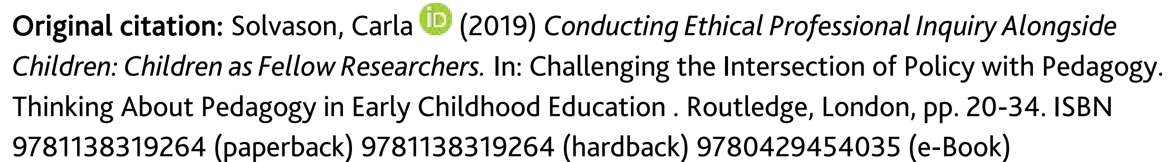

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Researching alongside children

> As time has gone on, we certainly have more mechanisms, mores research funding, and better guidance to listen to children and young people, but are we any better at *hearing* them, in the sense of taking account in a meaningful way what they have to tell us? (Roberts, 2017, p. 142).

As early years practitioners, reflective practice is simply an integral element of what we do day to day. I am always eager to tell my students that there is a very fine line between reflective practice and research. Both are about identifying areas of development and considering the best way to do that. It is not something new, something foreign or intimidating, they should own it, use it. But what we do need to be aware of, is that when we move from reflective practice to practitioner research our peers also play an active part in our development. They are involved either directly or indirectly. We need to be more wary of the impact that our research has upon others, the researcher footprint. However careful we are our research affects others; the topics we raise, the questions we ask, the changes we suggest. It is not personal in the way that reflective practice can be, by our words or actions we are prompting others to question their own values and practice. The thoughts that others share with us are valuable. We should treat the information that is shared with care.

The best research considers a range of perspectives. But the reality, certainly in a trainee practitioner situation, is that very often that becomes colleagues and parents because of the ethical implications of researching with young children. We are wary of the wrong questions being asked, the wrong children being selected. Yet for most of us our espoused theory is to listen and respond to children. So how can we better marry these two factors? How can we successfully research alongside children in a way that is gentle and nurturing, but also in a way that prompts children to question and to challenge? How do we give children the opportunity to ask 'is this the best way?' just as we do in our own research. How can we provide real opportunities to listen to the child's voice and to value their views? A number of researchers have asked this question and we shall explore some of their ideas in this chapter.

It is not until relatively recently that we have come to acknowledge that children are the experts in their own lives (Einasrdottir, 2007) and 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). Children are entitled to their own voice to explain their own understanding of their own context. This shift in ideology was largely prompted by the United Nations Rights of the Child (1989) which stated, in two of the articles in particular (12 and 13) that children's views should be respected in matters affecting them and that they should be supported in finding ways to express those views. In other words, the inability to complete a questionnaire should not prevent a child from presenting their own viewpoint; alternative means should be found. Einarsdottir (2007: 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]. James and Prout (1997) assert that adults have an obligation to listen and take seriously the voices of children. In other words, 'Listening' to them should not be an act of tokenism, and should not

involve presumptions made about factors, viewed through the lens of an adult (Dona, 2006). We should strive to obtain not just the voice but the untampered views of the child.

1 Levels of Involvement

If you are considering collaborating with children in a research project, and I hope that you are, then you need to think very 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 to 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 the adult eliciting the child's perspective 2. Participation- where the child plays a role in the process of the research 3. Self-initiation- where the children are the instigators of the research and the adults support them in this. If we are honest, then 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 (2017:143) discusses how "children's voices, edited and sanitised, become merely a tool in the adult armoury, used more for decoration than illumination." We are back to Dona's (2006) tokenism. Dona (2006: 24) goes on to explain that research can ever happen "in a social or political vacuum." We are all influenced by the socio-political environments that we inhabit. But those environments look very different through the eyes of an adult compared to a young child's eyes. It is important that the filter for ideas is the ideological influences upon the child and not those acting upon the adult. We can only really do this if the child identifies the priorities, if the child decides upon the questions that need to be asked. We shall return to this.

Hart (1992) takes the idea of collaborative research with children much further, with a ladder of participation. This illustration identifies 8 stages, which move through non-participatory approaches such as manipulation, decoration and tokenism, through to child-initiated research where decisions are made alongside adults. Gallacher and Gallagher (2008: 500) explain that in the relatively new 'social studies' of childhood phenomena (it has grown on popularity since the 1990s) "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." These latter stages of involvement are rarely seen and can be extremely problematic for the researcher, because the reality is that in handing over the ownership of the research and allowing children to take control it may mean that intended goals for the research are not met (Dona, 2006). Gallacher and Gallagher (2008: 503) explain 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". But is that such a bad thing? McNiff (2016: 16) likens all research to stepping off a cliff- you really have no idea where you'll end up; she says "You stand on the edge, prepared to take the risk of stepping into the unknown." The whole idea of research is that we are stepping into unknown territory. If we already knew the answers or where the research would take us then there would be no point in carrying it out. James (2004:158) urges us to step back from the stereotypes of wise adult and naïve child and "see wisdom and uncertainty shared among people of varying ages and experience". But the problem with

that remains in relinquishing control. Most of us are not very good at it, especially those of us from a teaching heritage, as it feels like failure.

Identifying the extent to which you would like to work with children when carrying out the research will help you to identify an appropriate methodology and methods. But this will be coloured by your own ideology of childhood. What do you view children as, vulnerable and in need of protection or competent agents? Are they already social actors or are they still in the becoming phase (Einarsdottir, 2007)? Your views about such things will, whether you are conscious of it or not, impact upon exactly whose views you believe it is important to hear. So give careful thought to whether you view a child as an empty vessel to be filled or whether you believe they are already full to the brim with 100 voices; whether they are helpless victims to be protected or capable individuals just waiting to be given opportunity. If you have not really considered these ideas the McDowell Clark's (2017) *Childhood in Society is* a good place to start.

2 Ethical Approaches

The British Educational Research Association (2011) set out very clear guidelines to be followed by all educational researchers as they work through projects involving empirical data collection. The European Early Childhood Educational Research Association (2015) goes one step further and gives us detailed guidelines specifically for researching within early childhood. These documents have translated into the information and permission letters that are the mainstay of almost all of the research that we see, as well as the obligatory statements concerning the right to withdraw and confidentiality. These guidelines are the ethical scaffold for all education researchers. But the more that you explore, the more that you realise that taking an ethical approach encompasses far more than simply gaining permissions; it starts by choosing a suitable topic and a suitable approach, it is embedded in every respectful conversation that you have and extends throughout the research as you collect data and give feedback. That applies to all research; but the idea of permissions and consent is a particularly tricky one that needs careful consideration when researching with children.

Consent and Assent

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

Butler et al (2003: 25)

Returning to the rights of the child, Butler at 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. But before we can do that it is vital that consent has been gained before embarking on any collection of personal data from children. This is needed on a number of levels. But before we go in to these it is important to remember that all of these processes will be far more effective if time has been taken to establish trusting relationships between the researcher and the participants. As Gallagher (2008) stresses it is only possible to gain consent in any genuine way if the participants understand something of the intentions of the research. So the million dollar question is, is it okay for just the adults with responsibility for the children to understand, or should children understand the intentions of the research, too? Gallagher goes on to discuss how even within the current early childhood culture where an emphasis is placed upon children as autonomous agents, in reality decisions are usually made for them. This may be consciously or in complete innocence as he adds that "Even in the absence of coercion, children may rely upon cues from

adults whom they trust" (2008 :16). 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. It may be that they think that they understand and opt in to something that they discover that they really don't enjoy. Or, alternatively they may have been oblivious to the intentions of the research but had the decision to take part made for them, by an adult, a parent or a teacher, for example. This is where assent, discussed further below becomes vitally important, but first we should be clear on methods of gaining consent.

2.1. 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 (2011). Within our 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 gained consent form the first set of gatekeepers, 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 concerned as well as a signature to confirm that consent has been given; in order to maintain a paper trail that demonstrates that the appropriate ethical procedures have been followed.

Within some educational settings a 'blanket' consent exists where the school or setting has gained consent from parents and carers for all research that will take place there. This means that as long as you have gained permission from the manager within the setting, you could, in theory, continue your research without gaining explicit consent from parents. It is sound ethical (and respectful) practice to still inform parents of the research that is taking place and to invite them to speak with you in order to clarify any queries that they may have. If there is no universal consent in place then permission will need to be explicitly gained from parents. For this an information letter will be sent home to parents. In studies where very little is happening beyond the norm of day-to-day activities, where, for example, you are recording a group of children's engagement with normal, day-to-day tasks, I would argue that it is sufficient to invite parents to 'opt out' of their child's data being used. This means that you can go ahead unless you hear otherwise within a given time frame. The benefits of this are clear as parents will often forget to return reply slips, but if it something that they are strongly opposed to then they will say. I do not think that this is sufficient, though, if the research requires detailed information regarding specific children that is beyond the norms of daily teaching, or if the research involves a select group of children or if it involves them in activities which are unlike the experience of the rest of the group. Here specific consent would need to be sought from the parents of the sample of children that you have selected. 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 SENDi children (below):

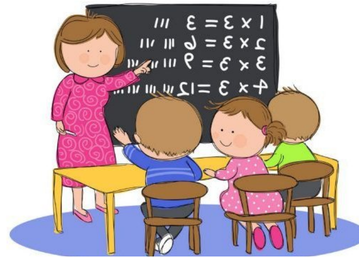
I am a student.

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.

But the fact is that even the most basic leaflet, letter or presentation will hold no value to a very young child. Imagine that you are looking at the behaviours of children 4-6 months. This is where the concept of assent becomes more important.

2.2 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 successful research when it comes to researching with children. Gallagher (2008: 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. Most often, especially as early years research frequently involves children too young to interact with props, assent (or dissent) has been assumed through the child's body language. Fortunately most children have not learnt the layers of subterfuge employed by adults whose behaviour is moulded by cultural expectations and social cues. If the 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.

3 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 et al, 2009: 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 the sample chosen and whether it adequately represents the 'multiple realities' (Frones et al 2000) that children experience. Careful consideration should be given to variables such as age, gender and ability (to name but a few) and whether this fully represents the group that you are researching with. But, if we are genuinely recognising children as "key researchers into children's experiences" (Christensen and James, 2017: 5) then we should also be enabling children to take a lead in identifying a suitable sample. In Dona's (2006: 27) article which allowed children to take the reigns in the research projects exploring their experiences, their choice of sample was sometimes unexpected, but "children know best about what they are familiar with." Their suggestions for gaining a fuller, more holistic view of individual's lives ranged from interviewing children in pairs with their best friend (when you consider ideas of support, confidence and authenticity the benefits connected with this become obvious) to asking neighbours about families. Although the latter may have dubious ethical implications the pragmatism of their suggestions was to be applauded. Who will paint a genuine picture of an individual or a family?

Think very carefully about the ways that your research partners or participants will feel empowered. Empowered to make decisions about approaches to the research or empowered to share their views about something important to them, safe

in the knowledge that their views will be heard and respected. Einarsdottir (2007: 200) 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" she adds, perhaps most importantly, that children are most relaxed and most empowered when they are with friends. This is something important for all of those researching with children to pay attention to. Remember, the group that you discuss the data with does not have to dictate the sample that you will record your data from, that may still be just one or two children within the group, but put those children in a situation where they feel most secure.

It is important to remember that if consent has not been given for a child's data to be used within your research, this does not mean that they cannot still be a part of your activities- especially if those activities will be beneficial for them. BERA (2011) recommend that any advantage experienced by one group over another through research should always be minimised. Any advantageous circumstances experienced by your research sample should also be made available to others, even if this is at a later date.

4 Research approaches with very young children

"There may be an assumption that the tools themselves somehow automatically enable participation. The key message from literature is that it is the research design and relationships that confer real participation and engagement."

Waller and Bitou (2011: 12)

Many of the ideas about suitable ways of collecting data from children stem from Clark's (2010) mosaic approach that seeks to use a variety of child-friendly approaches to data collection in order to produce a composite picture of children's lives. (Please note that I have not included the use of technologies here, as I think that is a whole topic in itself, worthy of its own discussion). Many of Clark's suggestions involve some form of artwork or symbolic creation or representation and as such the type of approaches to collecting data with children that have developed from this include:

- creating artwork through a variety of media such as traditional paper approaches, clay, natural materials, 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. This can be adult or child led and include the children taking photographs themselves, or a practitioner taking photographs of the child engaged in activities as a starting point for discussion at the end of the day or (Einarsdottir, 2007). Although, arguably, this is always adult led as the adult is the prompt for topic and for the discussion.
- storytelling and role play
- 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 Punch (2002) adds 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, very different lens. Merewether and Fleet (2014) present a similar argument for accompanying the child participants in their research whilst they took photographs. This proved necessary when the researcher interpreted the photographs produced as representing something entirely different to the child's intended focus.

Einarsdottir (2007) suggests alternative forms of data collection with children to the usual questioning/ interview approach because "Children do not have knowledge of interview or what is expected of them. Their knowledge is also in many cases implicit…they are not aware of what they know…" Gollop (2000) urges that we should not see it as 'interviewing' children but listening to them, giving them the chance to really be heard. But Warming (2005, cited in Waller and Bitou, 2011) makes a key point concerning this, which is the distinction between 'listening' being used as a tool and the children genuinely having a 'voice' by their concerns actually being acted upon.

Now clearly there are limitations to all of the 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. Children like to challenge agendas and the need to conform, as Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) frequently found. When given the opportunity to draw or photograph children may simply draw and take photographs of things that they like rather than the prescribed focus of the researcher, and you should be prepared to work within these fluid realities. Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) explore how they let go of seeing children's unpredictability as a restriction and embraced it as a quality of the work in their own research projects, how some of their most fascinating insights emerged from children acting in unexpected ways. Ongoing and genuine dialogue will help you to tune into the correct wavelength for understanding each child.

5 Data Analysis- whose voice?

The extent to which research participants should be involved in data analysis is problematic in all research, but can particularly so in research with children. Palaiologou's (2013) examination of research 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 data is entangled with ideas of power and dominance.

Einarsdottir (2007: 204) discusses how children are potentially "more vulnerable to unequal power relationships" than other groups. This is put more strongly by Gallagher (2008:25) who suggests 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, Flewitt, 2005) and Gallacher and Gallagher (2008: 506) even comment that "researchers are expressly taking advantage of children's schooled docility towards such activities" which sounds harsh but in many cases of research carried out in schools is

probably true. The European Early Childhood Educational Research Association (2014:8) stress that it is our responsibility to make well-documented steps to “reduce the power differential”. Their ethical code refers to issues of power repeatedly as something that should not be abused. Palaiologou (2013: 13) offers advice on this:

> … researchers should be aware of the visible challenges in a research project such as children’s age, rights, emotions, sociocultural context, but equally important they ought to be aware of the invisible signs such as the effect of adult power, control and decision making as well as social injustice and inequalities that impact on children’s environments and contexts.

But these are not issues that can feasibly be ‘solved’ and Einasrdottir (2007) discusses a range of literature that found just that, but they are areas that should be given due consideration and approached with sensitivity. Practical steps, such as the language and approach taken with the children and the appropriateness (and comfort) of the research context can help to reduce the impact that power differentials might have. Merewether and Fleet (2014) discussed how important it was to make sure that all their data collection activities took place in the children’s spaces, places where they were confident and at ease. If you are researching as an outsider, then the way that you introduce yourself is important. Simple terminology such as the choice between ‘working with’ or ‘learning from’ can have a significant impact. Remember, if you are looking for the child’s view, then the child is the expert. Acknowledge that through your behaviour.

6 Confidentiality and Safeguarding

The need to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of children involved in research is well documented within all ethical guidance. Einarsdottir (2007: 206) comments that when researching with children authors should ensure that “the participants cannot be recognised in reports or presentations of the project” but also that “the researcher does not betray the child’s confidence with parents or teachers”. Straightforward, right? Unless, of course, areas of concern arise. If these ‘big’ concerns, involving the safeguarding of the child, then, again, the course of action is clear. Any responsibilities that you may hold as a researcher are outweighed by your responsibility as an adult to guard children’s safety. At that point, to hell with ethical guidelines. In such cases concerns should be passed on to the relevant safeguarding officer, or, if further guidance is needed, discussed with a colleague in a position of authority whom you trust to give you helpful guidance on the matter. But what if, as researcher, you find out something that you believe teachers or parents should know which is not necessarily putting the child at harm? This is where ethics becomes more personal, where codes of conduct, permission letters and tick boxes cannot help. You are simply left with your own conscience. This is where Punch (1994) after a detailed exploration of all aspects of ethics, had to concede that ethics is a swamp and he can provide no map. If your moral conscience is prickling then discuss your dilemma with someone whose views you trust.

7 Responsibility to Disseminate

> “All research participants, including young children, have a right to feedback on the research process and outcomes”
>
> (EECERA, 2014: 8)

Mukherji and Albon (2010: 246) point out that as we become more accustomed to researching with children we might sometimes forget the importance of sharing our findings with them. They suggest examples such as compiling a book of photographs during the research to be used 'with' and 'for' the children. Some of my own students have used simple, photograph-based power point presentations to discuss with the children. Shaw et al (2011) also suggest video-clips or posters. How findings might 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 should be aware of the impact that those contributions have had, and how they will impact upon future actions. Have they just ben listened to or genuinely given a voice?

Merewether and Fleet (2014) discussed how, during their collaborative research project with children based within and early childhood setting, they progressively told the story of their research throughout its duration, in a documentation book that was left in a prominent place, accessible to all adults and children. The ideas that were shared were given visibility and validity. What is interesting about this project is that the ethical requirement that the children's names would have to be changed when the work was published was met with indignation from the children. They felt that they were being erased from the research, they felt betrayed. Acting to ethical requirements did, in actual fact, cause harm.

Conclusions

I started this chapter by positing that in order to be an effective, reflective practitioner, you should continually question and examine your own practice. To question and to challenge is how we grow and develop. Why then, is that not also a key focus of a child's education? Just as research should be an integral element of an early years practitioners practice, so it should be an integral element of a young child's education. I suggest that with children, just as with practitioner researchers, we cease to view research as something unattainable, the 'foray' of academics' and begin to view it as a useful tool. We should aim towards nurturing a community of respectful 'fellow researchers' in the classroom, similar to the Reggio Emilia philosophy. This approach to education, which is very much based upon ideas of community has become internationally influential over the past 50 years (Merewether and Fleet, 2014: 899). Carlina Rinaldi, who was director of the pre-school services in Reggio Emilia (a small town in Italy) for a number of years argues that 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, 148)

I return to the points made in the opening section whereby we carry out research because we do not know the answers. And that should be an exciting position to be in. Why not share that position and that excitement with children? As James (2004) suggested, why not share our wisdom and our uncertainty. I will close with Gallacher and Gallagher's (2008: 510-11) wonderful suggestion that we embrace rather that shy away from the idea of 'methodological immaturity'. They say:

> "In contrast to the dominant 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. It seems to us that, if research is to achieve anything, it should proceed from a position of ignorance. For us, research is fundamentally a process of muddling through, sometimes feeling lost and out of place, asking stupid questions, 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."

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