then discuss the situation with a senior colleague whom you trust to give you thoughtful, helpful and confidential guidance on the matter.

Responsibility to Disseminate

'All research participants, including young children, have a right to feedback on the research process and outcomes.' (EECERA, 2014, p. 8)

In my own experience as both researcher and supervisor, dissemination is increasingly recognised as a key element of research over recent years, but how can we approach this with young children? Mukherji and Albon (2010, p. 246) suggest compiling a book of photographs during the research to be used 'with' and 'for' the children. Merewether and Fleet (2014) discuss how, during their collaborative research project with children based within one early childhood setting, they progressively told the story of their research throughout its duration. They did this by compiling photographs in a documentation book that was left in a prominent place, accessible to all adults and children. The ideas that were shared by the children were given visibility and validity. Shaw, Brady & Davey (2011) also suggest video-clips or posters. How findings can be most suitably fed back would need to be considered case by case, but in order for the contributions of children to be truly valued within research, they must be made aware of the influence that those contributions have had; how their input has impacted upon future actions.

Conclusions

As effective, reflective practitioners, we continually question and examine our own practice, because to question and to challenge is how we grow and develop. We should encourage children to take the same approach—children should be encouraged to view research as a useful tool by embedding it within the classroom. As Carlina Rinaldi argues—research must: *'come out of – the scientific laboratories, thus ceasing to be a privilege of the few (in universities and other designated places) to become the stance, the attitude with which teachers approach the sense and meaning of life.'* (Rinaldi 2005, p. 148)

I return to the points made in earlier sections whereby we carry out research because we do not know the answers. That is an exciting position to be in, so why not share that opportunity and that excitement with children? As James (2004) suggests, why not share our wisdom *and* our uncertainty. Let us rethink our ideas of 'control' where research is concerned and embrace rather than shy away from the idea of 'methodological immaturity' delightfully described by Gallacher and Gallagher (2008, p. 510-11):

In contrast to the image of the academic as expert, the very status of the researcher as seeking knowledge suggests a position of incompleteness and immaturity. If researchers were fully mature, they would know all the answers; and if they knew all the answers, there would be no need for research. If research is to achieve anything, it should proceed from a position of ignorance. Research is a process of muddling through, sometimes feeling lost and out of place, constant questioning, being corrected and having our preconceptions destroyed. In this way, we cannot deny our incompetence and vulnerabilities: our immaturity. And we do not want to. Being a reflective professional in the early years means to embrace Gallacher and Gallagher's (2008) constant questioning. Is this the best way? Can I do it better? And the one that is so overlooked; What do the children think about this?

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