Researching with and for children and young people

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About the Author

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Mary has a strong practitioner background having worked as a children’s social worker and primary school teacher before embarking on her post-doctoral academic career. She sits on a number of national and international advisory groups and has served as International Expert to the United Nations Development Programme. She holds a number of visiting and adjunct professorships and has published widely on child voice, participation and agency with a particular focus on disadvantaged, disabled and marginalised groups.

For further details and a list of Mary’s publications visit www.open.ac.uk/education-and-languages/people/people-profile

Inviting your Critical Engagement

Photos used throughout this publication are sourced from Shutterstock (http://www.shutterstock.com). They have been selected to highlight the diversity of ways in which children and childhood can be represented.

We encourage you to engage critically with these images as you reflect on the idea that 'childhood' is socially constructed. Ask yourself, ‘What message about children or childhood is being conveyed through this image’? ‘How do these images challenge my understandings of children and childhood’?
What do we mean by research with and for children and young people?

Research is a diverse term that conjures up a host of images, from scientists in white coats experimenting on rats to ethnographers exploring unknown societies in remote parts of the globe. Where does research involving children and young people fit into the spectrum and what are its particular characteristics?

A common theme that unites all research involving children and young people is that it seeks to generate knowledge about childhoods and children’s lives. Those involved are connected by an underlying desire to enhance our understanding of childhood phenomena in order to better provide for children and young people and improve the quality of their childhoods. Thus, the scope of child research is all-embracing and encompasses any aspect of children’s lives or any issues that impact on their childhoods.

However, it is important to differentiate from the outset that research with and for children and young people is not the same as listening and consulting. It may involve these approaches but it has to go beyond them. There is no imperative in listening and consulting processes to translate what you find out into ‘new knowledge’ whereas research has an imperative to produce outcomes in the form of findings. These findings have to be based on valid data generated by the study and should, at some level, advance our understanding of a particular issue.

An emphasis on the importance of children as ‘beings’ not ‘becomings’ (James et al, 1998) and their entitlement to childhood as a human right (Hartas, 2008) has given new prominence to a notion of children’s citizenship. Children are citizens from the day they are born and practices have to adapt to nurture the citizenship skills they need.

If children are to influence decision making they need to be involved in research about their lives. So, part of our responsibility in researching with and for children and young people entails developing their capacity for judgement, for communicating their views and agency for action. Good practice aspires to a partnership in which adults, children and young people generate a body of child research knowledge. Here, research with, for and by children and young people are complementarities that inform and interact with each other.
Historical overview of children and research

The earliest focus on children came from seventeenth century philosophers who initiated theoretical debate around the nature of childhood (Hendrick 1997). Attitudes to children and childhood were largely shaped by religion and culture. The Puritan dogma of this era considered children to be innately evil, born with ‘original sin’ that must be purged from them.

John Locke (1632-1704) was the first to challenge this, arguing that far from being innately pre-determined, children were a product of their environment, born as a ‘blank slate’ waiting for environmental influences to shape them. He was the first philosopher to acknowledge that children had specific needs of their own, needs that were different from adults, although these needs were still correlated to ‘becoming’ an adult rather than ‘being’ a child. In the following century Rousseau (1762) constructed childhood as a pure and idyllic time, a notion which lasted into the nineteenth century.

Actual research on children, as opposed to theoretical discourse about them, grew out of an interest in child health and wellbeing. Child Guidance clinics (run by teams of psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers) mushroomed in the 1930s (Fass, 2004) and fuelled a new interest in childhood research. Many of the early documented research studies were observations on children’s development.

Developmental psychologists of the early twentieth century considered that childhood was divisible into age-graded developmental stages. The child was regarded as an incomplete and malleable being, developing differently in response to different stimuli. Large-scale quantitative studies focused on improving the health and welfare of children and enhancing their cognition.

This period of positivist research harvested numerous studies in the areas of nutrition, health and preventative medicine such as childhood vaccinations, with many positive benefits including a measurable fall in the rate of infant mortality and the exposure of childhood inequalities among different social classes.

In this era, children were viewed as ‘objects’ of research. It was the researcher who was acknowledged as the expert on children’s lives: on how children think, reason, communicate, even on the effects of aspects of their personality and environment. Methods were based on hypotheses, control groups and laboratory-style experiments from which the generation of universal laws was sought.
Educational establishments such as schools and nurseries provided ideal opportunities to observe large numbers of children of the same age at the same time under ‘controlled’ conditions. This made it possible to analyse average ability and arrive at standard definitions of what constituted ‘normal’. One of the tools for establishing what was ‘normal’ was the intelligence test. This led to the ‘labelling’ of children and segregation according to their Intelligence Quotient (IQ).

Whilst research of this nature added to the body of knowledge about cognitive development (e.g. the work of Piaget, 1896-1980) it also produced negative outcomes particularly for those children who were assigned to ‘mentally defective institutions’ on the basis of their IQ scores. Furthermore, researchers such as Louis Terman (1877-1956), who regarded IQ as genetically and racially determined, opened the door to abusive practices of eugenic social control and the promotion of the white child as superior.

Vygotsky (1896-1934) introduced a style of child research which emphasised the socially interactive nature of learning. This social constructivist perspective, as it became known, eschewed assumptions about social structures that define childhood. Within a socially constructed world there are no constraints and childhood is not viewed in any precise, identifiable form (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998).

All the research referred to thus far has been research ‘on’ children where children are the ‘objects’ of adult research. This approach persisted late into the twentieth century until sociologists began to question the ‘assumed’ roles and relationships in child research and accrue to children a distinct entity.

A widening of the scope of childhood and greater attention to children’s status in society spawned an interest in research around children’s rights, childhood as a social category and children as a distinct population group. This led to developments in thought regarding the ways in which children should be involved in research. A rights-based perspective prompted expectations that children should be active participants in this process. Research ‘with’ rather than research ‘on’ children became a dominant discourse.

The UNCRC (1989) was a catalyst for change, upholding the right of children to high standards of research about their lives (article 3). The politics of research involving children is inextricably linked to the discourse on children’s voice. A new wave of participatory research ensued which purported to consult with, and listen to, children by involving them more directly in the research process. Children and young people became more involved in the operational aspects of research and some studies invited them onto advisory groups and/or to become co-researchers (Alderson, 2000; Jones, 2004), jointly framing research projects and being actively involved in data collection and analysis.

This was taken a step further in the first decade of the twenty-first century by a move to empower children as researchers in their own right (Kellett, 2005; 2010) predicated on the entitlement of children and young people to quality research training and the opportunity to undertake research they identify as important in their lives. This child-led approach centres on the unique knowledge contribution children and young people can make based on an insider perspective that is partially opaque to adults, in a similar way that the feminist insider perspective is partially opaque to the male gender.
Research is truly cosmopolitan and characterised by many different approaches and methods but, essentially, there are two modes of inquiry - quantitative and qualitative. In the past these were polarised by a paradigm debate, however both reflect similar elements - they each state a purpose, pose a problem/raise a question, define a research population, develop a time frame, collect and analyse data, present and discuss findings.

Both modes of inquiry rely (explicitly or implicitly) on theory and both are concerned with rigour in the research process. So what is the major difference? This comes down to views about what constitutes valuable knowledge (epistemology) and the nature of reality (ontology). Ontology is the philosophical study of the nature of being or existence;

Ontology is the concern about whether the world exists, and if so, in what form... Because we cannot experience the world directly (unfiltered through our senses), we will never know for sure what the world really is...It is a matter of belief (Potter cited in Glesne, 1999, p.4).

Epistemology, on the other hand, is a branch of philosophy concerned with the theory of knowledge. In identifying the epistemological assumptions you bring to your research you’ll be reflecting on questions such as ‘How and what can we know (about the lived realities of children and young people)? What is the status of such claims to knowledge? How can we tell our knowledge claims are reliable and valid?

To understand the influence of epistemology on research, let’s consider two contrasting examples. Positivism is an epistemological position whereby we believe we can describe ‘what’s out there’ and get it right – it assumes there is a fixed, measurable reality and is concerned with objectivity.

Constructionism, on the other hand, is an epistemological position that assumes reality is socially constructed – the emphasis is on knowledgeS rather than knowledge. Human experience is mediated historically, culturally and linguistically, and subjectivity is a ‘given’ in the research process.
Whilst not always the case, positivists will likely lean towards quantitative methods while constructionists will often utilise qualitative methods in their research design.

Quantitative research provides information about the world in the form of numbers. This involves some form of measurement. In quantitative research, measurement is a process that turns data into numbers by assigning a numerical value to things, events or people.

There are two types of operations that produce numbers: counting and scaling. Counting is something we do every day and can easily understand. Scaling refers to creating a kind of continuum ranging from a very little of something to a great deal of something e.g. a percentage scale ranges from 0 to 100 where 2 would be a very little and 96 would be a great deal. Scaling enables us to compare things (or people or events) in a standardised way.

Qualitative research is non-numerical and provides information about the world in a descriptive way. This can take many forms such as oral accounts, photos or artefacts although the most common is qualitative data that are expressed as descriptions in words. Because of the more subjective nature of such data, qualitative researchers frequently collect data from several sources, a process we call triangulation.

Qualitative approaches are generally considered to be less structured than quantitative approaches; indeed some models have virtually no structure at all at the data collection stage and it is only when the analysis begins that any kind of structure can be identified. This is known as grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), a means of generating theory through data rather than the other way round.

As signalled above, there was much debate in the latter part of the twentieth century about the relative merits of quantitative versus qualitative approaches with many eschewing the ‘soft’ qualitative option in favour of more scientific quantitative methods. Perspectives have shifted greatly since then as academics have come to understand the different values attributed to ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ data. Here, ‘thick’ refers to richly descriptive qualitative research and ‘thin’ to the larger, broad-brush data sets produced from quantitative research. Qualitative methods tend to be more popular in contemporary research with and for children and young people because they enable adult researchers to get closer to their lived experiences through richly descriptive data.

In practice, both approaches are valuable and researchers increasingly adopt a mixture of both in what is termed an ‘integrated’ or ‘mixed method’ approach.

In the next section we will look at some of the methods commonly employed in qualitative research with and for children and young people. There are too many to include, so the focus is on those that are more commonly used by professionals working in this sector.
Ethnography

Ethnographic research is traditionally associated with long-term participant observation but it is not confined to this. Some shorter studies adopt an ethnographic ‘style’ in that they use some of these practices but without the longitudinal perspective. A wide range of observational techniques are used in ethnographies, as well open-ended conversational techniques.

Ethnographers keep detailed field notes, often in conjunction with a self-reflective journal. Video recordings, photographs, audio-recordings, drawings and artefacts (i.e. documents from the field setting) are also commonly used as data collection techniques. The aim of ethnography is to provide ‘thick description’ of contextualised behaviour (Geertz, 1973) and make it more understandable.

Ethnographers gather data through their active participation in the social world, but they cannot participate naively; they must do so systematically and reflexively. An ethnographer aims to elicit and analyse insider perspectives through systematic comparison between inside and outside views of particular events and processes.

‘Participant as observer’ is perhaps the most popular role assumed by ethnographers. Here the researcher adopts an overt role, making their presence and intentions (as a researcher) known to the people they study. A less intensive role is that of ‘observer as participant’. In this role, the researcher participates less in the activities of the group under investigation and moves towards more direct conversational techniques (interviews and focus groups) and more formal observation (of those things that are visible without immersion within a community). This less immersive type of role is often chosen for projects where time constraints, and other considerations, make it impossible to produce a ‘full ethnography’. It is popular with school based studies where a researcher ‘sits in’ with a class and may involve themselves in small ways, but is not integrally involved in the activities.

Ethnography is an important approach for research involving children since it assumes that children are recognised as competent interpreters of, and actors within, their social worlds. It allows researchers to engage with children’s own views and cultures and enables these views to be made accessible to adults and other children.

Traditionally, ethnographers try to become part of the group being studied, but this may not be entirely possible when the study is concerned with the worlds of children. Adult researchers meet a number of challenges in trying to integrate themselves into children’s worlds because of the obvious differences - differences in physical size, in cognitive and communicative capacities, and in power and social positioning.

There is much disagreement within the research community about the extent to which adult researchers can overcome such differences and integrate into children’s worlds. Mandell (1988) argues that the full participation of adults in children’s lives is both possible and desirable through the ‘least adult’ research role. Lærke (1998) insists on the possibility of becoming ‘childish’ through remembering and cultivating an illusory ‘inner child’. She argues that by imitating the children as best she could she was able to ‘undo her adultness’ by acting like a child: dressing as the children did; addressing adults as the children did; eating school dinners with the children; and sitting on the floor with them.

Other researchers, however, contest the ability of adults to become part of children’s worlds in this way. Kellett (2005) argues that even the most skilled ethnographers cannot sufficiently divest their adult baggage and adult filters to fully represent children’s worlds and a genuine insider perspective can only be obtained by empowering children as researchers in their own right.
Fine and Sandstrom (1988) argue that there may be some methodological value in maintaining the differences between adult researchers and the children they study. Corsaro (1997) attempted to cultivate a research persona as ‘Big Bill’ in his ethnographies of peer cultures in early childhood education in Italy and the USA. Many other researchers have chosen similar non-authoritative adult roles. Nukaga (2008) studied practices of lunchtime food exchange in American schools by refraining from positions of adult authority and engaging with the students as a kind of ‘friend’ who was willing to learn from the children and understand them. However, such non-authoritative roles can be difficult to maintain. Thorne (1993) attempted to avoid positions of adult authority in her study of gender relations in an elementary school, but found herself drawn into allegiances with adult-authority. She reflects on the sense of betrayal she felt for moving into such allegiances.

### Action research

Action research retains the empiricism of more traditional methodologies (i.e. the insistence that knowledge should be rooted in experience in and of the world) but insists that the world is produced, and can be changed, through acting in the world, and reflecting upon that action. Thus the notion of ‘answerable’ is meaningless because answers transform into new questions and new impetuses for action in an ongoing, changing and changeable world.

Action research, then, rejects the notion of an objective, value-free approach to knowledge generation, preferring instead a politically and socially engaged practice (Chandler and Torbert, 2003). According to Brydon-Miller et al (2003) action research is not simply about ‘doing good’, it is about ‘doing things well’. They argue that, in order to be competent, action research must be carried out within collaborative relationships with relevant stakeholders, a form of cooperative inquiry (Reason and Bradbury, 2001) that is inherently participatory. Action research projects tend to be valuable because they are concrete and situated. They grow out of, and focus upon, issues that are of real concern to people in their everyday lives.

For McNiff and Whitehead (2006), action research is valuable because it does not separate theory from practice. Knowledge does not exist to be applied to practice; it begins with practice. That is, theory is located within practice and evolves with it. Action research is a way of learning about practice, and learning from the experience of practice; it is a way of changing practice, of learning to do things in more beneficial ways.

Action research proceeds through cycles of action and thinking. The action research cycle is usually thought of as having four phases. In reality, and at least in its initial stage, action research tends to have an extra stage of problem identification prior to any planning. The stages of the action research cycle can then be thought of as follows:

- **Problem identification**: Before beginning action researchers must identify an area to be investigated. They must decide what they want to look at and why. They must also consider whether their project is practical and important; it needs to be something that would actually be
beneficial to themselves and other people involved.

- **Planning**: Once a problem is identified, action researchers must imagine a solution and plan how this might be implemented.

- **Action**: Once a plan has been devised, it needs to be implemented in a particular setting.

- **Observation**: The action researchers must gather data about the initiative so as to be able to evaluate the effectiveness of the action. They must think about what kind of data they will need to collect and how they are going to collect it. Action research projects can use just about any of the methods available to traditional researchers in this regard.

- **Reflection**: Once the action has been taken and the data collected, the action researchers must analyse these data and reflect upon the successes and failures of the action.

Traditional research methods yield knowledge only as ‘findings’, while action research projects generate both action and knowledge in the service of further action. Action research cycles are not understood as leading to a complete resolution of a problem. Rather, they spiral. Reflecting upon the action taken should lead to the implementation of new plans and a new cycle of action research.

Action research also differs from traditional research in the means and purposes of dissemination. Action research is problem-centred, participant-driven and action-oriented. This means that it must be fed back to those involved as part of an ongoing collaborative process embedded within the research itself.

Action research is a participatory form of research in that it is not conducted ‘on’ but ‘with’. Action researchers actively seek to collaborate with stakeholders to ensure that their action and findings are relevant to the lived experiences of those involved. The degree to which this participation is integral varies from study to study along a continuum. At the PAR (participatory action research) end the aim and research methods would be collaboratively developed by all involved, as would be the findings. Importantly, action research which relates to issues of relevance to children and young people would involve them as co-researchers in some degree.

**Case study**

A case study is an in-depth investigation of a single individual, group, or event which can be descriptive or explanatory. Yin defines case study as an empirical inquiry that ‘investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used’ (Yin, 1984, p. 23).

Rather than using population samples and following a rigid protocol to examine a limited number of variables, case study methods involve an in-depth, systematic examination of an instance or event - a ‘case’ - within its real-life context (Miles and Humberman, 1994). This single phenomenon might be, for example, a person, an organisation or a community of practice.

Case study research can have multiple case studies embedded within it and uses any mix of quantitative and qualitative evidence. Indeed, a feature of case study is that it relies on multiple sources of evidence and benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions. One of the advantages is that defining a case sets boundaries that limit the extent of the investigation. This makes
it popular in practice contexts where it can be tailored to manageable-sized projects that are feasible for professionals to undertake.

Stake (1995) makes a distinction between ‘instrumental’ and ‘interpretive’ case studies (interpretive implies that the case studies are based on inductive thinking processes and are socially constructed), although both are pertinent to research involving children and young people. Although case study researchers rely heavily on narrative and description (Cohen et al, 2000) a common tool they employ is to develop conceptual categories that enable an exploration of the case to be made. These inductively conceived categories can also be used as comparatives across embedded cases.

**Evaluative research**

What we classically term ‘evaluative research’ moves away from ‘pure’ research into the realm of ‘applied’ research. Applied research seeks to use and create knowledge for some purpose beyond the knowing itself. In evaluative research, the aim is to assess the effectiveness of an innovation, intervention, policy or practice.

In evaluation, programmes or policies are analysed in relation to a set of standards - which may be explicit or implicit - in order to assess the operation and/or the outcomes of that programme or policy. Evaluators are interested in the internal workings of a programme, or the implementation of a policy. In doing so, they want to strengthen or improve the programme or policy. For example, health workers might want to find out how accessible their services are for young people in order to improve provision and target resource more effectively.

Evaluative research must be systematic to ensure that effects and processes identified really are happening, and are not simply opinion. The evaluation aims to provide evidence about the running of, or the outcomes of, a particular initiative. Methods can be qualitative or quantitative and draw on a range of techniques and skills used in traditional research. Indeed evaluative research commonly employs a multi-method approach. Frequently a ‘pre- and post-test’ design is used where data is collected from participants before engaging in the program or service and then afterwards to ascertain what has ‘changed’.

When is evaluation ‘research’? We evaluate all the time in our daily lives - how good a restaurant meal or a TV programme was or how engaged students were in one of our lessons etc. Research is a systematic collection of data that contributes knowledge for use by others. If your evaluation is just confined to assessing a single process e.g. evaluating if your own child prefers a named brand of baked beans or a supermarket brand, or evaluating how much teenagers enjoyed the snooker competition you arranged in your Youth Centre, then this is not research. If you are
evaluating something – e.g. a pilot – for use by others which has the potential to generate knowledge and to have application value beyond its own entity, then this is deemed to be evaluative research.

A crucial aspect of evaluative research is that it is critical. This does not mean that it should simply be negative. Rather, in academic terms, to be critical is to independently analyse the strengths and weaknesses of something. Evaluative research should be relevant to policy and practice, but it should never be enslaved by it. Evaluative research does not simply ask what the best way of implementing a specific programme is, but also ponders the worth of the programme itself. In identifying the results of a particular initiative, evaluative research should lead to critical discussion of that initiative.

Children and young people’s services are increasingly accountable for the efficacy of what they provide. This focus on accountability makes evaluative research very popular among professionals who work with children and young people. It can be useful in almost every context in the child and youth sector.

Children and young people as researchers

Before leaving this section, I want to draw your attention to the impetus that is building around the concept of children and young people engaging in their own research. I have already alluded to the role they can play as participants and co-researchers in adult-designed studies. This concept extends to children and young people leading research themselves.

A growing interest in children and young people’s rights and acknowledgement of their role as social agents in their own lives has spear-headed initiatives that launch them into the research driving seat. This shift in perspectives has enabled some children and young people to set their own research agendas, formulate their own questions and design their own research studies (Kellett, 2005).

Child and youth-led research generates different data. They observe with different eyes, ask different questions (they sometimes ask questions that adults do not even think of), have different concerns and immediate access to a peer culture where adults are outsiders. Child-child research generates nuanced data which can provide valuable insights into our understanding of childhoods.
A principal barrier to children and young people undertaking their own research is their lack of research knowledge and skills. Many adults also lack these skills and could not carry out quality research without some training.

Some innovative practice is beginning to address these challenges. For example, the Children’s Research Centre (CRC) at the Open University, UK, focuses on optimal ways to develop children and young people’s research knowledge and skills and support them to undertake their own research. The CRC aims to minimise adult filters by shifting the balance to supporting rather than managing child-led research (see http://childrens-research-centre.open.ac.uk).

Some children and young people investigate matters directly pertinent to their lived experiences, others undertake social research about issues that preoccupy adult researchers and policy makers e.g. racial discrimination, poverty, bullying, social exclusion, educational attainment, knife crime etc. Action research is popular because children’s interests often stem from a desire to change something. It is an opportunity for adults to access evidence-based child perspectives from within children’s peer culture and inform our knowledge and understanding about challenging issues. There is also a growing body of research by children and young people from around the world, including majority world countries.

An example is Shannon Davidson (2008), aged ten, who researched issues about children who have a thyroid disorder know as Graves disease. There are support groups for adult sufferers but not for children. Shannon’s research resulted in a national children’s support group being set up. Further reflection and action brought about changes for other sick children, not just those with thyroid disorders, and resulted in empowering actions at Great Ormond Street Children’s Hospital UK where sick children are now consulted more about their views and have been given their own children’s page in the hospital newsletter.
Ethics

Ethical considerations in researching with and for children and young people are paramount. Ethical considerations have been considered in Background Briefing number 3 (Kellett, 2011) and all of these considerations apply equally to research ethics. Additionally, there are some ethical considerations that apply specifically to research process.

The guidance that follows is only a brief summary of these, intended to get you to engage with the dominant issues. For fuller guidance, look at the suggested reading and visit the websites of learned societies which provide downloadable ethical guidelines.

Ethics are not a ‘bolt-on’ option to research but rather they are an integral core of each stage, from initial design through to dissemination. Sometimes, the topic of the research itself can give rise to ethical sensitivity. If, for example, the research concerns bullying, then the very act of exploring this with individuals might cause distress, anxiety or increase an individual’s vulnerability to a bullying situation. On the other hand, it is important that issues like bullying are explored so that we can increase our knowledge and understanding and hopefully improve prevention rates. Thus, ethics operate at macro and micro levels throughout, and beyond, the life of a research study.

Some of the guiding principles which Alderson and Morrow (2004) invite us to focus on include:

- respect and justice – e.g. respecting participants’ sensitivities and dignities;
- rights – e.g. participants’ rights to be protected from harm, to be fully informed and to be listened to;
- best outcomes – to actively promote best outcomes for participants.

The macro level is generally a process of approval by an ethics committee, or similar body, where research proposals are scrutinised and changes to the design of the study sometimes requested. At a micro level, researchers constantly make individual, fine judgements about ethical sensitivities relating to participants’ wellbeing throughout the life of the project.

Informed consent

Consent issues were discussed in the Engaging Children and Young People Background Briefing but it is worth reminding ourselves of the critical factors. All research requires the informed consent of those participating.

Before individuals can give their consent they need some understanding of what is involved and exactly what they are consenting to. They need to know all the potential benefits, risks, inconveniences and obligations associated with the research that can be reasonably foreseen. Participants should be told the aims and objectives of the research, how the data collected from them will be used and how the findings will be disseminated. All of this information should be transparent, with no hidden agendas.

Consent must be obtained without coercion or inducement. Participants can be compensated for their time and effort, for example, by reimbursing their travelling expenses, but this cannot be used to persuade them to take part in a project.
The issue of informed consent with regard to participating children is complex because of their status as minors and therefore informed consent is required from those who have legal care and control – a parent, guardian or local authority. Sometimes there can be a conflict of interest.

Legally, a child is a minor until the age of eighteen, but some rights are obtained at 16. It is a grey area although it is becoming increasingly accepted that competency is more about social maturity than cognitive ability and that young people are experts on their own lives. ‘A consensus is emerging about the need to let young people speak for themselves, subject to appropriate safeguards’ (Williams, 2006, p. 19).

Judgements are not always based simply on issues of competency or age. Other factors such as vulnerability, power issues and personal safety influence the decisions of consent protocols. Competency issues are particularly acute with younger children and those with learning disabilities. Here, researchers may seek assent rather than consent from children.

The principle of assent recognises that explicit, prior consent may not be appropriate for all participants, and that the researcher should attend to children’s behaviour in the process of research so as to judge whether their continued involvement is appropriate. Issues of assent, with children of all ages, may over-ride previously gained consent from both children and their parents. Indeed, researchers should be aware of the comfort and wellbeing of participants of all ages in their research projects and not seek to continue if these are compromised.

Consideration should also be given to ongoing consent in that participants should understand that they can withdraw their consent at any time and for any reason. Informed consent which is ethnically obtained does not involve any element of coercion on the part of the researcher. This is particularly relevant in contexts where participants are relatively powerless – e.g. children in schools or in youth offending institutions. There are many examples of unethical coercive practice such as suggesting that non-participation might adversely affect a child’s chances of being picked for a school play or the football team.

**Openness and integrity**

Researchers should be open and honest about the purpose and content of their research and behave in a professional manner at all times. Can deception ever be justified in research? Some writers argue that the answer is an unequivocal no. Others argue that there are occasions when ends justify the means and where the ultimate ‘benefits’ outweigh any deception ‘costs’. But deception is not a good basis on which to build an exploration of truth and knowledge and should be avoided unless an essential element of the research design would be compromised by full disclosure to participants.
Participants need to be given opportunities to access the outcomes of the research in which they have participated, and be de-briefed if appropriate after they have provided data. In research involving children, both the children who participated and their parents should be informed of the outcomes of the research. This may mean that the project needs to be reported back in a number of different ways, e.g. a research report provided to a local authority will differ significantly from a report provided to the children who have taken part.

Confidentiality and anonymity

Wherever possible researchers must assure participants that the data they collect from them will be treated confidentially and their anonymity preserved. Names are generally changed when a study is reported and ‘pseudonyms’ are chosen (sometimes by the participants themselves).

Special care is taken with video data because this is more difficult to anonymise. Because of this, video and photographic data are usually destroyed once all the analysis has been undertaken and the study completed. The expectation of confidentiality may be over-ridden by more compelling concerns such as the duty to protect individuals from harm.

Specific thought must be given to how issues of child protection will be handled in the event of a disclosure of abuse. Researchers must make clear to their participants that promises of confidentiality cannot extend into this domain.

Protection from harm

Researchers must make every effort to minimise the risks of harm - physical, psychological, social and financial - arising for any participant, researcher, institution, funding body, or other person affected by the research. Every project needs to undertake a risk analysis and, where significant risks are identified, should specify a risk management and harm alleviation strategy. Participants should be given information as to whom they may contact about any issues arising in the course of the research that cannot be resolved with members of the project team.
Examples of questionable ethical practice in social research

1. Involving people without their knowledge or consent.
2. Coercing them to participate.
3. Withholding information about the true nature of the research.
4. Otherwise deceiving the participant.
5. Inducing participants to commit acts diminishing their self-esteem.
6. Violating rights of self-determination (e.g. in studies seeking to promote individual change.)
7. Exposing participants to physical or mental stress.
8. Invading privacy.
9. Withholding benefits from some participants (e.g. in comparison groups).
10. Not treating participants fairly, or with consideration, or with respect.

(Robson 2002, p.69)

Research roles and relationships

Roles and relationships in research with and for children and young people are crucial to successful outcomes. Promoting rapport and fostering trust are essential building blocks in this process. Research relationships need to provide a high level of confidence that any research involving children and young people is not based on deception and will not be harmful in any way. Adopting a reflexive approach, constantly questioning whom the research is for, and whose interests the research serves, helps to maintain integrity.

The most common relationship is adult researcher-child participant. Here power relations are significant. We considered this in section 5 of the Engaging with Children and Young People Background Briefing so you already have a platform on which to base further reflection. Just as size, body language, tone of voice and context were shown to be critical elements in successful engagement, these are equally important in research relationships with children and young people. However, they take on an additional dynamic in that power relations can interfere with the legitimacy of research data. If your research data are based on interviews with, and/or observations of, children and young people then validity can be compromised if participants are fearful or anxious. This may result in them telling you what they think you want to hear rather than what their real experiences are leading to erroneous findings and conclusions that undermine the legitimacy of the research.

Another role to consider is the adult who supports children involved in research. This might be as parent, familiar adult or disability advocate. Such a role requires finely balanced integrity to ensure that the support being provided is sufficient to enable the child to participate meaningfully but does not encroach on the independence of the child’s views being expressed. Temptations to influence data being collected or ‘speak on behalf of’ the child have to be avoided if the authenticity of the child’s contribution is to be valued and the legitimacy of the research preserved.

With the increase in children and young people as researchers and co-researchers we must not overlook peer-to-peer relationships. Although this changes the power dynamic it does not necessarily remove it. Pleasing an adult can easily transmute to pleasing a friend. Power dynamics in child researcher-child participant roles can emanate from, for example, differences in age, popularity, cognitive ability or affluence. Reflexivity is the most effective way of managing research roles and relationships.

Young researchers need to ensure they are being ‘child-friendly’ in their data methods and that they do not allow their own preconceptions to obscure their approach. Young researchers are sometimes surprised to find that their peers do not necessarily share the same views as they do.
Some data collection techniques

It is not possible to cover all possible data collection techniques in this Background Briefing and you can find out more about other methods not discussed here in the suggested readings. However it is useful, here, to provide a brief overview of some of the more common methods.

**Interviews**

Interviews are perhaps the most common technique employed in research with and for young people. Effective communication was discussed in *Engaging Children and Young People* (Kellett, 2011) and all of the suggestions for good practice outlined there are relevant to research interview techniques. Additionally, we need to remember that research interviews – as opposed to communication per se – need to generate analysable data, so a range of considerations are important with regards to how data is obtained, recorded, managed, and analysed.

Structured interviews consist of a series of pre-determined closed questions. This approach is particularly useful if you want to collate a number of responses from a large number of children and/or make comparisons between and across groups of children. Unstructured interviews have no pre-determined questions and function more like conversations around a topic. These are more likely to be used in ethnographic-style research. Semi-structured interviews are a little of both. They have a central core of questions but allow for additional, unscripted questions, probes and follow-ups. These are the most common in research with children and young people and feature frequently in methodological designs because of their flexibility.

**Observation**

Observation is another common data collection tool. Researchers employ three principal methods, *naturalistic*, *participant* and *systematic*. Naturalistic observation is where the observer does nothing to manipulate or stimulate the behaviour of the individuals being observed, aiming for as natural and typical a situation as possible, akin to being a ‘fly on the wall’. The aim is to be objective and avoid becoming part of the action because this changes the dynamics of that action and interferes with, or alters, the behaviour of those being observed.
Systematic observation is a particularly rigorous style of observation that may or may not involve the manipulation or stimulation of behaviour. This kind of observation is commonly associated with a positivist approach and is generally, although not always, quantitative. It is a meticulous method in which the minutiae of behaviour are targeted for observation and coding. This is less common in research with and for children and young people.

Child-friendly data collection techniques

Collecting the views of children and young people does not always need to be done by the traditional methods described above or via ethnographic field notes. There are many interactive and games-based techniques that are attractive to young participants and known to be effective. Thomas and O’Kane’s (1999) pasta pots and diamond ranking methods are two such examples.

To make data collection more interactive, fun – and for younger children more accessible – questions that might be posed in a written survey are delivered orally and then children are invited to voice their level of agreement or disagreement using tactile resources such as plastic cups and pasta shells or pots and beans or boxes and beads. Each ‘receptacle’ is labelled with a category e.g. emotions such as anger, fear, joy, sadness etc. Children are given a finite number of ‘counters’ to distribute across the labelled receptacles and they put as few or as many in each pot according to how closely they associate with that emotion in relation to the verbal question posed.

Given a number of choices, children can generally tell you quite readily what they like most and least but find ranking their middle choices more problematic ‘but I like them both the same!’ has a familiar ring for many of us. Thomas and O’Kane’s (1999) diamond ranking offers an attractive alternative. This requires the production of nine categories or statements (which might be pre-determined by the researcher or brainstormed with children prior to the diamond ranking data collection activity). Children are then invited to rank the nine categories according to what they like most and least in the shape of a diamond – which allows for some to be equally ranked.

Sometimes video cameras are used to record the action. While this has the advantage of being able to re-visit the event innumerable times, a camera has a limited field of view and is not as flexible as the human eye and may miss some action that a human observer would pick up.

There can never be absolute objectivity because the very presence of an observer (or camera) is bound to result in small degrees of interference. Also, the observer is continuously making subjective judgements about what she or he is seeing, resulting in some low level ‘filtering’ that the researcher may not even be aware of doing. Where humans are involved, a low level of filtering is almost inevitable and a researcher needs to be reflexive about this. Reflexivity is being aware of one’s own effect on the action under observation and of one’s own set of values and how these colour interpretation of observed action.

Participant observation is closer to an ‘insider looking around’ because the researcher is actually a part of the action she or he is observing. Tensions can arise from a dual role of observing and practising where it is impossible to divorce one from the other, so once again reflexivity is an essential element in this method. Participant observation is a popular tool in action research and other forms of practice-based enquiry.
Mitchell Schofield, aged 11, researched the views of his peers about ideal teacher qualities (Schofield, 2008); ‘I chose this project because I wanted teachers to see what qualities their pupils really want in a teacher’. He carried out an initial questionnaire to help him create nine choice categories:

- sets fair homework,
- exciting
- lots of activities
- encouraging
- happy and smiling
- keeps control of the class
- kind
- fair to everyone
- group work

and then did individual interviews with his classmates to rank the categories from most to least important. Participants could shuffle the choice categories around until they were happy with the final layout. (see figure 1).

![Figure 1 Diamond ranking categories for ‘My Ideal Teacher’ (Schofield, 2008).](image)
Data analysis techniques

7.1 Qualitative data analysis

Qualitative methods generate volumes of descriptive data such as observation field notes or interview transcripts. Analysis is about the process of managing and reducing the data so that the main findings can emerge (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Analysis can be done either by content or by theme.

In content analysis, the frequency of particular words or phrases (such as from an interview transcript) are tallied. Depending on the study, this tally might also include synonyms. The prevalence of particular keywords is then discussed to determine what findings emerge. An advantage of content analysis is its reliability because the actual raw data are used and therefore minimal interpretation is employed. A disadvantage is that context is rarely considered.

By contrast, thematic analysis relies on the generation of codes in order to draw out themes from the data. While this has the advantage of taking context into account, there is a degree of researcher-interpretation involved in the code generation which may impact on reliability. Therefore inter and intra coding checks are sometimes set up to protect against perceived research bias. Reflexivity is particularly important in thematic analysis for these same reasons.

An alternative, and popular, approach to qualitative data analysis is grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This is an inductive approach whereby, no pre-conceived theory or hypothesis drives the direction of the analysis. The themes emerge from the data themselves, in other words the data generates the theory or concepts. A process of immersion in the raw data enables the researcher to produce some initial codes, known as open coding. This might be done in the margins of an interview transcript or field notes.

A second process known as axial coding explores connections between the initial codes, creating a new set of categories. This stage leads to the identification of a ‘core’ axis. This is something that explains the actions of participants in relation to their main concern. Once a core is established, the data is re-analysed using selective coding whereby the coding is determined by the core axis. Anything else is discarded thus effecting a data reduction process and leading to the generation of a main concept or theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

There are now a range of computer programs designed to support researchers in analysing qualitative data. They do not do the analysis for you, but they do help to manage what is often a large quantity of data and to allocate data flexibly to categories and themes (as described above).
**Quantitative data analysis**

Quantitative data requires numerical analysis. This may be as simple as a frequency count from a questionnaire. Generally, however, it involves more sophisticated statistical analysis capable of showing connections between different variables (bi-variate if there are two and multi-variate if there are more than two). There are many computer software packages which can do this analysis for the researcher for example, SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

An important tool in quantitative analysis is the calculation for statistical significance. This is judged to be the level beyond which something could have happened by chance. Chance probability is set at five per cent. Therefore the critical p level is set at 0.05. The smaller the p level the stronger the statistical significance. If it is greater than 0.05 then the results are deemed to be statistically insignificant.

Quantitative analysis is less common in research with, by and for children and young people, so I do not propose to go into this in any more depth but interested readers can engage further with the wide range of available resources on introductory statistics.
Preparing for your own study

This section provides a few pointers to help you prepare to undertake your own small scale research study involving children and/or young people in your practice setting.

Firstly, think about why you want to carry out a particular piece of research. For example is it going to deepen your knowledge about children and young people, enhance your practice or perhaps generate some new knowledge that will inform yours and others’ understanding of children’s lives? Once you have a strong rationale for why you have chosen a particular area of investigation you need to refine the topic so that it is small-scale enough and sufficiently tightly framed as to be a feasible study. This may mean confining the age range and/or environment(s) to manageable numbers. It is better to finish a small scale study that can inform a larger one than bite off more than you can chew and find you are unable to complete an over-ambitious project.

Clearly set out the parameters of your study, especially the time frames involved and how you will manage your own time. Do be aware that ethics clearances can often take far longer than you plan for, so do build in contingency time for this. To avoid disappointments and a waste of your own time, tackle permission from gatekeepers first. It will be very frustrating if you spend time seeking informed consent from young people and their guardians if you then discover that the manager of the practice setting refuses permission or you fail to get clearance from your local ethics committee for your study.

A common mistake that novice researchers make is that they choose data collection methods that do not generate the right kind of data to answer their research question(s). For example if your research question is exploring children’s views about underage drinking a questionnaire sent to youth support workers will not produce appropriate data. It will produce some data but these will reflect adult views and therefore will be answering a different research question from the one you have posed.

Another common pitfall is an expectation that you will be able to generalise from your findings. It is unlikely that a small scale study will produce results that can be applied generally, as findings are likely to be context-specific, so do be realistic in any claims you plan to make. This does not mean that the research you undertake will be meaningless. It will have value in its immediate context, possibly have an impact on community policy and practice, and will also provide a qualitative snapshot of a particular case example. Knowledge is extended through bodies of evidence being constructed, and your case example will contribute to such a body of evidence and has an important part to play.
Future directions

Research with and for children and young people has undergone a sea change in the last decade and a transformation in the last half century from a time when research was performed ‘on’ children, often without regard to their well-being and sometimes causing actual harm. An example is the notorious acne experiment on children with learning difficulties who were given an antibiotic for the treatment of acne to see whether it caused liver dysfunction – and it did! (see Beecher, 1966).

The tightening of ethical processes would outlaw any such study in contemporary times. However, a different ethical consideration is gaining momentum; that of authentic child voice. This is set to challenge the legitimacy of research about children that does not involve them in any role, be that as an advisory/reference group or as co-participants. Such concern stems from criticism of the extent to which adult interpretation of childhood experiences are likely to be unwittingly mediated by adult researchers. Future research with and for children and young people is likely to involve them in some capacity, even this is only advising on an initial research design.

Other reflections on future directions of child research revolve around the growth of child-led research and how this will sit in the larger spectrum of research with and for children and young people. There are many advantages in research which illuminates an inside perspective and elucidates child and youth sub cultures but it is important to establish that this should be an additional and complementary body of knowledge not one that replaces existing adult research with and for children and young people. There is likely to be greater scrutiny of research by children and young people and more awareness of child-to-child power issues and social inclusion issues to guard against this new research wing becoming elitist.

In the era of cyberspace and 24-hour news programmes, ‘global’ readily becomes ‘local’ and information is communicated quickly and extensively. This is especially true for Non Government Organisations who have sophisticated websites. In virtual environments, research has the potential to be very influential. Moreover, muted and marginalised voices can sometimes succeed in getting their voices heard in cyberspace where this would not have been possible in more conventional political space (Ong, 2006). An example is young people in China and more recently Egypt using the internet to protest their human rights (see Hartas, 2008). The future of research with and for children and young people will increasingly occupy this virtual space, both in terms of how data are collected through social networking sites and how findings are disseminated.
References


About the Centre for Children and Young People

The Centre for Children and Young People (CCYP) was established at Southern Cross University in 2004. The CCYP works collaboratively with organisations, particularly in regional and rural areas, to enhance policy and practice related to the well-being of children and young people.

The Centre has three priority areas: Research, Education and Advocacy.

For more information about the CCYP, visit ccyp.scu.edu.au

About the Course

The Graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma and Master of Childhood and Youth Studies are awards which have been developed collaboratively by the Centre for Children and Young People and the School of Education at Southern Cross University, Australia. The awards meet a recognised need, expressed by a range of professionals, for contemporary knowledge and skills to assist them to work more effectively with children, young people and their families.

The course seeks to be an innovative, professionally relevant, practical and interdisciplinary qualification for people working, or intending to work, with children, young people and their families. Applicants can enrol in any one of the awards or complete individual units as professional development.

Units are delivered externally so that students can successfully study at a distance. Each unit has authentic and professionally relevant assessment and the five core units involve optional but highly recommended summer/winter intensive workshops of 2 days duration. Students who are unable to attend are able to engage with workshop content and processes live online or via recorded formats.

The course incorporates innovative and appropriate use of technology to support students’ learning, opportunities for regular engagement with tutors and fellow students and (where appropriate) multimedia elements.

The course is underpinned by a deep respect and regard for children and young people and for their views and perspectives. It also incorporates an understanding that children and young people can benefit immensely from positive relationships with adults – parents, teachers and the myriad professionals with whom they may engage over the course of their childhood. The course embraces multidisciplinary perspectives in the belief this can enhance service provision and lead to improved outcomes for children and young people.

For more information about these awards, visit www.scu.edu.au/chilhoodstudies
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