Researching with children
Lessons in humility, reciprocity and community
Eclipsing voice in research with young children
and more ...

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Research that draws on ‘new sociology of childhood’ perspectives recognises children as social actors and competent participants who are fully capable of representing their views. These perspectives orient researchers to doing research with, rather than on, children. This themed edition adds to the newly emerging literature about research with children by teasing out important implications of these perspectives. The authors outline ways they have found to research with children and discuss some of the challenges and complexities (theoretical, practical and ethical) they have encountered. As such, this collection of articles contributes to the ‘growing mosaic of understanding’ (Graue & Walshe, 1998, p. 14) about researching with children.

A major theme of this edition is that research contexts are complex sites when researching with young children. As adult researchers, we need to be mindful of children’s assumptions about what research is, what it is for and what they understand their rights and roles to be in relation to adults who do research with them. Do we construct children as competent, even though they are often positioned as dependent in relation to adults? If so, how do we work with them in ways that enable them to participate more fully in the research process? What methodological, analytical and practical frameworks can be used to incorporate their perspectives? What approaches are ‘appropriate’ for research participants and collaborators who happen to be children? How do we respond to ethical issues associated with the power relations between children and adults and how can we identify crucial ‘pivot points’ (Fasoli, 2001) in the playing out of these relations? What can we learn and what do we gain from researching ‘with’ rather than ‘on’ children? Finally, how might working with children change us as researchers? The articles in this themed edition begin to address these and other issues.

Reid draws on a larger longitudinal study to provide a rich, evocative narrative that helps us to recognise children’s competence even when they stand out as ‘difficult’ in an early years of school context. Dockett & Perry report on a study involving children taking photographs to document their perspectives on starting school. This study highlights children’s ability to share their insights about the contexts in which they are located, particularly when empowered by research technologies. Fasoli’s reflexive account of children learning in an art gallery uses Wenger’s ‘communities of practice’ framework to analyse assumptions that underpin our research processes and interpretations. She highlights the importance of making these research practices more apparent to children and the difficulties that can be involved in doing so. Jennifer Sumson also adopts a reflexive stance in describing her first time attempt at research with young children. She explores a number of strategies for addressing power issues between researcher and children in order to minimise the effects of unequal power relations and produce more productive research relationships. Reporting on young children’s understandings of natural phenomena, Robbins emphasises the need to avoid a deficit, normative view of children and illustrates how a more respectful research relationship can generate richer insights into what children know. Reflecting on historical constructions of childhood, Sorin examines her own research practice and discovers new layers of richness in data by privileging children’s perspectives. This edition concludes with a timely warning from MacNaughton about the dangers of uncritically honouring children’s voices. She argues persuasively for the need to problematise, not simply privilege, children’s voices.

Our intention is not to imply that these accounts are exemplary but rather to illuminate the continuum that all of us are on when it comes to working in more collaborative ways with children as researchers.

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From bad to worse?: Troubling development in preschool settings

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At the end of Jake’s first day of school his teacher called him the ‘worst kid in the class’. A year later, when he was not ‘progressed’ to Year 1, the pattern of Jake’s school development seemed to be set. As I write, Jake is in Year 4, and many of the predictions his Prep teacher made on that first day seem accurate—he has not had a history of successful learning or social experience at school. As I discuss elsewhere (Hill et al., 2002), Jake has had periods of very successful learning and progress though, which indicate that the ‘developmental pathways’ that children tread are socially constructed, rather than reliant on innate ‘abilities’ or ‘natural’ traits. For Jenks, ‘development’, or ‘progress towards an adult state over time’, is ‘the primary metaphor through which childhood is made intelligible’ (1996, p. 36). Psychological notions of development, however, are far more complicated and troublesome than such a metaphor encourages us to believe.

In this paper I explore Jake’s preschool experience, arguing that his limited agency as a male child from a family in crisis, constructed him as a ‘bad boy’ in both preschool and school, impacting on his ability to learn successfully. I provide observational evidence that this construct is both inaccurate because it is incomplete—and unfair because it is inaccurate. As a researcher who has observed him in different settings over a five year period, I believe that Jake is not always, and has never been necessarily, a ‘bad’ boy. I consider that this in-school identity has been constructed because of Jake’s limited agency as a child who does not fit the mould of the ‘good’ preschooler or schoolboy in formal learning tasks. His potential is (and could be) significantly more complex than the unfolding of a pre-set developmental pattern. I claim, further, that Jake’s school literacy goes from ‘bad to worse’ because of the power of this construction, which relentlessly occurs at the expense of alternate constructions of himself that he tries to mobilise in school settings, but which are consistently frustrated by institutional structures and social prejudices.

In arguing this case, I also argue a position on the role of the researcher in studying children. When I first met Jake he was four years old. He is now nearly eleven, and I cannot claim to be taking an impartial observational stance in terms of my relationship with him, his family, and his teachers. As Walkerdine notes: ‘It is an impossible task to avoid the place of the subjective in research. … instead of making futile attempts to avoid something which cannot be avoided, we should think more carefully about how to utilise our subjectivity as a feature of the research process’ (1997, p. 59). The question of where ‘truth’ lies in any account of research with children must always be asked of both the telling and the reading of the research. By definition, a research report is always ‘made up’ from data. And the data used is always selected from the recorded interaction of researcher and participants (Bourdieu, 1992). If we want truth to be the basis for our action as readers of educational research, we will be always disappointed, as the full reality of any human event in time and space is always impossible to represent. But if we are to act intelligently as educators, we need a sound basis of information and feeling on which to base our decisions. This is what Ladwig (1995) calls ‘socially recognisable evidence’, which though never complete and full, nevertheless tells a truth that invites our responsive action.

Context for development

Jake was born in December 1991, the third child of a young couple who battled to support their children and their marriage on a single low income. Both had left school early, married young, and in the depressed economic and social situation of a regional city, lived in a deteriorating relationship marked by violence, hopelessness and, by 1996, four children under seven.
From the time he was two, Jake attended full-time long-day childcare at ‘Building Blocks’ Kindergarten, a new private centre with bright, spacious rooms and extensive outside play facilities. The staff there included a trained early childhood specialist who organised a daily kindergarten program for the four- to five-year-olds. Jake's placement at Building Blocks was a Department of Community Services arrangement that had begun as Respite Care for his mother, when he was two years old.

What I noticed as significant for Jake's literacy at Building Blocks was his physical immaturity and lack of obvious 'readiness' for school, or for the school-like activities that characterised the formal kindergarten program. He was physically smaller than other children heading for their first year at school, and his speech was limited and unclear. He was reluctant to attempt indoor activities within the kindergarten sessions and demonstrated unwillingness to persist at tasks that did not give immediate success. This frustration regularly took the form of physical bursts of anger—knocking down equipment, and destroying the work of other children. Jake was regularly punished for these behaviours and for other aggression. At the end of his preschool year, he appeared to view 'teachers' as adversaries, or at least antagonists. He often disobeyed instructions and cried easily and often.

Yet he listened to stories with enjoyment. He enjoyed participating in musical activities, and he was cooperative and keen in a one-to-one testing situation. Jake showed some familiarity with pen and paper, and his mother, Leonie, reported that he had had some experience at home with his sisters' reading books from school, though this was not extensive.

The structured kindergarten program at Building Blocks worked on a daily timetable that catered for two groups of children, three-year-olds and four- to five-year-olds. These came together for stories, singing, outdoor play and eating. Jake remained in the centre for the whole day, and the formal activities comprised only just over an hour, yet he seemed to be particularly unhappy in the company of the other four- to five-year-old boys, often complaining that they ‘hit’ and ‘punched’ him. During outside playtime Jake interacted with other children, and he successfully engaged in cooperative play with younger peers. On one occasion I observed and recorded him skilfully manipulating a digging game to include a bigger, intellectually disabled boy, Jason, whom I had also observed being hit and teased by other preschoolers. On this occasion, Jake organised for Jason to sit alongside the group, playing parallel to Jake, who placed himself so that he sat physically between the bigger boys and his friend. In this way he was blocking their teasing and aggression toward Jason, and enabling his friend to participate in their play. The following transcript records this event:

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**9.15am**

Jake and Aidan talk as they walk toward the sand pit.

*Jason arrives, and approaches Jake on the edge of the sand pit. Jason is a larger child, with a slight intellectual disability. He hugs Jake, slowly, arms around his whole body.*

*Jake hugs him back—they appear very affectionate and glad to see each other. Jason follows Jake and Aidan into the sand pit. There is sand kicking from a boy called Matt. Jason moves away. Jake gets sand in his eyes, wipes them, addresses researcher.*

Jake: One day I’m gunna go to Melbourne Zoo. And I’m gunna go to Aidan’s new house ...

Matt leaves, scuffing up sand. The other boys play together in the sand, filling a large saucepan held by Aidan with sand from smaller containers.

*Jason plays alone, off to one side, filling a wheelbarrow with sand.*

**9.20am**

Aidan: I’ve got dry sand

Jake: We can put some lollies and stuff in it (breaking leaves and sticks into the saucepan, turning to take sticks from Jason’s barrow)

Aidan: We’re making food, stir ... stir.

Jake: We need that … and we need this … (They dig and stir. Jake reaching round to Jason, who hands him leaves and sand)

Jake: We need heaps of mud, don’t we Aidan? Where’s the scraper, Jason?

*Jason stands up, points and then moves to sit back with the others. They remain playing together till the bell rings for ‘inside play’ at 9.30am.*
This observation contradicted everything I had hitherto seen and heard about Jake. He wasn’t ‘aggressive’ in this situation. On the contrary, his actions were ‘kind’, and sensitive to his disabled friend’s social position in the group. He was also ‘clever’, ‘diplomatic’ and ‘tactful’ to position himself between the Jason and the others, so that Jason could be part of the boys’ game. But this sort of social situation is not what counts in school learning. Jake’s kindergarten teacher was concerned that he would find school difficult. She commented on his tendency to become frustrated in formal learning activities, and his need to be ‘right first time’ or else fail to persevere. He was not happy to sit at a table and do quiet activities and refused to cooperate or try to complete a task. Clearly, he could solve difficult social and logistical problems such as the one in the sand pit very effectively. 

His results on preschool literacy assessment tasks were consistent with his interactions with his teachers. Jake scored very poorly on all testing items in 1996 (Hill et al., 2002). However he was eager to interact around the writing and drawing tools provided, though he could not write his name, or attend to print or numbers in the environment. These did not appear significant for him, consistent with his limited experiences with the world outside of the centre. There were few books at home, and few visitors, though Jake had ‘slept over’ at his grandmother’s house. His mother went shopping during the times when the children were in school or care, and the family’s poverty prohibited many activities that children are assumed to have experienced before starting school. His mother noted:

we were never sort of allowed to go places or do anything cos we had to save money—that was with their father … And now that he’s not there I don’t care if I haven’t got any money to back me up if things happen. I don’t care, if the kids are happy...

Jake watched little television at home. Programs classed as ‘children’s viewing’ were reserved as a reward for dry sheets in the morning, a reward he did not often earn. The Centre Director described him as having ‘a quick temper’, explaining that he needed to be ‘the centre of attention or else he seeks it through inappropriate behaviour’. She felt he should remain at the Centre for another year, as he lacked self-confidence, even though his social interaction was generally ‘good’. She had talked with his mother about his ‘readiness for school’, but his mother was keen that he should begin school, in spite of problems with his speech and his emotional and physical immaturity. She considered he needed to grow up, and that school might improve his behaviour:

Oh I threatened him last night if he keeps the violence up he’s back to Kinder, until he’s ready to go—to start school. I said to him, ‘I don’t care if you’re ten and in Prep then, that’s the way it’ll be, Jake. You’ll be ten and you’ll be picked on ‘cos you’re the biggest kid in Prep. And you’ll be the biggest sook in Prep too’.

The ‘sooky kid’ label certainly fitted Jake at this time. His mother regularly found him in tears when she collected him at the end of the day. By 5.30pm he would often be sitting, his head down on a table, ‘being good for just five minutes’ before he was ‘allowed’ to go home. Jake was often unhappy at the Centre, and he was at the Centre for almost all of his waking hours, five days a week.

Discourses of gender and violence

There was considerable observational and anecdotal evidence that Jake found his kindergarten experience in the day care Centre to be characterised by physical violence and aggression towards himself and Jason. As a small child, he was powerless to inflict retribution or attain justice through the use of language because of his unclear speech. He was often, in turn, physically violent to other children. He also had regular experiences of physical aggression directed by a larger male towards himself, his mother and his siblings at home. He was regularly punished for aggression at Building Blocks and at home. It was clear that Jake’s behaviour at the Centre did not invite positive responses from any staff member. With a large number of children attending the Centre each day, he had little opportunity to be the ‘centre of attention’ for any reason other than disciplinary.

In addition, his family was in the final stages of breaking up during the summer of 1996–97, and his mother was forced to move house five times during Jake’s first months at school, sometimes returning, though always unsuccessfully, to the children’s father. Jake’s new school teacher was also new to the school, and had no time to settle in before her mixed-age P/1 class arrived. Jake was one of twenty-four new students for his teacher to get to know, ten of whom were starting Year Prep. Jake was the only child from Building Blocks in this classroom. From the first day, he began to demonstrate the aggressive behaviour that had been evident in the Centre. Because of his unclear speech, it was difficult for his teacher to
communicate with him, or to know what he could and could not understand. It is not surprising, from her point of view, that he so quickly appeared to be ‘the worst kid in the class’.

While I have pointed here to a significant intersection of discourses of gender and violence in Jake’s home and preschool life, I have also tried to indicate his kindness and his positive reactions to literacy events at home and in the centre. However, his ‘bad boy’ behaviour around formal learning tasks meant that it became extremely difficult for Jake to position himself as a ‘good boy’ or potentially successful learner. His mother was explicit about the intersection of gender and violence in his home life. Her story below, illustrates how literacy events within the family, once Jake started school, became part of the domestic struggle for power.

There was an on-going problem about take-home readers for Jake and his mother. These were often misplaced or lost in sudden shifts of house, or moves to his grandmother’s house for the night. Jake’s reading record for the first two school terms covers only one A4 page and has just 14 entries. In comparison, the reading record of another child in this classroom contains 56 entries over the same period. Jake was able to read a book with an interested adult only one quarter of the times his classmate did, and he was constantly in trouble from his teacher for not returning his take-home books.

At this time Jake was just five years old, and unable to control his life circumstances or take care of this problem himself. His mother reported his efforts to do the right thing. He had enjoyed reading with his sisters in earlier, more settled times, and tried to do the same himself. At one time Jake was barred from taking home any more books from school until several ‘lost’ books had been recovered. His mother recounts:

Last night he turned to me and said, ‘I didn’t get a reader.’ I said, ‘Why didn’t you ask the teacher for one?’ And he said, ‘Why?’ And I said, ‘It’s your teacher, you should ask!’

‘You’re my mum, you ask.’
I said, ‘No Jake, you ask.’

So then he went up and got a book. Then he came down and gave it ... you know like that (mimes a flinging movement) across the lounge room floor. I ignored it. It hit my plant, knocked me plant over—I ignored it. (Amazing that I did, ‘cos I had a headache and all, and usually when I’ve a headache I’m real nasty to the kids if they start playing up.) ... I turned around and looked at Jake, and said, ‘Now you can get the vacuum cleaner and clean it up mate.’

‘Nah, ‘ he said. ‘It can stay there.’

His father walked in the door twenty minutes later.
He turned around, seen the mess on the floor and said, ‘Who done that?’
I said, ‘I’ll give you one guess!’

‘Jake! Get here! Now!’

Jake comes up like this (mimes head down, shoulders bunched).

‘Did you do that? Did you do that Jake?’
Like this and all (mimes sheepish shrug) and: ‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘Mum didn’t get me a reader and I hate her.’

At the time I found this story emblematic of Jake’s transition between home and school. His family circumstances, his classroom circumstances, his preparation for school at pre-school had all failed to provide him with experience and practice in the sorts of behaviours, speech patterns and understandings expected of children beginning school, and essential for success there. On the contrary, Jake’s home circumstances at this point in his life were difficult and he was receiving little individual attention at school with regard to his learning, though plenty around his behaviour.

Interactions around learning were not positive experiences for Jake, at home or school. In the story above, he demonstrates his need and wish to be like other children. In the face of severe obstacles in achieving this goal, however, learning to become literate has become a major problem for Jake. This story is significant because it illustrates how for Jake, like most children starting school at the present time, literacy education proceeds in the company of women. Yet Jake has had few educational experiences where women have positively valued his behaviour, understood his attempts at communication, or recognised his need and ability to care and nurture.

At home, he has already observed and practiced other ways of achieving power in relation to the women in his life. These were ultimately unacceptable to his mother at home, and they are certainly unacceptable at school and elsewhere.
Conclusion

Studying Jake has led me to believe that for him, like all children, social and emotional factors underpinning activities and relationships at school, preschool and home are not ‘peripheral’ to the project of learning. They are crucially influential in how the child approaches this task. My observational data shows that Jake could act powerfully and lovingly, and could listen, read and write with pleasure. Yet this information was not reported by his teachers, or by his mother. They all report, however, that he could act angrily and destructively, and that he resisted the sort of reading and writing activities that produced him as deficient or lacking skills other children have. When Jake felt secure and at ease in his surroundings, he was willing and able to persevere in the face of frustration, in order to learn. In the face of repeated failure and punishment, however, learning became an almost insurmountable challenge for him.

This is what is troubling to unexamined assumptions about development. If we, as teachers, cannot intervene to interrupt the developmental trajectory that Jake appears to have started out on, how can we help him benefit from the years he will spend in schools and save him continuing to go ‘from bad to worse’?

Recognising the complexity of development is central to reconceptualising educational practice to help all children, not just the ‘good’ ones, learn. Jake’s story helps me to understand that development ‘isn’t about the future, it’s about the present […] conditioned by past experience and biological predisposition’ (Davis et al, 2000, p.130). The key word here is ‘conditioned’. Jake’s development is not necessarily determined by what has gone before and by what appear to be ‘natural’ traits within him. This is true for any child. Jake has experienced, pleasurably, alternative ways of being a boy learning successfully. But he hasn’t experienced them often. And he hasn’t experienced them often enough in the company of women. I do believe that he needs more of these experiences and he needs them regularly if he is to be able to veer off the ‘developmental pathway’ his schooling has so far placed him on (Thelen and Smith 1998). If he is to experience future social and educational success at school, the ‘present’ Jake needs to be in must allow him to experience and interact positively and regularly with other people around literacy. And any teacher, in any setting, can arrange for this to occur—knowing its benefit for all her students, not just Jake.

Acknowledgements

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Reflections on doing research with young children

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Drawing on a larger critical case study, the writer uses Wenger’s (1998) communities of practice framework to reflect on some examples of research practice that involved young children. In Wenger’s framework, the research context is viewed as a set of situated social practices that are continually being negotiated by all participants. Most of these practices contain implicit and unstated assumptions about the overall purposes and expectations of the research, thus providing participants with few resources for participating in collaborative ways. As young children move into the research context, they are confronted with new ways of doing things. Being more experienced, the early childhood researcher can make research practice more transparent and assist children to participate more effectively, as collaborators rather than as subjects.

Early childhood researchers are in a position to engage children more explicitly in the research they undertake with them and for their benefit. We often take for granted what is entailed for young children to be involved in research processes. They are being asked to move from the familiar context in which we found them to a new and unfamiliar one, the research context. This is the case regardless of the fact that the research is conducted on familiar ground because the process involves a number of practices that contain largely unstated assumptions about its purpose and nature. Traditionally, children are considered too young to understand or notice what is going on, and so have often been provided with very few resources to make sense of the research context in which they are expected to participate. Early childhood research has drawn heavily on psychological and scientific views of children and learning in constructing research designs and in interpreting data produced by and about young children (Christensen & James, 2000). Gradually this orientation has shifted as early childhood researchers adopt more sociocultural views of childhood, of children and of learning (Goncu, 1999; Hill, Comber, Louden, Reid & Rivalland, 1998; Smith, Taylor & Gollop, 2000; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000). As Smith, Taylor and Gollop point out:

Too often in the past children have been regarded as the passive recipients of adults’ protection and care, or indeed merely as the properties of their families. ... Children have been the invisible and voiceless objects of concern, and not understood as competent, autonomous persons who have a point of view (2000, p. ix).

Research as participation in community of practice

Wenger’s (1998) sociocultural and situated perspective on learning, ‘communities of practice’, provides a useful framework for reflecting on the research process as a set of social practices that are rarely made explicit to participants. Wenger’s framework describes the social practices of any community as complex, mostly implicit and learned slowly. Learning occurs primarily through participation in social interactions. We all belong to multiple communities of practice and in each we learn the community-endorsed ways of doing things; in other words, what counts as valuable ways of being and doing in that particular community. We bring to every encounter a set of resources or thinking tools provided by the communities of practice to which we belong. People who live and work together for extended periods eventually form common understandings and ways of doing things.

As people pursue any shared enterprise over time—working, living, playing together—they develop a common practice, that is, shared ways of doing things.
and relating to one another that allow them to achieve their joint purpose. Over time, the resulting practice becomes a recognizable bond among those involved. (Wenger, 1996, p. 4)

When young children become participants in a research activity, particularly in one that involves them living and working with researchers over long periods, they can begin to form the kinds of communities that Wenger describes. However, participation in research usually requires a crossing of boundaries between the children's school, preschool, home or child care community to the new community constituted by the research. We have trouble seeing this crossing as problematic because our research practices are so familiar to us. The notion of boundary crossing between communities is a productive analogy. It helps us reflect on what we take for granted and what is required of a research participant to make sense of the new practices associated with the project.

In the next section I have drawn on incidents from a larger critical case study conducted in 2000 to provide examples of some taken-for-granted research practices in which children were expected to participate in order for the research to proceed.

Study description

The study from which these examples are drawn involved seven preschool-aged children who attended a university preschool. Their teachers and I took them on a series of excursions to an art gallery and followed up later with typical early childhood play activities at their preschool. My goal was to understand how the children learned the new practices they encountered in the art gallery, as they enacted them in the gallery and in play activities in their preschool. Consistent with the sociocultural methodology I had adopted, my intention was to work collaboratively with children as co-participants in the research rather than on them as if they were subjects (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000).

In order to gather the kinds of data I sought, I needed to become a familiar and non-threatening entity in the preschool, and adopted the participant observer role for this purpose. During the gallery visits I acted as an auxiliary staff member, or one not primarily responsible for the group of children but involved with them during the visit. At first, during the four-month period prior to data collection, my role was similar to that of a volunteer helper in the preschool. Over time, a sense of trust and familiarity developed. As is often the case in early childhood classrooms, the children did not distinguish sharply among the adults present (Hedges, 2001) and, as time went on, they began to come to me as one of the familiar and friendly adults who could help them, listen to them and appreciate their activities. The staff also began to involve me in more of the daily planning, often leaving me to work alone with children. In other words, my role as researcher was blurred with that of teacher. I describe this process in some detail to illustrate how subtly the research context changes and evolves as people participate together towards a joint enterprise. The research relationships I had with the children began to move well beyond the neat definitions and procedures proposed in the planning phase.

The children's roles also changed over time and they were never simply 'subjects'. Through their constructions of 'doing research', the children's participation helped constitute the form that the research took, an issue not often considered in studies involving young children. Nespor (1998, p. 1) emphasises that 'even relatively young people have experiences with "research" in the course of their everyday and institutional activities that shape how they interpret and participate in our research endeavours'. Some of these children were quite experienced as participants in research processes, having spent two or three years at this university preschool where research was a common occurrence. This apparently positive experience contributed to the children's acceptance of me and to their willingness to participate. They seemed, increasingly, to regard my presence and involvement in my research as a 'normal' situation. Over time, the children, the teachers and I began to develop a kind of 'joint enterprise' around what it meant to 'do' my research. As can be seen in the examples below, it was a process that was never clear-cut and needed to be negotiated continuously from the start to the finish.

As researchers, we often neglect to consult and involve children in design issues because of our conceptions of their competence to participate in such conversations. Nespor (1998) discusses the 'routine suppression' of children's perspectives. He recommends that we make 'the meanings of research for kids an explicit topic of scrutiny and create new ways for them to participate in research not as objects of study but as inquirers'.
I found this an appealing but very challenging recommendation to enact. Although I attempted to conduct the research in ways that allowed children to participate as inquirers, it was always difficult to know exactly what they understood the research process to be.

**Cooperating in the practices of data collection**

I felt it was important to provide opportunities for the children to become fully aware of my data collection procedures and equipment (i.e. the mini tape recorders and a camera) and the uses I intended to make of the results. I demonstrated for them how equipment worked. I explained, in what I hoped was language appropriate to a young child, why I was taking the photographs and how we would be using them. The reasons I gave were: to help us to remember what happened when we were at the art gallery, to help me understand how children do things at the gallery, to show the other children who wouldn’t be going on the excursion and to help me with my research.

It was clear that the children were beginning to construct diverse notions about data collection practices and what they were for. On a few occasions children signalled to me when I should take a picture. For example, at one point I complained aloud that there wasn’t enough light to take a photograph in the gallery. Bonnie (all names used are pseudonyms) came to get me, took me back to where she could stand bathed in the light of one exhibit and told me that now I could take her picture. Another time, I suggested to Mary that she might like to draw an exhibit in order to remember it and show to the other children who hadn’t come with us. She told me to take a picture! Jake asked me to photograph the triangle structures on the ceiling of the gallery so that we could tell the children about them. Given this attention to photography during our visits I was surprised that, later in the preschool, the children seemed less interested in talking about or sharing most of the photographs with the other children. However, their interest was clear when they made books containing photographs of themselves for their parents. This incident led me to reflect on what the children seemed to know about the practice of taking photographs as data collection. I realised that the use of the equipment and the process of taking photographs had been my focus and I had neglected to explain and demonstrate a key research practice, the notion of photographs as ‘data’ that contained traces of their activity for later interpretation. Children’s understanding of the purposes and uses of the tape recorders was similarly confused, despite the demonstrations and explanations. For example, Harry told me during the visit to the gallery that his ‘radio’ wasn’t working, indicating some confusion about the purpose of the machine he was carrying around. We had another tape-recorder demonstration back at the preschool after his comment. Jake also seemed to have constructed a notion of the tape recorder as a transmitter rather than a recorder. At one point he stopped, looking perplexed, and asked me, ‘Well, how, how can you hear me?’ Bonnie expressed, or rather demonstrated, some discomfort with the tape recorder. I thought her recorder must have malfunctioned because there was so little to hear when I reviewed it later. In fact, she had barely spoken at all during this visit. Her teacher thought that she might have been distracted by or even a bit concerned about wearing the tape recorder. Her silence certainly seemed to indicate that she understood that the machine would be recording what she said. After the visit, I asked her if she was worried about the tape recorder. She said that she wasn’t. Whether because of this conversation or simply through her increasing familiarity with the practice, she talked without hesitation during the next visit.

The children’s responses to the use of this equipment as an aspect of our research practice recalls Nespor’s (2000, p. 2) claim that children’s views of the research process ‘are likely to influence how they participate’. These children were never unaware of the fact that we were doing something different from their normal preschool practice. In the ways they participated they showed, on the one hand, a keen interest and willingness to cooperate in this research but, on the other hand, their understanding of the overall purpose was limited. They needed more information or engagement with the results of the practice of data collection to understand what was happening.

**Resisting practices: ‘But everyone goes on our excursions’**

The excursion, as a research practice, was particularly problematic. We told the children that only some of them would be going to the gallery each day for my project. We had anticipated that they might find
this strange and so had prepared an explanation that
highlighted the impracticality of taking all of the
children. We had not anticipated that the children
would resist our plans to the degree that they did. The
transcript below is part of the discussion we had about
who would go on the excursion. Cathy was the director
of the preschool.

Cathy And tomorrow, there will just be four of us
who'll go to the gallery. And four more on
Wednesday.

Harry Well usual, well usual, well usually more
people go.

Lyn Yes … usually.

Cathy What?

Lyn Usually more people go. But this is a special
kind of excursion to help me with my studies
and …

Cathy Do you think you know why we only having
four people going at a time?

Child 'Cause there's not enough room?

Cathy That's one reason.

Lyn I've been hunting all over and I finally found
four tape recorders so I can only take…? (I
don't finish the sentence so that the children
will finish it for me.)

Children Four children! (in chorus)

Harry So four tape recorders means four children.

Tom Why didn't you find FIVE tape recorders?

Cathy We didn't have any more (sad, regretful).

Lyn They're very expensive.

The adults brought in the logic of numbers and the
expense of tape recorders as a way to legitimise the fact
that we would only be taking some children on the
excursion. In their response, the children seemed to
see such logic as ‘unfair’. In retrospect, I realise that a
more honest reason for limiting the numbers was the
constraints of my research design and data collection
strategy. I could only manage to take photographs,
field notes, tape recordings and transcriptions for four
children at a time. I can also see that Cathy and I
wanted to avoid a lengthy explanation or discussion.
The children reacted with resistance to this change in
their usual excursion practice. Tom, using our discourse
of logic, offered a solution—"Why didn't you find FIVE
tape recorders?"—to which I responded with a new
argument, an economic argument about the cost of tape
recorders.

The adults’ use of logical and economic arguments
apparently stalled the children's resistance and we
proceeded with our plans, but it did not stop the
children's concern that the decision was unfair or
their ongoing resistance. For example, one day Harry
(the child who had told us in the transcript above
that ‘usually more people go’) refused to come on the
excursion, saying he was ‘too busy’. It turned out that
he wanted to play with a friend who was not going
on the excursion. We ended up taking another of the
participants instead. On the next excursion day Harry
decided to come. We had ended our discussion with
the assurance that we would take all of the children to
a gallery after my project was finished. For the children
the point seemed to be not whether we all went to a
gallery at some point in the future, but that we would
ever go with only some of the children.

I can see now that there were many unstated
assumptions in the ways we negotiated the meaning
of this ‘research excursion’. I could have made it clear
that the excursion, as a ‘research’ excursion, would be
different from the usual preschool excursion, instead
of trying to pretend that it was the same thing. We
could have shown the children all of the tape recorders,
counted them and tried them on. They might then
have agreed with us about the need to limit numbers,
or perhaps they would have come up with another
solution. They may have decided, if we had let them,
to change my research design. Conducted as a verbal
discussion, with the adult's agendas already firmly
predetermined, the discussion was less a negotiation
than an attempt to impose a predetermined plan. This
incident highlighted the need to pay attention to the
interaction of familiar and unfamiliar practices, those
associated with the research and those similar to the
research practice, which had different meanings outside
the context. New relations were produced as the children
and adults negotiated what ‘going on a “research”-
oriented excursion’ could mean.

Conclusion

Wenger (1998) maintains that a community’s practice
never springs into being out of nothing. The current
practices operating in any community have been built
on a history of practice. The practices of today are like repositories of that community's past knowledge, skills, values and attitudes. In early childhood research there is a legacy of objectifying children through child study (Hatch, 1995), constructing children as innocent and needy (Woodrow, 1999) and positioning them as developmentally incompetent as compared to adults (Aubry, David, Godfrey & Thompson, 2000). These notions can be seen embodied in many of our research practices.

There were many unstated assumptions embedded in the research practices used in this study. My goal had been to work with the children collaboratively rather than do research on them. However, I provided them with few of the resources they needed to make sense of the new practices involved in research. The practices of data collection involve much more than familiarising children with the apparatus. Engaging the children in analysing the photographs and listening to the tapes could have shown them how I intended to use these traces of their activity to help me understand their learning in the gallery. As the research excursion was so similar to the normal preschool excursion, it is no wonder that the children objected to this change in practice. There was a history of shared practice around excursions in this preschool that made the changes we proposed difficult for the children to understand by merely discussing them in a superficial way. The more closely the research excursions had fitted with their usual excursion practice, the more accepting they may have been. Alternatively, the more transparent we could have made the differences between ‘research’ excursions and their normal excursions, the more useful it may have been for children's authentic participation as research collaborators.

Clearly children were active and competent in helping to construct the joint enterprise of this research. They both challenged as well as appropriated the research practices they encountered. They were not raw novices in the process, having participated in a number of other research projects previously, but they still had much to learn in order to enable them to participate effectively as collaborators rather than as subjects in research.

Acknowledgement

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References


Children’s views and children’s voices in starting school

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The Starting School Research Project promotes the involvement of children in the research agenda. This paper explores some of the philosophical and methodological issues involved in this stance. The main focus of this paper is the voices of children reporting issues of significance to them as they start compulsory schooling, through drawings, descriptions, photographs and demonstrations.

Introduction

Starting compulsory schooling is an important time for all involved. Much has been written about assessing children’s readiness for school (May & Kundert, 1997), their adjustment to school (Hadley, Wilcox & Rice, 1994) and differences in adult perceptions of readiness for school (Harradine & Clifford, 1996). However, comparatively little research has considered the views, perceptions and expectations of young children as they start school (for exceptions, see Brostrom, 1995; Clyde, 2001).

Early findings of the Starting School Research Project indicated a clear difference in the perspectives of the children and adults involved in transition (Perry, Dockett & Tracey, 1998). Specifically, children commented on two major areas: they emphasised rules and the importance of knowing the rules in order to start school; and their feelings about school. While most children had positive comments about school, these often related to friends and having or making friends. Children who commented that they did not have friends reported feeling sad, scared, or lonely at school.

Part of the underlying philosophy of the Starting School Research Project has been that effective transitions to school involve all stakeholders, particularly children (Dockett & Perry, 2001). Drawing on an ecological model of transition, where ‘a child’s transition to school is understood in terms of the influence of contexts (e.g. family, classroom, community) and the connections among these contexts (e.g. family-school relationships) at any given time and across time’ (Pianta, Rimm-Kaufman & Cox, 1999, p. 4), we are interested in describing ways children influence the contexts in which they live and the ways those contexts also impact on experiences. This view regards children as competent and interpretive social participants.

Investigating children’s views about starting school

Including children in discussions about starting school has the potential to inform adults from the direct experiences children have of the implications and outcomes of these experiences and to signal directions for change. Involving children ‘introduces into critical conversations the missing perspectives of those who experience daily the effects of existing educational policies-in-practice’ (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 3).

A range of issues are encountered when considering research with children. Clearly, the relationships that exist between children and adults exert a strong influence on children’s involvement (Graue & Walsh, 1998). In some instances, the perceived differences between children and adults have set up expectations that children, particularly young children, cannot provide reliable information about issues that affect them. The Starting School Research Project rejects this view, working instead to establish relationships and interactions that are comfortable, meaningful and relevant for children. One way of achieving this involves engaging children...
in research conversations, rather than structured or formal interviews. Such conversations "hand over the agenda to children, so that they can control the pace and direction of the conversation, raising and exploring topics" (Mayall, 2000, p. 133) of relevance and interest to them. These conversations, when conducted within small social groups, have the potential to encourage children to discuss things that matter to them. Issues of power and control are not eliminated, but children can feel more in control of the situation.

Other issues to be considered when incorporating children's views include the realisation that, even when children's perspectives are sought and listened to, these are not necessarily representative of all children in all situations. Some voices and some views are not heard (Viruru & Cannella, 2001), perhaps because they are not expressed, or perhaps because the adults listening do not hear them. Some children do not feel empowered to express their views, and some choose to remain silent. Further, the frame of reference adopted by researchers is not always attuned to the messages children convey. The possibility that researchers might select evidence to support particular views, or overlook evidence which does not support those views must be considered. The ways in which we interpret children's expressed views reflect our own experiences, expectations and beliefs.

The aim of the Starting School Research Project is to enhance the transition to school experience for all concerned. Many transition programs rely on adult input, and develop approaches which reflect adult experiences, expectations and perceptions. Other programs have sought input from children. The project described in this paper aimed to listen to children's views and perspectives on starting school; to respect their experiences; and to seek ways to represent those which emphasised the children's agendas.

Method

Staff, parents and children from four schools were invited to participate in the project. School 1 is a large, inner Sydney public school with a high level of cultural diversity among children and families. School 2 is a public school in a relatively prosperous suburb of Adelaide. School 3 is a Catholic school, located in a mid-western NSW country town and drawing students from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. School 4 is a public school, located in a large north-western NSW city. Students are drawn from the city, as well as rural communities and Indigenous communities.

While the implementation of the project varied in each context, the essence remained the same: seeking current Kindergarten/Reception children's input about what new Kindergarten/Reception children need to know, or know about, as they contemplated starting school. In all four sites, data was gathered in Term 3 of the year, so the children involved were aged between five and six years. The primary means of recording children's input was a digital camera operated by the children and a tape recorder.

The methodology consisted of the following:

1. Classroom discussion

In each school, a group of Kindergarten/Reception children were invited to discuss what they considered important when starting school. The initial questions were:

• What did you need to know about when you started school? and,
• There are some children who are going to start school soon. What is important for them to know about this school?

2. Taking photos

After some class discussion, small groups of children continued the conversation and were invited to walk round the school to take photos of things they considered important when starting school. The research team printed the photos and collated the text from the children. The children who took the
photos checked the text, and in several instances added detail. The photos were also accessible for the children on the class computer. The photos and text were combined into a book. One copy was retained by the school and the other by the researchers. Where possible, the book was the subject of further class discussion with members of the research team.

4. Preschool visits/orientation

In three of the schools, several of the children who had taken photos participated in a small group session with children who were about to start school. In one school this involved visiting the local preschool; in the others it involved a small group interaction during an orientation visit at the school.

Results

The tangible results of the project are four books, containing the photos and the text from each of the project sites. They range in size from 36 pages (18 photos) to 70 pages (35 photos). Sometimes several children contributed to the text: for example, where two children took photos of the same thing, they may have selected the photo to be included and both contributed to the text.

The photos and the accompanying text have been analysed in terms of the subjects covered and the nature of the comments made about those subjects. Table 1 indicates the general areas covered by photos and comments, as well as the frequency of these.

Table 1. Subjects and frequencies of photos and comments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Sites*</th>
<th>Photos No (%) Examples</th>
<th>Comments No (%) Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rules</td>
<td></td>
<td>There were no photos specifically about rules. Rules were discussed in the context of 31 (30%) photos.</td>
<td>37 (14%) Not allowed to run Not allowed on verandah Not allowed out-of-bounds Play quietly in the play area Don’t play with water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The classroom</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>31 (30%) What it looks like Teacher’s desk Children’s work Computer Play area</td>
<td>36 (13%) Children’s work Where the classroom is What you do in the classroom Where to put bags What the teacher does Merit system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playground</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10 (10%) Climbing equipment Sandpit</td>
<td>12 (5%) Know where it is Know what to do Have fun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School buildings and surrounds</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14 (14%) Lining-up areas Garbage bins Other classrooms</td>
<td>8 (3%) Other classrooms 'Big kids’ areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toilets/bubblers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10 (10%) Girls toilets Boys toilets Bubblers</td>
<td>9 (3%) Know where to go Know where to get a drink Know where to wash hands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plants/grass areas</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7 (7%) Trees Playing fields</td>
<td>6 (2%) Look after plants Avoid running into them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5 (5%) Building ‘Magic eye’</td>
<td>9 (3%) What you do How to get there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>Sites*</td>
<td>Photos No (%) Examples</td>
<td>Comments No (%) Examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canteen</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3 (3%) Canteen building</td>
<td>7 (3%) Know where to go</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sick bay</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3 (3%) Inside the sick bay</td>
<td>8 (3%) For when you get hurt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7 (7%) Friends Teacher</td>
<td>7 (3%) Who they are Teacher marking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-bounds</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5 (5%) Road Primary area</td>
<td>2 (1%) Where it is You get hurt there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2 (2%) Building</td>
<td>4 (2%) Go there to find teacher Where to go when you get hurt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bus stop</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2 (2%) Bus stop</td>
<td>3 (1%) Know where to go For when you go on excursions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Church Lost property Fire drill area Elevator</td>
<td>10 (4%) Jesus lives there Know where it is Just pretend Who can use it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TOTAL** 103 268

* indicates the number of sites where photos/comments related to this subject were taken.

**Discussion**

Each of the books is specific to the school and community context. For example, children from the Catholic school were keen to include a photo of the church, as it is an important part of their school experience as well as their community life. Children at the school located in country NSW photographed the bus stop for the same reason. The children have accessed these books often, just as they accessed the photos which had been downloaded onto classroom computers. The books have become important reading material in the classes, both for shared-book and individual experiences. They have also become resources that can be shared with parents and teachers as they consider new groups of children starting school.

There were other, less obvious results, including an increasing respect within the school communities, and among families, for children's competence. In all cases, children were competent in the ways in which they accessed the available technology and their ability to share matters of importance with others.

The photos and the text recorded by the children represent the things that mattered to them. They do not claim to be representative of all sites or children. Rather, they indicate that young children are competent social actors, aware of their context and their ability to influence as well as to be influenced by that context.

The children are actively making sense of the people, experiences and expectations around them. The results also indicate that what matters varies in different contexts. While it is tempting to discuss the results in terms of similarities only, the differences indicate that contexts play a major role in determining children's focus.
As in previous reports from the Starting School Research Project (Dockett & Perry, 1999a, 1999b), the children in this project spoke often about the rules they needed to know in order to manage the school environment. They knew a great many rules and indicated that anyone starting school needed to become familiar with these. Only comments that were explicitly stated as rules are included in the ‘Rules’ category in Table 1. Comments such as Don’t run in the classroom and You’re not allowed in the staff room doors have been coded as rules. Other comments such as You have to read and You hang your bag on your hook have been coded as classroom activities, rather than rules. This is a fine distinction and results in a conservative estimate of the rules emphasis.

While several children took photos of and commented about their friends, this was not an overwhelming focus. This is, in contrast to conversational data from these and other children, where friends were noted as a very important part of school life. There are several possible explanations for the lack of photos of friends. First, children were taking photos around the school in small groups, often having been allocated to these groups by their teachers, hence they may not have been with their friends. Second, while children and researchers generally were welcome to take photos of any area of the school, several classroom photos were taken when the class was not present. In some cases, this was to avoid including children for whom parental permission authorising involvement in the project had not been received, or children who indicated that they did not wish to be involved. Third, in at least two of the schools, children demonstrated a fascination with being able to go out of the classroom. Researchers indicated some difficulty in getting children to go back to class, with a range of creative reasons being given by the children for re-taking photos, or checking another area, just in case the new children needed to know about it. This fascination was evident in relation to ‘out-of-bounds’ areas, with researchers noting that they needed a great deal of creativity to avoid being out-of-bounds themselves and, after the photos had been taken, to encourage children to return to their classrooms.

Despite their fascination with outdoor areas, much of what the children felt was important to share with others starting school related to the everyday functioning of the classroom. For example, 30 percent of the photos taken by children relate to their classroom. These include displays of children’s work—so that other children will know how to make it, with the explanation that they (the new children) would be making one next year and they would probably want to know what they look like; photos of the actual classroom—so that they will know where it is; the teacher’s chair—that’s where they sit down and listen to stories; features of the classroom, such as the computer, play area and merit charts; and activities that occur in classrooms—you go to Italian and you get to be classroom manager.

Other areas of particular interest for children were the school surrounds, playgrounds, toilet and bubbler areas and specific function areas such as the library, canteen and sick bay. Comments indicated that it was important to know where these areas were and what occurred in them. For example, it was important to know that you could borrow books from the library, but also important to know about the ‘magic eye’, because the books go across it and it knows you have the book until you bring it back. The canteen was a place to get lunch, but only if your Mum gives you money. The sick bay was important for where it was located, but also for why and how you went there: If you are hurt that’s where you have to go and you go to the teacher and then they take you. You go up to them and you tell them everything and you maybe take a friend with you up to the office in case you might get lost and that. Several areas of the playground were delineated as ‘big kids’ areas, with attendant comments that if the little kids go out there, they are not allowed, they might get bullied, and when you are a big kid they will know where it is. On a more positive note, some children indicated that it was important to know where this big kid’s area was because our buddies are there.

Children’s toilets featured in both photos and comments. Most children pointed out the different areas for girls and boys. Bubblers too, were something that the current children thought the new children would need to know about. Other features of school life that were important included the plants and grass – for both environmental reasons: [the trees] help us breathe and make us feel as if we are alive and more practical reasons: in case you run into it.
Conclusion

As important as these individual comments are, they illustrate a broader consideration related to the perceived competence of young children and their ability to know what is happening around them and to communicate this to others. In each instance it was clear that these children knew a great deal about themselves and their school, had had a great many experiences and were more than capable of sharing these, especially when asked and when provided with the time, opportunity and purpose to consider and reflect. The purpose of sharing information with children who were soon to start school was important for the children involved: they could understand and relate to this and were happy to share their perspectives as experienced school children. In creating opportunities for children to be active participants in the Starting School Research Project we are committed to listening to children’s voices, learning about what matters to them and making changes that reflect and respond to their concerns and understandings.

Acknowledgement

Our thanks goes to all the children who have given us their time, energy and insights as we have undertaken (with them) the research reported in this paper. We thank Sarah Simpson and Mella Cusack for their involvement and assistance in this project.

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Reseaching with children: Lessons in humility, reciprocity, and community

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I had assumed that my experience as a qualitative researcher accustomed to interviewing adults, and formerly as a teacher of young children, would be an adequate enough basis for undertaking research with children. My first inklings that investigating children's perceptions of their (male) preschool teacher would be far from straightforward surfaced when Bill* (the children's teacher) introduced me to them. He explained to the children that I would be sitting at the drawing and writing table and that I would like them to draw a picture of him, and to tell me about it. 'Perhaps you could draw a picture of me in a pink dress,' he joked.

I settled myself at the table and waited. The few children who approached the table that first morning were more interested in colouring Christmas decorations, the other activity available at the table that day, than in drawing a picture of Bill. 'Bring some novelty pencils tomorrow,' advised Bill, 'You need something to attract their interest'.

More children approached the table the following day, keen to use pencils topped with the plastic dinosaurs I'd hastily bought at the local toyshop the previous afternoon. It was clear, though, that the pencils were the drawcard, not the opportunity to draw and talk about Bill.

On my third day in the centre, I strategically 'reserved' the dinosaur pencils for children who agreed to draw a picture of Bill. He assisted by removing the colouring activity and channelling children toward me. Their 'resistance' was impressive. Sometimes subtle, more often overt, it took the form of rushed, scribbled drawings, multiple versions of Bill in a pink dress, 'silly' talk and 'rough house' play, almost identical comments, or no comments at all. Deflated and dejected, I retreated from the centre at the end of the week with little meaningful data, my stance as researcher severely challenged and disrupted.

A sobering beginning
My first attempt at research with children was indeed a sobering experience (Fasoli, 2001). As the above reconstruction from my research jottings illustrates, I had clearly overlooked many of the theoretical, practical and ethical issues involved (Christensen & James, 2000). In particular, I had failed to appreciate the significance of the 'physical, social, cognitive, and political' differences between adults and children and their implications for my practice as a researcher (Graue & Walsh, 1998, p. 96). As Graue and Walsh point out:

It is not enough to say that one is treating children the way good researchers have always treated adults. It is not that easy. One cannot simply treat children like adults. They are not adults. One must treat them as children, but in a way that adults normally do not treat children. Therein lies the challenge (1998 p. 57).

In this article, I describe how I responded to that challenge when I returned to the centre the following year in the hope of continuing the project. Like others (e.g. Fasoli, 2001; Mayall, 2000; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000) who have written reflexively about their research experiences with children, I believe such accounts can further our collective and individual understandings of how we might more effectively gain insight into children's experiences and perspectives.

The research context
The project was part of a larger investigation of implications of the gender imbalance in the children's
services workforce. To enrich and extend existing data, I sought children's views. Bill, the teacher–director of a 40-place preschool, had participated in earlier phases of the study. He suggested that I talk with children about their perceptions of him as their teacher and the only male member of staff.

The preschool was located in an affluent Sydney suburb and provided a full day (9–3) program for children aged 3–5 years. The older children attended three days per week, the younger children two days. Almost all were from two-parent families of high socio-economic background and spoke English as their first language. Although these demographics were not representative of preschool children generally, speaking with children in this centre offered a particular advantage. Because Bill had previously shared with me his impressions of how he was perceived by, and how he positioned himself, with children and families (Sumsion, 2000), insights into children's own perceptions, constructions and positionings of Bill offered a valuable opportunity for triangulation—provided I could obtain rich and trustworthy data.

**Humility**

Because I could spend only a week in the centre—insufficient time to begin to establish myself as a member of the preschool community—I adopted the stance of a friendly and interested outsider who welcomed the opportunity to talk to and to learn from children. 'I was wondering whether you might be willing to chat with me sometime during the next few days', I said, taking care to leave the unasked question hanging, hoping to avoid engendering in children any sense of compulsion to participate (Hatch, 1990).

My overtures to children were made with humility (Graue & Walsh, 1998), with no expectation that they would want to participate. Any contribution would be a gift, to be acknowledged and, where possible, reciprocated (Roberts, 2000). Being humble meant curbing my impatience, relinquishing my customary preoccupation with accumulating data, fitting in with the children’s rhythms, and valuing their time and agendas above mine.

Being humble also meant leaving decisions about their availability to the children. 'Maybe you might let me know when you have some time free to talk', I said to children who indicated that they would like to be involved, and whose parents had given informed consent. Occasionally, children replied that they could talk now. Sometimes they explained that they wouldn’t have time today, but that they would be happy to participate tomorrow—and almost always made a point of following up. Mostly, they approached me later that day to announce they now had time available.

I also left decisions about location to the children. They usually chose outside spaces where we could sit informally side by side. The inadequacy of my audio-recorder’s microphone to counter environmental sounds precluded taping our conversations, my preferred option. Privileging the children’s ownership of decisions about time and place, however, seemed to signify to children that I was prepared to relinquish some of the power typically assumed by adults.

My overt humility, arguably unusual in adult interactions with children, seemed to contribute to a climate of mutual respect and to enable the children and me to form ‘relationships in which children feel that
they want to participate throughout the research process’ (Christensen & James, 2000, p. 5). Such relationships had been conspicuously absent the previous year. My humility appeared instrumental in negotiating two crucial pivot points—children's acceptance of me as an interested outsider, and their consent to participate in the project. A commitment to reciprocity, as well as humility, seemed essential in nurturing the relationships underpinning these negotiations.

Reciprocity

Gollop (2000) reminds us that, while it is clear to many children that the researcher wants something from them, there is often no tangible or immediate benefit to the children themselves. Consequently, children ‘may lack a sense of personal investment in the process’ (Gollop, p. 19)—as I had found the previous year. Moreover, I was acutely aware that, by asking children about their perceptions of Bill, I was asking for more than their time. I was also asking them to share, with an inquisitive stranger, their insights into the relationships and dynamics that underpinned their preschool community. I felt a responsibility to reciprocate their generosity—but in ways that transcended the tokenistic offerings of novelty dinosaur pencils.

Approaching the children with humility positioned them as expert social actors in their preschool community. While an outsider in the preschool, I was an ‘expert’ member of a research community so exchanging insights into our respective communities and their discourses, dynamics, and practices offered an authentic form of reciprocity. Our exchange acknowledged the children as active and capable contributors to the wider community and to gender equity research, as well as making my role as researcher more visible and accessible to children (Nimmo, 2002). In many ways, through this reciprocal exchange, we created a third community—one centred on the research project.

Community

Wenger (1998) uses the term ‘community of practice’ to refer to those connected by their mutual engagement in a joint enterprise or undertaking, and a shared repertoire of ‘routines, words, tools, ways of doing things . . .’ (p. 83). The children and I were drawn together into a community of practice by our mutual engagement in the project. Our joint enterprise, suggested by me but seemingly eagerly taken up by the children, was the compilation of a book about Bill, consisting of children's drawings and accompanying text reporting the children's interview responses. Through this joint enterprise, we developed a rich shared repertoire of practice. Three aspects of our shared repertoire seemed particularly important: our complementary contributions, our tools, and our rituals and routines.

Complementary contributions

Our shared repertoire reflected and honoured our complementary expertise and contributions to the project. In the context of the preschool, my expertise as an interviewer counted for little, as the children were unfamiliar with interview conventions. Inviting them to draw pictures of Bill helped to mediate this unfamiliarity and avoided placing children in the position of being asked ‘to participate unpractised in interviews’ (O’Kane, 2000, p. 140, citing James, 1995). Drawing, for most children, unlike most adults, is a known and comfortable medium, and one in which they have recognised expertise. Just as the children were able to draw on their expertise in portraying Bill, I was able to call on my expertise as interviewer to scaffold the children’s conversations about their portrayals of Bill. Our recognition of our complementary expertise and contributions, seemingly implied by the mutually respectful, slightly formal nature of our interactions and conversations, appeared to engender a shared commitment to the project.

Tools

Our tools—two attractively coloured clipboards that I provided for children to rest their paper on when drawing pictures of Bill—seemed an equally important aspect of our shared repertoire. As Wenger (1998) explains, ‘having a tool to perform an activity changes the nature of that activity’ (p. 59). Unlike the gimmicky pencils of the previous year, the clipboards were functional tools that conferred on their users the status of research participants, and provided conversational openings for the children and myself to talk about what this role might mean and involve. The scarcity of the clipboards—frequently, more children wanted to use them than there were clipboards available—enhanced
their value and transformed participation in the project into a highly regarded activity. Children's choice of the colour clipboard and paper they wished to use became part of the rituals and routines that underpinned our shared repertoire.

Rituals and routines

Choice was key to these rituals and routines. For example, when both children using the clipboards indicated that they were ready to talk about their drawings, I offered them a choice. Would they like to wait until there was an opportunity to talk about their drawing? Or would they prefer me to let them know when the other child had finished talking to me? At every step of the process, I was careful to ask children's permission to proceed with our research conversation—‘Would you mind if I asked you some questions about your drawing?’; ‘Do you mind if I write down what you tell me?’; ‘Would it be okay if I asked you three / two / one more questions?’; ‘Is there anything else you would like me to write?’ Because these procedural questions gave children the choice of bringing our conversation to a close, I believe they offered children some sense of control of the interview process.

They also alerted those children who were drawing alongside to a sense of the shape and conventions of the interview process. Asking these procedural questions in the same sequence enabled children to anticipate the general conversational direction and assisted in familiarising the unfamiliar. The ritual that developed around these questions (and that perhaps can be glimpsed in the excerpts below) added a certain solemnity that the children seemed to welcome as an important aspect of our shared repertoire of our community of practice.

A third aspect of our shared rituals and routines involved revisiting the book of drawings about Bill and accompanying text. As the book began to shape, many children showed interest in returning to the drawings and responses they had contributed. As we chatted about their original contribution, I invited them to add to it if they wished. Sometimes children chose to draw another picture but did not want to participate in another interview. Again, I was careful to leave the choice with the children. ‘Would you like me to ask you questions again, or are you getting bored with that?’ Some children were definite about not wanting to engage in another conversational interview, others clearly valued the opportunity to respond to statements they had found difficult, or had chosen not to respond to the previous day. Cara (4.3), for example, seemed to find it difficult to elaborate when we first talked about whether she thought Bill was a good teacher.

12/12/01

Researcher: Is it okay to ask you two more questions?
Cara: Yes
Researcher: Well, the first one is, do you think Bill is a good teacher?
Cara: Yes.
Researcher: Okay, the last question is, Why do you think that?
Cara: I don't know.

13/12/01

Researcher: And here (tracing with her finger the text of yesterday's transcribed conversation) you said you thought Bill was a good teacher, but you weren't sure why.
Cara: I know why.
Researcher: Do you?
Cara: Coz I like him.
Researcher: Why is that?
Cara: Coz he helps me paint. And he reads books to us.

Some children chose a different focus from the previous day; others chose to elaborate on themes developed during the first interview. When I first asked Tim (4.9) whether there was anything at preschool that he especially liked to do with Bill, he replied, ‘I help him with the hosing. I play with him and help him a lot. I follow him around because sometimes I’m shy’. The following day, Tim elaborated on this theme of Bill's companionship and emotional support. ‘He's my friend. Sometimes, I get a bit scared. I ask Bill to help’. The ritual of revisiting the book seemed to assist in generating richer, layered and therefore ultimately more trustworthy data.
The active role taken by many children in recruiting other participants was a further aspect of our shared routines and rituals. At the conclusion of each interview I asked children whether they thought any of their friends might be interested in talking to me and, if so, whether they would be happy to introduce me. The children's engagement throughout various phases of the research process, from participant recruitment to revisiting their contributions, seemed instrumental in generating a sense of collaborative engagement in and commitment to the project that characterised our community of practice. Through these processes I successfully negotiated with the children their continued commitment to the project—a third crucial pivot point.

**Concluding comments**

This article has explored how a sense of humility, reciprocity and community seemed to contribute to establishing productive research relationships with children and in negotiating potentially problematic pivot points arising from power differentials between adults and children. It leaves many questions unanswered, however. How did the children who participated in the project construe my stance and my practices as a researcher? Did they feel part of a community of practice, as I have suggested? What sense did they make of the project, my interactions with them and the processes in which we engaged? Such questions warrant investigation (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000).

Indeed, we still have much to learn about researching with children. It is encouraging, therefore, to see the proliferation of thought-provoking questions emerging in the literature. Many of these questions are unsettling, for they challenge our assumptions about ourselves as researchers and our practices. Dockett, Simpson, Cusack and Perry (2002) citing Jipson and Jipson (2001), for example, ask whether we should rethink our customary focus on what ‘what matters to the researcher’ and instead ‘ground the research in what matters to children’? (p. 8). Yet, to what extent, I wonder, are we really willing to relinquish our power as researchers and adults as we seek children's perspectives?

As I ponder these and other questions, I wonder whether I have glossed over issues of power, and the inevitability of the continuing power differentials between adults and children in our current social context. Did the children truly feel they had a choice about participating, or did they interpret what I perceived to be humble overtures as yet another adult directive? Was the use of clipboards a manipulative way of enticing the children's participation? Was our ‘joint enterprise’ as collaborative as I have implied, given that the suggestion about compiling a book about Bill came from me, not the children? I wonder, too, why I gave the children so little information about the project, or the rationale behind it. Could my failure to do so mean that our reciprocity was less robust than I have portrayed? Had I explained the project in more depth, would the children have thought it worthwhile? If not, then whose purposes was the project really serving? What were the benefits for the children of participating? For what reasons, and for whom, did they think they were undertaking the project? We need to continue conversations that explore such questions if we are to address the challenges of researching with children.

* a pseudonym

**Acknowledgement**

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he more he looked inside the more Piglet wasn’t there: What adopting a sociocultural perspective can help us see.

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Unlike the Piagetian notion of children actively constructing their own understandings, sociocultural theory emphasises that it is through involvement in activities with others that development occurs. Thus, it is important to consider the contexts in which children are developing; the socioculturally relevant activities within those contexts; the participation with, guidance and support of others, and how this changes through involvement in activities and prepares children for future involvement in similar experiences. This article, drawing on research into young children’s understandings of natural phenomena, will illustrate how adopting a sociocultural perspective can present a richer image of what children know, than an approach which relies solely on using ‘scientific’ methods to uncover and analyse understandings.

Introduction

One day when Pooh Bear had nothing else to do, he thought he would do something, so he went round to Piglet’s house to see what Piglet was doing. It was still snowing as he stumped over the white forest track, and he expected to find Piglet warming his toes in front of his fire, but to his surprise he saw that the door was open, and the more he looked inside the more Piglet wasn’t there (Milne, 1974, p.1).

When we, as teachers and researchers, look, what do we see? Do we expect to see Piglet warming his toes – and is this in fact what we do see? Or is it that, like Pooh, the more we look the more we understand that what we expected to see is not there? Indeed, the more we look, the more we see remarkable things that we never noticed before.

As early childhood professionals within Australia, many of us developed our understanding of early childhood education from the perspective of acknowledging the importance of the ‘individual’ child, who passes through universal, sequential stages of development, such as those expounded by Piaget (1973), or in Developmentally Appropriate Practices (Bredenkamp, 1987). However, in some circumstances, this has resulted in a tendency to ‘see’ only certain things when we look at children, such as when they begin to show interest in peers, how well they can put pegs into a board, or when they ‘begin to understand turn-taking’. This reflects a perspective in which: We provide materials such as blocks and pegs and we keep checklists in which we mark off whether each child can or cannot put pegs into a hole, sort blocks or take turns.

The focus is on the individual child who, irrespective of context, follows a standard sequence of biological stages that constitute a path to full realisation or a ladder-like progression to maturity … Despite frequent talk about a holistic perspective, in this construction the child is frequently reduced to separate and measurable categories, such as social development, intellectual development, motor development. Consequently, processes which are very complex and interrelated in everyday life are isolated from one another and viewed dichotomously, instead of viewing them as intrinsically related functions that all work
together in the production of change (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999, p. 46).

This approach derives from a long institution tradition of research that informs early childhood theory and practice. Traditionally, such research, dominated by preconceived ideas of what children are and know, has been conducted primarily by Euro-North American developmental psychologists, who have scientifically constructed powerful normative models of development (Woodhead, 2000).

What has resulted in both teaching and research is the adoption of a somewhat deficit view of many children – those who have not reached a particular 'universal' milestone or achieved a nominated outcome, or those whose life experiences do not match those of the dominant culture. Thus, there is much concerning the diversity, complexity and richness of children's lives that is overlooked. In an attempt to make children 'fit the boxes' of norms we may lose sight of what is really occurring in their lives, and no longer notice that the door is open and Piglet is no longer there.

Increasingly, however, challenges are being made to the concept of the 'universality' of childhood and children. Many are drawing attention to the diversity and complexity of childhood, and disputing the idea that decontextualised, universal norms, rules and 'truths' based on Euro-North American or Minority world views are relevant for all children (see, for example, Penn, 2000; Woodhead, 2000; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001). Authors such as Rogoff (1990), for example, have suggested that a contextual approach to development allows for multiple directions and courses of growth, and that 'development involves progress towards local goals and valued skills' (Rogoff, 1990, p. 57). Furthermore, the relatively recent interest in the ideas of Vygotsky has provided a useful contrast to the 'universalist' framework interpreted from Piaget’s work, while postmodern perspectives have been influential in examining some of the existing assumptions about childhood (see, for example, Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999).

However, despite the range of perspectives appearing in early childhood research and pedagogy, the ideas of Piaget have remained influential in early childhood science research, particularly where related to children’s ideas in science topics such as the earth, the sun, and the water cycle (see, for example, Jones & Lynch, 1987; Baxter, 1989; Sharp, 1999).

This article, drawing on research into young children’s ideas about natural phenomena, will attempt to demonstrate what might be gained by how adopting a sociocultural rather than developmental perspective in research. That acknowledges when the influences of children's contexts, and the people, values, beliefs and experiences within those contexts are acknowledged, can present a richer image of what children know is revealed. This method contrasts with an approach which relies solely on using ‘scientific’ methods to uncover and analyse understandings. In effect, it is about an attempt attempting to adopt a method of research with children rather than on children.

Sociocultural perspectives

Sociocultural theory originates in the work of Vygotsky and his Russian colleagues in the early decades of the twentieth century (Woodhead, 2000). It is an approach that emphasises relationships between people, contexts, actions, meanings, communities and cultural histories (Edwards, 2000).

According to Woodhead (2000), every child is born into a particular sociocultural context, and the most significant features of this context are the people with whom the child establishes close relationships—usually family. Each child grows and develops within these particular particular contexts and takes on the particular understandings, patterns of behaviour, skill at using specific tools and artefacts, belief systems and ‘ways of doing things’ of significant people within their cultural setting. That is, each child’s development and learning is culturally constructed, tied to its particular context and the important goals and values of that community (Rogoff, 1990), and

…one cannot understand what the individual is doing without understanding how it fits with ongoing events.
It is not as if the individual could be taken outside of the activity to have their development analysed. They are involved—part of the activity (Rogoff, 1998, p.688).

Significantly, therefore, unlike the Piagetian notion of children actively constructing their own understandings, the sociocultural perspective emphasises that it is through involvement in activities with others that development occurs. For researchers and teachers, the implication is to examine more than just the ‘individual’ child growing and developing through the predictable, sequential stages of the early childhood years. It is important to consider the contexts in which children are developing, the socioculturally relevant activities within those contexts, the participation with, guidance and support of others, and how this changes through involvement in activities and prepares children for future involvement in similar experiences. Individual development, therefore, can be perceived as both contributing to and constituted by the sociocultural experiences in which children participate (Rogoff, 1998).

This contrasts with social influence approaches that ‘maintain a focus on the individual as the basic unit of analysis and examine the influence of “outside” social forces’ (Rogoff, 1998, p. 692).

Researchers adopting a social influence perspective examine the external influences that impact on individual children’s development, while researchers employing a sociocultural approach consider how children’s understanding and roles transform as they participate in sociocultural activities (Rogoff, 1998).

Using a sociocultural approach in research—one example: What happens to the sun at night?

In 1999 I began a study of young children’s (aged 3–8 years) ideas about natural phenomena such as the sun, moon, rain, and clouds. The research was undertaken in the preschool and junior primary classes of an independent, co-educational school in the outer south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne, Australia. Prior to the commencement of the study I spent a number of months acting as a participant observer within the school, getting to know the children, teachers and the school and preschool contexts. The data-gathering methods consisted of informal conversations, with the children completing drawings as we talked.

At that time (and since), most of the similar studies undertaken focused on older children. A ‘deficiency model’ of young children’s thinking, particularly in science, was common. For example, young children have been said to have misconceptions (Watson, 1997), alternative views (Sprod & Jones, 1997), erroneous concepts (Stepans & Kuehn, 1985), preconceptions (Watson, 1997), naïve ideas (Stepans & Kuehn, 1985), or untutored innocence (Russell, Bell, Longden & McGuigan, 1993). In analysing children’s ideas, a Piagetian framework was (and, in research in science education, still is) most commonly applied, though social constructivist and social influence approaches are gaining some attention (for example, Driver, Asoko, Leach, Mortimer & Scott, 1998). Children’s statements in response to a series of questions about natural phenomena have been ‘measured’ against pre-existing stages of understanding. In fact, many researchers seem to be saying that it does not matter where children live, their ideas are the same (see, for example, Driver et al; Sharp, 1999). For instance, in terms of beliefs about what happens to the sun when it is night, children’s responses are commonly categorised according to the following types or stages of explanations (described in Table 1): anthropomorphic or animistic, (attributing human characteristics to non-human and inanimate things), religious or magical, covering of the sun, astronomical movements or rotation of the earth (Piaget, 1973; Jones and Lynch, 1987; Baxter, 1989; Leeds, 1992; Fleer, 1997). Had I, too, used a traditional approach in my research, and focused on looking only for what I expected children to say, I could have corroborated these findings, as demonstrated by the following extracts (Table 1) from children’s responses to the question, ‘What happens to the sun at night?’
Table 1: Simple categorisation of responses to the question, ‘What happens to the sun at night?’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category: Anthropomorphic or animistic (attributing human characteristics to non-human and inanimate things)</th>
<th>Religious, magical or mystical (e.g. God; it ‘just happens’)</th>
<th>Covering (e.g. by clouds, moon, or by night)</th>
<th>Astronomical movements (e.g. the sun moves around the Earth; the Earth goes round the sun; the sun moves up and down)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Examples:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paula (6.7):</td>
<td>Liam (5.4):</td>
<td>Danielle (4.2):</td>
<td>Lochie (4.6):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It goes down to sleep.</td>
<td>… Um … God makes the sun go down.</td>
<td>… Um … um … it, it goes down.</td>
<td>It goes down on the other side of the world, then the moon comes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neil (7.11):</td>
<td>Leyton (5.8):</td>
<td>Jessica (5.7):</td>
<td>Phillip (7.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(As he is drawing) God ties some string on to it.</td>
<td>God pulls it down.</td>
<td>… Well … it really is dark … and den (sic) the sun closely moves into de (sic) um, water, ‘cos that how it goes …</td>
<td>… the sun’s going round it … So it gets to different parts of the world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… And it will go back down into his bed … And then, this is where he is at the moment … having a sleep … So he’ll come up to here … and then … keep awake.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Paddy (4.3):</td>
<td>Alicia (6.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>… The moon is going … um … to cover the sun …</td>
<td>Well, what the sun does is, it just goes down, and goes across, and comes up again.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, focusing only on certain aspects of the discussions in order to categorise categorising children’s responses in this manner, focusing on what it might be expected children would say, presents a very simplistic view of the conversations I conducted with the children, their participation in the discussions activity, and the depth and richness of their ideas, so I have rejected this approach in my data analysis. What has been omitted are the vibrant and extensive conversational exchanges, collaboration and elaboration of ideas, sharing of roles in the activity, and reciprocal guiding and leading that at times occurred between child and researcher in attempts to reach some sort of shared understanding, as well as valuable and sometimes ostensibly insignificant contextual factors.

In fact, many of the children’s explanations in this study could not be easily and neatly categorised, as they appeared to hold a number of views at the same time, as illustrated in. In the following short extract of a much longer conversation with Charlie (7.3):

Charlie’s (7.3) explanation appears to fall within several categories.

JR: Charlie, can you tell me, what do you think happens to the sun at night-time?

Charlie: Ah … it goes away in the clouds? (Covering)

JR: Mmmm.

Charlie: Ah … and it goes over to the other side of the world (crosses one arm over the other). (Astronomical movement)

JR: Mmmm?

Charlie: … Mmmm, to another country … Mmmm … So when it goes …

JR: Mmmm?

Charlie: The moon goes over it. (Covering)

JR: Mmm?

Charlie: And then the sun goes over to the other world (crosses arms again). (Astronomical movement)

JR: Mm-huh.

Charlie: No, the other side of the world (crosses arms again).
JR: Mmmm?

Charlie: … Mmmm …

JR: So you said first of all … something about a cloud?

Charlie: The cl … the clouds go over it, and the moon comes out … (Covering)

Traditional approaches to discovering young children's ideas in science tend to isolate the individual and decontextualise thinking in order to uncover certain accepted scientific views. However, research from a sociocultural perspective recognises that cognition is a collaborative process.

Charlie: And then…the…maybe the sun comes…over if it's a sunny day…

JR: Mm-huh.

Charlie: And the sun will stay there for eight hours, and then it keeps on changing.

JR: So what if it's not a sunny day?

Charlie: Mm…clouds go over it (Covering)

Therefore, when researching children's ideas from this viewpoint the research techniques and data collection measures need to reflect the same orientation as the guiding theoretical framework. Thus, techniques to consider when researching children's ideas include:

• developing familiarity with contexts;
• recognising that ideas are inextricably related to contexts;
• recognising children as competent participants, and allowing them to set the direction and pace of the conversation;
• ignoring time constraints;
• anticipating and acknowledging the unexpected in how they participate;
• addressing the inevitable power relationships that occur in any research situation involving young children and adults;
• examining the taken-for-grantedness of the traditional question-and-answer format of interviews; and
• analysing 'ways of doing things' in research that can impact upon relationships.

In so doing, like Pooh, the more one examines some of those assumptions the more one can be surprised at what is revealed. The adoption of a more formal approach to the research may have resulted in my overlooking many important factors (including some of the following) that are often ignored in interviews or conversations with children, but which serve to highlight that deficiencies lie in traditional research approaches rather than in children's thinking.

What became very apparent was the important contextual factors in children's thinking, but which are too often dismissed in research as producing 'incorrect' or 'naïve' views, or as being irrelevant. These included shared understandings (as opposed to knowledge held by the child alone), the impact of traditions and religious belief systems, apparent wandering away from the topic of the conversation (which often proved not to be off the topic), the use of singing, drawing, and other culturally appropriate 'tools' that children might use to organise their thoughts, and the desire on the part of children to have adults understand their perspective. These are more than factors that influence thinking. Rather, they transform thinking. As such, they illustrate the difference noted by Rogoff (1998) between sociocultural and social influence approaches.

Too frequently researchers reject certain ideas put forward by children as being 'mistaken' or 'wrong'. Yet, can we dismiss particular views, such as those given by Ollie (5.6) in the following extract, when they are the same as those held by others within the child's community and are actively 'taught' to the child? They are important beliefs—scientific or not—within that particular community or cultural group, and are 'learned' through participation in socioculturally relevant experiences.

Ollie: We-ell, I could know this … The Earth always goes around and you can't feel it.

JR: What makes it go around?

Ollie: I don't know … First … well … well … maybe God makes it.

JR: Mm-huh. Maybe.

Ollie: ‘Cos he made the Earth.

JR: Mm-huh. Mm-huh … And … if you can't feel it, how do you know it goes round?
Ollie: I know ... just a bit ... if it stops, everyone will go off.

JR: Mm-huh.

Ollie: Maybe...it's already turning like this ... We-ell, Heaven's ... all around the Earth.

JR: Mm-huh.

Ollie: ... Heaven is all around the Earth.

JR: And who told you that? How do you know that?

Ollie: ... Well, my Mummy did ... Heaven's usu ... and my Mummy can ... tell you some ... my Mummy can tell me other things, and I'll be able to tell you.

JR: Okay.

This excerpt (part of a much longer conversation) also illustrates how children can be eager to lead adults to some sort of 'common ground' or shared understandings, with the comment '...my Mummy can tell me other things, and I'll be able to tell you'. This also was apparent earlier in the conversation when Ollie had been singing *Stand By Me*, recorded by Ben E. King (Lieber, Stoller & King, 1998), and having murmured the following lines, he exclaimed, 'See, that's part!'

When the night has come, and the land is dark, And the moon is the only light we see, No I won’t be afraid, no I won’t be afraid, Just as long as you stand, stand by me.

It is acknowledged that these examples and limited discussion may be specific only within the narrow context in which the research was conducted. However, from my study I have become conscious of the amount we can learn by looking at aspects such as how roles and responsibilities coordinate and change during the course of an activity, what community or contextual factors are integral to the experience, and who and what particular types of research methods are privileging.

Most importantly, we need to acknowledge the relevance of all that children are saying and doing—not just the anticipated (but frequently disembedded) responses that happen to fit what is already known and expected. As Rogoff has suggested: '... the point is not to try to dissect individuals apart from sociocultural activity, but to try to understand their roles in, contributions to, and changes through the sociocultural activities in which they participate. (1998, p. 695)

Edwards (2000) warns of the dangers of closed communities of practice that are forever recycling the old and tired knowledge. It is time for more early childhood educators (as opposed to well as developmental psychologists) to engage in research with young children. The door is open, and the more we look inside, the more we may find that Piglet, as we expect to see him (warming his toes), isn't there!

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References


Research with children: A rich glimpse into the world of childhood

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I feel angry when my brother is hurting me and he, and I'm tired and I'm having a sleep and Jason just says 'Matthew, Matthew, look at this'. My face gets angry. [Makes face and clenches fist]. That's when they get even pinker. That's what happens to my arms when I get angry (Matthew, age 5—name has been changed).

Research in early childhood education generally involves children in some capacity, whether it be how they respond to various pedagogical initiatives, how their parents or teachers interact with them or what understandings they bring to a situation. Unfortunately, in the past, much of this research has given children limited voice; positioning them as innocent, incompetent and in need of an adult voice to confirm their place in the research. This article examines my research into young children's emotions, which suggests to me that children's voices can be powerful and possibly richer than those of adults acting on behalf of children.

Introduction

In the past, children and childhood have been viewed from three dominant perspectives: that of the child as the 'embodiment of evil', as 'innocent' and as 'miniature adult' (Woodrow, 1999). In recent times, two other images of the child have emerged: the child as adult commodity and the child as agentic. These images will be discussed below. I began my research into children's emotions, with the common early childhood belief that children are innocent and must be protected by more capable others (teachers and parents) who take responsibility for them (Fasoli, 2001; Gibson, 1998). While including children through a focal group interview, I considered teachers and parents to be the better informants. During the course of my research, I found that the voices of children often resonated more clearly and fully than those of their adult counterparts when sharing their experiences of emotions. In the section, 'Findings', I share some of my glimpses into the world of childhood that were contributed by the children themselves. Through my research, my conception of the child as innocent was replaced by that of the child as agentic and capable of participating as a reliable informant in the research process.

Images of childhood

The image of the child as evil stemmed from prehistoric and early Christian beliefs that children were evidence of their parents' intimacy, and so the embodiment of original sin. With this belief, infanticide and abuse were common and justified practice (De Mause, 1982, in Branscombe, Castle, Dorsey, Surbeck & Taylor, 2000). From the 4th century through to the Middle Ages, a second image emerged, that of the child as innocent, or 'child-saint'. Based on Christian beliefs that children possessed souls, this new image produced the binary concepts of the child as innocent alongside the child as evil, a duality that persisted over the centuries (Branscombe et al., 2000). As a consequence, forms of abandonment gradually replaced infanticide (Branscombe et al., 2000). A third image of childhood, that of the child as miniature adult, emerged some time after the late Middle Ages. Distinctions between childhood and adulthood became blurred as adults and children lived and worked side by side. As Aries notes, 'In medieval society, the idea of childhood did not exist… [childhood] corresponds to an awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult, even the young adult' (1962, in Cleverly & Phillips, 1988, p. 6).
Despite this seeming parity, adults still searched for ways of controlling children and making them obedient. These three dominant images: the child as evil, the child as innocent and the child as miniature adult have persisted through the centuries and can be seen in recent and current practices. The child as evil is reinforced by rules and disciplinary practices meant to keep children ‘in line’, such as mandated behaviour and dress codes and forms of classroom grouping based on behaviour management issues (Woodrow, 1999). Research from this perspective positions children as objects to be studied for the purpose of finding methods to achieve conformity and ease of teaching practice.

The view of the child as innocent has dominated early childhood pedagogy for more than a century, beginning with Froebel’s late 19th century notion of the Kindergarten or garden of children, where children were seen as seeds to be planted and cultivated (Branscombe et al., 2000; Morrison, 2001). The behaviourist movement of the early 20th century also assumed the view of the child as innocent and a blank slate, able to be moulded to adult standards through forms of reinforcement (Morrison, 2001). In research, this image of the child once again denies children a voice, allowing adults to speak and give consent on their behalf (Fasoli, 2001). While the Industrial Revolution promoted the image of the child as miniature adult, with children made to work long hours in mines and factories in harsh and unrelenting conditions (Branscombe et al., 2000), the image did not die with the 1930s enforcement of child labour laws, but is apparent in educational practices today (Woodrow, 1999). School curricula that push children to compete and achieve on standardised tests and Piagetian notions of childhood as steps towards maturity reinforce this image. From this perspective, neither child nor adult are seen as powerful; merely as mechanisms to reproduce social order (Woodrow, 1999).

In recent times, other images of the child have emerged. One of them is the child as adult commodity. This image is seen in calendar pictures of children, in child pornography, and in children being conceived for bone marrow matches and, in some parts of the world, being sold for body parts. In this image, the child is objectified and has no agency and the adult acts in what may or may not be the best interests of the child (Woodrow, 1999).

But another image of childhood has also emerged, largely through the work of the Reggio Emilia movement in Italy and through the ‘new sociology of childhood’ (James & Prout, 1990, in Corsaro, 1997). This is the image of the child as a capable and competent agent who appropriates and reproduces aspects of their culture through interaction with others (Corsaro, 1997). This approach rejects the view of the child as passive and innocent (Fasoli, 2001; Woodrow, 1999), asserting that childhood innocence is a socially constructed phenomenon (James & Prout, 1990, in Corsaro, 1997) that limits the opportunities we give children to explore and develop in the ‘real world’. It reconceptualises childhood as a period of active participation in, and of making meaning of, new experiences. The agentic child is seen as possessing capabilities and competencies to meet new challenges with curiosity and motivation, not unlike those of older children or adults. In this framework, adults—teachers, parents, researchers—are constructed as co-learners who negotiate, challenge and guide through reflection on their own experiences, values and practices, and who share power with children (Woodrow, 1999).

Viewing the child as capable and competent has a number of implications for early childhood pedagogy and research. This paper focuses on the area of research with young children, using the frame of the child as agentic, or capable and competent. From this perspective, research is seen as implemented with children rather than about them. Power is negotiated between the researcher and child participants in data collection (Fasoli, 2001), and children’s voices are given serious consideration in how data is interpreted to make meaning of the research questions and how these interpretations are presented to the reader.

**Research with children**

Coming from an early childhood teaching background, like many researchers who conduct research involving young children, it is often difficult to shift from the view of the child as innocent to this new way of thinking. Children have often been studied through their teachers’ and parents’ perspectives, this being justified as adults possessing more knowledge and experience as well as larger vocabularies and therefore being better informants. This is problematic, not only as it denies children
a voice, but also because teachers and parents have been subjected to views of childhood that colour their interpretations of situations. Early childhood pedagogy has for many years been based on the image of the child as innocent and in need of adult direction (Fasoli, 2001). As Gibson notes:

*Early childhood education ideologies tend to be shaped by and resonate with the child-rearing beliefs held by a social group, and they motivate teaching practices for inducting children who are novice students into a classroom community and for teaching them to be 'good' students* (1998, p. 370).

On occasions when children’s voices have been included in research, it has often been to give researchers ‘cute’ quotations on which to base titles of their articles or to embellish the ‘more informed’ adult views discussed in their publications. My initial inclusion of children’s thoughts on their experiences and expression of basic emotions probably held this perspective (see ‘Procedures’ below). I formulated questions for parents and teachers, and finally created a focal group interview for children, not expecting much of a response but in some way wanting to include children. At best I hoped that children would recognise some of the emotion words and confirm that they had experienced the emotion.

What I found was that children described experiencing a range of emotions, often not apparent to their parents and teachers; and that their descriptions of experiences and expressions of emotions not only confirmed their understanding of the emotion, but also enriched the data collected by this research. Matthew’s example (see ‘Abstract’) shows an understanding of a situation that triggers the emotion of anger, as well as how he demonstrates the emotion to others. Matthew’s mother confirmed that he had experienced anger, but Matthew’s teacher reported that she had not perceived this emotion in Matthew. While it may be the case that children are discouraged from showing their anger in public places such as preschools, it may also be the case that the teacher was unaware of how Matthew demonstrated the emotion.

What a researcher chooses to ‘hear’ and how it is interpreted are determined largely by the researcher’s subjectivity (Gibson, 1998). With often a large mass of data collected, decisions must be made about what information fits the purpose of the research and the conceptual framework and what is superfluous (Miles & Huberman, 1994). MacNaughton’s and Smith’s timely reminder that ‘our choices affect whose voice is heard in our work and whose voice is silenced’ (2001, p. 35) echoes this concern with how we listen to and give power to informants’ voices. This can be a conscious, predetermined process or can emerge, as it did in my research, from the data presented by participants.

**Procedures**

My research investigated the presence of eight basic emotions in preschool-aged children and how these emotions are demonstrated by the child. It also looked more closely at the emotion of fear, including how teachers and parents respond to children’s fears. For the purpose of this paper, I am focusing on the recognition and description of basic emotions, through examining interview forms and transcripts of Parent, Teacher, and Focal Group (children’s) interviews to show how much richer the data became by giving children a voice in describing basic emotions, what caused them, and how they are expressed.

Parents and teachers were given a written checklist, which asked whether eight basic emotions (happiness, sadness, surprise, fear, excitement, disgust, interest and anger), chosen because they were frequently described in the literature as innate (Sorin, 2001), had been observed in the focal child. They were instructed to tick ‘yes’, ‘no’ or ‘unsure’ and were given a section in which to comment. Sample items included:

This child:

- Has been happy for various reasons
- Has shown anger when things haven’t gone his/her way
- Has been disgusted by something she/he experienced

Focal group interviews were entirely verbal and began by asking children the following open-ended questions: ‘What is a feeling?’ and ‘What feelings do you have?’ These questions were followed by specific questions focusing on each of the eight emotions, asking the child:

Do you ever feel (happy, sad, etc.)?
If so, what makes you feel (happy, sad, etc.)? When you feel (happy, sad, etc.), how do you show it so that other people know?

Findings
I debated putting the open-ended questions into the Focal Group interview as they seemed too difficult for children aged 3 to 5 to answer. In many cases, this assumption was supported. However, the children who did attempt to answer these questions provided a variety of responses that indicated different levels of understanding of the concept. Children and adults who participated in this research are all referred to here by pseudonyms. When asked, ‘What is a feeling?’ children’s responses included:

Lenny (4 years): When something feels.
McKenzie (4 years): If you get hit and you tell a teacher.
Cameron (5 years): When you’re sad. Sad and happy and angry and surprised.
Janelle (4 years): If someone’s sad.
Larry (5 years): When someone hits you.

Responses to the question, ‘What feelings do you have?’ included:

Michelle (5 years): My own feelings.
James (4 years): I have feelings about monsters.
Jordan (4 years): Six.
Clare (3 years): [made a ‘sad’ facial expression].

The above responses indicate that these children are developing their understandings of basic emotions, including situations that trigger emotions, and that emotions are internal, numerous and can be expressed through facial expressions.

Most children reported experiencing a wide range of emotions, and a number described circumstances in which they experienced the emotion and how they showed the emotion. Camille (3 years) reported that she has experienced ‘interest’, adding, ‘Tigers make me interested.’ Many children described situations or events that trigger the eight basic emotions. These included:

Avral (4 years): [I feel sad] sometimes, when I have bad dreams. It makes me cry.

Avral’s mother also reported that Avral had been sad for various reasons, but did not identify situations that made her feel sad. Her teacher, however, reported that Avral became sad ‘when others won’t play with her’. Aidan described a situation that made him sad:

Aidan (4 years): [I feel sad] when Holly (sister) snatches my things off me. Holly scratches me, too. If she scratches me, I’ll push her over. ‘Cause I think someone pushed me over and I think I cracked my head.

Both Aidan’s mother and his teacher reported that he had been sad. His teacher described a situation that had triggered the emotion in him: ‘He thought he was not allowed to borrow library books, but [he] stopped [being sad] as soon as he was told he could.’ While Aidan’s teacher was able to give an anecdotal example of Aidan demonstrating the emotion of sadness, his own description of a situation that made him sad, like Avral’s description above, added rich detail about situations and events that trigger emotions in young children.

At times, adults, particularly teachers, were unaware of the scope of children’s emotions. This may be because many situations that trigger emotions occur outside of the preschool environment. Without this knowledge, teachers might assume that a child lacks experience and understanding, and may act on behalf of a child who is perfectly capable of acting in her/his own right. This reinforces the image of the child as innocent/evil and in need of direction/restriction from the adult, rather than allowing the child to act and interact competently with the world (Fasoli, 2001).

Children described emotion displays as occurring in a number of ways, from verbalisations to actions. Many of them described facial expression as a means of showing emotion. Neither parents nor teachers noted facial expressions as ways that children display their emotions. Five-year-old Sam said he felt surprised when ‘somebody good gives me a big motorbike or something.’ He went on to describe the facial expression he made to show his surprise: ‘Just put a hole in your mouth and do it.’ He then proceeded to make a face to show surprise. Other
children, rather than looking for words to describe their facial expressions, made a face to reflect the emotion they were describing.

In some cases, children needed my words and explanations to help them to describe their emotions and emotion displays. This is not so much leading children as helping them to assimilate the new concept into their existing schema (Piaget in McDevitt & Ormrod, 2002).

When I asked Cameron, ‘Do you ever feel interested?’ he answered:

Cameron: Yes. Sometimes I think, when I think something's interesting. What does ‘interested’ mean, anyway?

Reesa: It means, something you really want to do. It looks like fun. Or it looks like a book you really want to read or a game you really want to play.

Cameron: Yeah, well, I go, ‘I want to play with that. I want to play with that.’

Reesa: What kinds of things make you feel interested?

Cameron: Playstation.

By offering Cameron an explanation of what ‘interested’ means I was able to help him to relate this new word to his previous experience of the emotion. He was then able to describe a situation that triggered the emotion as well as his way of displaying the emotion. Not only did this enrich my data collection, but it also helped Cameron to expand his emotion understanding.

Conclusion

From my experience researching emotion understanding, it appears that including children's voices in the data collection produced richer and more meaningful data. Their comments helped me to realise that rather than children not understanding emotions, their understandings of these abstract concepts were at varying levels. They were often able to describe emotions, situations that trigger emotions, and emotion displays that were not identified or described by the adults involved in the research. I also found that researching with children went beyond eliciting data, to supporting and scaffolding children's growing understanding of emotion.

Research with children can support our evolving understanding of child growth and development and help us to reconceptualise childhood as a time of powerful and active involvement with the world. But the benefits are not exclusively for the researcher, as children’s understandings can be clarified and scaffolded through the research process. A future direction for this research could be to include children in the process of analysis and meaning-making with the collected data. Their voices could once again help to reconceptualise the child as agentic and provide a rich and insightful glimpse into the world of childhood.

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Bibliography


Eclipsing voice in research with young children

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This article examines two vignettes taken from a research project designed to give voice to children's understandings of equity and social diversity in order to raise questions about how this project potentially reinforced inequities in children's lives. A rhizoanalysis of the vignettes is used to raise questions about how young children perform diverse discourses of 'race'. This paper specifically focuses on the extent to which some of the voices produced in the research colluded in the production of racist and sexist practices. It uses this focus to raise questions generated through the rhizoanalysis for researchers who want to give voice to young children. Specifically, it asks if it is time for researchers to move beyond a concern for children's 'voices' and towards transforming inequitable power relations in our research with them.

Eclipsing voice in research with young children

In this article I use two research vignettes to eclipse the idea that honouring children's voices in our research is a necessarily democratic research process or a sufficiently radical one. Davies writes that:

'To eclipse' means to cast a shadow, to overshadow or surpass in importance (2001, p. 180).

We can overshadow the importance of discourse in our lives through refusing its effects and refusing to see it as a permanent marker on our becoming. I will draw on a rhizoanalysis (e.g. Alvermann, 2001) to briefly eclipse two prominent ways of seeing children's voice in research:

• naturalistic observation of children; and
• child interviews.

Introducing the vignettes and their origins

The research vignettes used in this article are from the Preschool Equity and Social Diversity (PESD) project. This project is an ongoing mixed method study of four-and five-year-old children's understandings of gender, 'race' and class that commenced in Victoria in 1999. The PESD project aims to study the relationships between preschool children's understandings of social diversity and equity and their own gender, class and racial identities—using three research techniques:

• semi-structured individual interviews with children;
• stories that raise issues of equity in relation to gender, 'race' and class with young children and group discussions of the stories; and
• observation of children's play to explore how children's gender, 'race' and class intersect with their constructions of 'race', gender and class.

In each technique four anti-bias persona dolls are used as research tools to initiate conversations and provide a focus for stories with the children. These dolls which have also been available for the children to use in free play, are:

• Shiree from an Aboriginal-Australian family
• Willie from a Vietnamese-Australian family
• Olivia from a rich Anglo-Australian family
• Tom from a poor Anglo-Australian family.

To date the project has been undertaken in six early childhood centres. A total of 112 children have participated. In two centres funding enabled the researchers to conduct the project over 15 weeks with a total of 20 children. These children participated in three individual interviews, 15 weekly story and discussion
groups, and three two-hour free play sessions with the dolls. In the remaining four centres, the research was conducted over a period of three weeks and children participated in three individual interviews and four story and group discussions, and a majority of the children participated in one two-hour free play session with the dolls. Children's participation was voluntary and the children knew they would be video-taped during their participation.

The PESD sits amongst a growing number of research studies that have attempted to find ways to hear children's voices and their perspectives in work with young children (see Lewis & Lindsay, 2000). For instance, in Australia, research has brought young children's perspectives into view on issues as diverse as migration experiences (Candy & Butterworth, 1998), learning to write (Martello, 1999), 'racial' diversity (MacNaughton, 2001) and social networks (Corrie & Leitao, 1999). In this work there has been an attempt to answer Cannella's point that children's voices are not always sought or valued in our work with them:

*The most critical voices that are silent in our constructions of early childhood education are the children with whom we work. Our constructions of research have not fostered methods that facilitate hearing their voices* (Cannella, 1997, p. 10).

The PESD is attempting to bring children's constructions of 'race', class and gender into our work with them.

**Rhizoanalysis**

Rhizoanalysis is a process for exploring what a text (e.g. a research moment) ‘does, and how it connects with other things (including its reader, its author, its literary and nonliterary context’) (Grosz, 1994, p. 199). The purpose in exploring what texts do and how they connect with other things is to map how meanings and power are organised and what this means for the way we struggle for progressive social change. In mapping how meanings and power are organised, one attempts to free up the ways in which we see the world and to open up new possibilities for how we construct and reconstruct our identities over time (our becoming) in it. To do this in research, Alvermann found ways to: ‘… connect diverse fragments of data in ways that produced new linkages and revealed discontinuities that had gone unmarked in the original analysis’ (Alvermann, 2001, p. 118).

Rhizoanalysis is a process for searching for unlikely connections between diverse fragments in the data and beyond data (Alvermann, 2001). Diverse fragments of data can be chosen because of how they differ in terms of who is involved in the fragment, when the fragment was collected, where it was collected, why it was collected and how it was collected.

Questions that aid the process of mapping and connecting include:

- What are some of the diverse fragments in this data? For example, who is present or absent, how are they present, when are they present or absent, why are they present or absent?
- How do these fragments connect to each other?
- How do these fragments connect to fragments from texts outside of it?
- How do the fragments connect to me? (Alvermann, 2001)
- What do these fragments do to each other? For example, what are the discourses brought to life in these fragments (Davies, 2001)? What were the effects of this?

These questions will be used to explore the research vignettes and to briefly eclipse my becoming as an objective researcher giving voice to children by raising questions about how power is organised in and through my research. An eclipse is produced by raising questions in order to generate further reflection and exploration of a text, such as research data. Instead of producing definitive answers and a final ‘truth’ about what is contained in a text, the fact that questions exist serves to highlight that we cannot have certainty about the text. Questions cast shadows by frustrating the search for certainty. In this article, questions are used to eclipse ideas about what are appropriate ways to give voice to children in our research with and about them.
Vignette one: Fragments from 40 minutes of ‘free’ play

Fragment 1: The four anti-bias persona dolls had been carefully placed in a play area defined by large outdoor wooden blocks under the verandah near the door that led from the inside play area of the centre to the outside play area. In the play area were several large pieces of cloth, some cooking utensils and…

Fragment 2: A video-camera on a tripod was focused on the area. The children could clearly see that they would be video-taped as they entered the area.

Fragment 3: A researcher sat nearby taking field notes of who entered, when and for how long.

Fragment 4: Two Anglo-Australian girls were the first children to enter the area. They began to play with the dolls by moving the two Anglo-Australian dolls, Olivia and Tom, to an area on the edge of the play area. This movement of the dolls began an elaborate and lengthy period of nearly 35 minutes of dramatic play in which the dolls were fed, talked to and put to bed. During this play blocks were rearranged with great care, and adjuncts to the dramatic play such as pieces of cloth and eating utensils were drawn on at several points.

Fragment 5: This dramatic play was punctuated on five occasions by the entry of individual boys, and a small group of three boys on one occasion. The boys hovered on the edge for minutes at a time before forays into the girls’ play were attempted. The boys jumped on blocks being used by the girls, moved pieces of cloth, handled Shiree roughly, moved Willie aside, stood menacingly in front of the girls, and shouted during several short bursts of a minute or two in the block area.

Fragment 6: The girls ignored the boys, using tactics such as turning their back on them and getting on with their play to successfully suggest that the boys leave them alone.

Fragment 7: Meanwhile, throughout the play a Vietnamese-Australian girl that I will call Mai sat to one side, watching silently.

Fragment 8: It was when the girls and the boys had vacated the area after nearly 40 minutes of play that Mai moved into the area and picked up Willie, sat him gently on a block, and began talking to him.

What are the connections between the fragments?

What does Fragment 8 do to the remainder of the fragments in this data? Does this fragment make sense of all that has come before? Was Mai on the edge of the play, watching because of what was in the middle of Fragment 4—two Anglo girls entering the play and choosing Tom and Olivia, and Fragment 5—the boys moving Willie aside? For instance, it could be argued that Mai sat on the edge of the play precisely because she understood the ‘racial’ politics within it and those politics placed her outside of it.

How do these fragments connect to fragments from texts outside of it?

I have drawn on fragments from five texts beyond the research vignette to attend to this question. The chosen texts speak to researching children, solitary behavior in preschools, identity formation and ethnic identities in education. I have also drawn on a second research vignette from the PESD that comes to mind whenever I reflect on Vignette One. Specifically, the connecting fragments come from:

• an early childhood journal containing an article exploring the construction of identities;
• an educational journal in which there is an article exploring the effects of the presence of ethnic minority teachers in education;
• a childhood education research journal containing an article exploring solitary–active behaviour in preschools;
• a second PESD research vignette; and,
• a book on researching young children.

In what follows I use these fragments from outside the first vignette to examine how they connect with the data from within it and to generate questions that can be used to produce an eclipse about what are appropriate ways to give voice to children in research.
Identifying positions as consequential to children: How does it connect?

Obviously what happens in young children's lives matters to their processes of becoming. However, as many poststructuralists argue (e.g. Butler, 1997; Davies, 2001) the processes of becoming are full of tensions as children negotiate different possibilities for themselves as gendered, 'racialised' and classed beings, and attempt to clarify which forms of becoming are possible and desirable. In this process of clarification, children come to identify with particular ways of thinking and being, and to resist, reject or 'disidentify' (O'Loughlin, 2001) with others. O'Loughlin provides a detailed examination of these processes in relation to the development of racial identity formation:

While it would seem, intuitively, that identification with one's own racial or ethnic group is essential to identity formation, some writers suggest that, at least for Caucasions, the development of a white racial identity may depend as much on defining an Other that they are not, as on defining some essential characteristics of whiteness with which to identify (O'Loughlin, 2001, p. 50).

What processes of becoming were made possible in this research moment? To what extent did each of the children perform discourses that will be consequential to their becoming because of the research? Children have the capacity to create their own meanings about difference and to act from these and because of these (Smith, 2000).

Was the children's learning about racial difference (through the moments constructed in and by the research) inevitable and consequential? What was Mai learning? Should this vignette be read as a consequential moment for each of these children or just for Mai? O'Loughlin invites us to at least consider that it might be consequential for each of the children involved:

The one thing we do not want to do, I think, is assume that subject formation is inconsequential, or that we need to do nothing because the inherent innocence of children will protect them from performing hateful acts (O'Loughlin, 2001, p. 63).

Would this consequential moment have existed without the research? O'Loughlin raises questions for me about the effects of research as a social intervention in children's lives and how they form their subjectivities in and through it. Can we assume that research moments in which children are active participants are inconsequential and innocent moments in their subject formation, and do nothing but observe what is brought forth through it? Or should research and children's participation in it be understood as always consequential because our presence in children's lives as observers will always place us in the position of colluding with their becoming? If we are present we are potential colluders. The questions for me, as researcher, have become 'what is it I want to collude with in children's becoming?' and 'is an innocence possible for researchers?'. Notions of objectivity that underpin much research suggest that it is. For me, connecting Vignette One with O'Loughlin's point about the consequential nature of subject formation connects me to those questions and prompts me to begin to trace the organisation of power in my work as a researcher. It raises for me, questions about how research as a social and political process constructs the social contexts, in and through which, subject formation occurs for young children. How might research with and about children be connected with and touch who they are becoming?

So, while O'Loughlin does not speak of research, her text serves to raise questions that can be borrowed by researchers to ask questions about their own place and position in the subject formation of young children.

The power of presence of the 'other': How does it connect?

Quirocho and Rios (2000) present a detailed review of what has been learned through research between 1989 and 1998 into the experiences of minority group teachers in their preservice training and as they move into the educational profession. They write:

One theme that has emerged is the perception of the 'marginalised' teacher. In Feurverger's (1997) study of immigrant teachers in Canada, the teachers' personal narratives were used to talk about the complexities of being marginalised. ... In spite of the training they
received, these teachers were treated as second-class citizens and began to see themselves as such. They found themselves catapulted into a culture that refused to recognise either their strengths or the strengths of their students (Quiocho & Rios, 2000, p. 509).

Their text is not of early childhood education or of young children’s dramatic play. However, asking ‘How does Quiocho’s and Rio’s text connect with the data fragments presented here?’ leads me to other questions. At what point does marginalisation of minority groups begin within education? Is this what Mai is experiencing? What are the complexities of this marginalisation for children from minority groups in early childhood education? To what extent do young children from minority groups in a particular early childhood program or a particular moment from a research project become treated as second-class citizens and begin to see themselves as such? What did Mai come to learn through her involvement in my research project? How was her experience in those 40 minutes of the research project connected with experiences beyond it? Mai sat on the edge of the active play with the persona dolls in this research project moment. She did not talk, she watched. Was her watching on the edge actually the most central and most consequential fragment of data in this research text? Would it have been produced without the research?

**Solitary play as dysfunctional: How does it connect**

The impact of early education on young children’s learning and future life chances has been widely discussed over many years. The concern with giving children the ‘best’, or a ‘head start’ through early education is so great that children’s positive adaptation to early childhood programs has become a source of interest and concern to researchers. Coplan, Wichmann and Lagacé-Séguin (2001) are three researchers who have studied the dysfunctional effects of solitary play behaviour in preschools. Solitary play includes non-social play, reticent behaviour and solitary-passive behaviour. From their work comes this description of reticent behaviour:

... reticent behavior involves such activities as sitting/standing unoccupied, and observing others without subsequently attempting to join the interaction. ... The display of reticent behavior in the preschool seems to be reflective of social anxiety and wariness. In this regard, reticent behavior in the preschool has been associated with maternal ratings of child shyness and negative emotionality, as well as teachers’ ratings of children’s internalising problems... (Coplan, Wichmann & Lagacé-Séguin, 2001, p. 165).

Non-social play, including reticent behaviour, that appears in free play moments in the preschool, is linked to ‘different forms of social and emotional maladjustment in this milieu’ (Coplan, Wichmann & Lagacé-Séguin, 2001, p. 164). How does this connect with Fragment 7? Mai’s observation of others and her reticence to join in any of the other fragments in the 40-minute free play vignette could be explained as shyness and as evidence that she has internalised emotional problems. It could point to her social and emotional maladjustment to preschool. How does this connect to my texts of marginalisation (Quiocho & Rios, 2000; O’Loughlin, 2001) and of the consequential in how the discourses of ‘race’ are performed and experienced in young children’s lives? Is it Mai who has internalized emotional problems or is it the children who never notice her and never invite her or Willie into their play? What is the consequential? How is racialised power organised in and through this research moment?

**Vignette Two: How does it connect?**

Olivia, the Anglo-Australian persona doll, is from a rich family. Her family has just moved to a new house and Olivia is choosing new curtains for her new bedroom. Her choices are between fabric with pink hearts, pink and blue cats and dogs, fire engines or bulldozers.

Ten children (five boys and five girls) sat listening to the story. The children are asked which fabric they think Olivia will choose. Most opt for the fabric with pink hearts. One child dissented. A girl (Sandy) said uncertainly, ‘I think she might like the fire engines.’ The other children laughed at her suggestion and loudly
restated their first choice. Sandy said again, but with a little more determination, ‘I think she might like the fire engines.’ She repeated her efforts four times before finally hanging her head quietly. She stayed silent for the remainder of the discussion.

Are connections possible between two disparate girls, times, places and parts of the project? Can they be connected through texts about marginalisation, reticence, resistance, and how being non-social might be produced in preschools? Can they be connected through a research project whose efforts to give voice to children’s knowings produced or played a part in producing their silences? How was power organised through the practices of observing children at play with physically diverse dolls and talking with children in groups about gendered choices?

How do these fragments connect to me?

In the PESD the search for children’s knowledge of ‘race’, class and gender has drawn heavily on well-trodden research paths for knowing others—watching them and talking with them. The use of naturalistic observational studies of children to understand children’s perspectives of the world has a long history. It has its roots in a positivist understanding of knowledge and the scientific study of the child and in empiricism.

An equally acceptable way to bring children’s voices into research is through the use of group and individual interviews with children (see Dockrell, Lewis & Lindsay, 2000). To this extent, the PESD draws on what are considered ‘appropriate’ ways to give voice to young children. My concerns should be not so much with these techniques but with how I interpret what I learn through them.

Dockrell, Lewis and Lindsay (2000) caution researchers about the need for objectivity and clear strategies for finding the ‘true’ indicators of what children think and know. They warn of type 1 and type 2 errors of interpretation that undermine the value of data collected from children:

… Errors that occur because we underestimate a child’s competence (commonly called a type 1 error) and errors that occur because we overestimate a child’s competence (commonly called a type 2 error) (Dockrell, Lewis & Lindsay, 2000, p. 53).

My efforts at rhizoanalysis lead potentially to type 1 and type 2 errors. I may have underestimated what children can and do know about gender, ‘race’ and class, and I may have been drawn potentially to overestimate. Through my efforts at empiricism, I could have colluded in the production and reproduction of marginalisation through not intervening in moments in the research when Willie and Shiree were marginalised and when Mai was on the ‘sidelines’ of the play. However, we could recast type 1 errors as errors in interpretation that result from an underestimation of the organization of power and its effects in our research. We could recast type 2 errors as errors in interpretation that result from overestimating our capacity to do research that is objective and reaches a final and single truth.

What do these fragments do to each other?

I have placed disparate fragments of text about research, voice, children, equity and social diversity up against each other and briefly explored how they connect.

In doing so, I am led to new vantage points on the operation of power in and through the PESD. The fragments talk to each other in ways that highlight for me dangers in seeking to give voice to young children in our research without first asking:

• which children’s voices will come out of it?
• what will be the consequence for each child who participates?
• how might one child’s voice silence that of another?
• what can and should I do when the voices, I and others hear, are racist or sexist?
• how might intervening in one child’s voicing of their knowledge enable another child to speak?
• how will I honour those children whose voices struggle to be heard?
These questions come to me not as the final stage of analysis but as a prompt to redesign my role as a researcher in ways that can do more than give voice to children. By briefly eclipsing my own research using rhizoanalysis I am led to ask ‘can we find ways to transform childhood research by becoming politically engaged researchers transforming with children the performance of discourse, rather than merely reporting how it works?’. Bringing forth children's voices is indefensible if those voices merely serve to silence some, marginalize others, or reinforce unjust ways of becoming.

Acknowledgement
I would like to thank the parents and especially the children who have enabled this study to proceed and thus my questions and searchings to arise.

References


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- **The Journal of Research in Childhood Education**
- **ACEI Professional Focus Newsletters**

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This biannual journal publishes current research in education and related fields. It is intended to advance knowledge and theory of the education of children, from infancy through early adolescence. It seeks to stimulate the exchange of research ideas through publication of: • Reports of empirical research • Theoretical articles • Ethnographic and case studies • Cross-cultural studies and studies addressing international concerns • Participant observation studies • Studies deriving data collected from naturalistic settings.

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or call your subscription agent.
This book presents a sustained challenge to current orthodoxies in early childhood education. Looking at gender equity strategies from a feminist post-structuralist perspective, Glenda MacNaughton examines the ‘truths’ of our early childhood practice and finds them wanting.

The work is framed around the research of a small group of early childhood practitioners exploring gender issues in their work. It documents their discussions, beliefs and practices as they worked to understand why so many of the strategies for gender equity they learned from conventional practice had little impact on the ways in which four- and five-year-olds ‘do’ gender.

In each chapter MacNaughton uses stories from the group to examine the various myths we have created to justify the failure of conventional strategies, and presents new ways of looking at how children learn and experience gender. Some of these myths are that gender is determined by biology, that children aren’t aware of gender, that boys miss out in gender equity programs, that parents don’t want it; and that gender equity work clashes with a multicultural program.

Within these chapters the current ‘truths’ of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) are discussed in relation to the strategies group members used in their work, and document the ways in which they debated, explored, and developed ideas in their efforts to make gender equity a reality. Their disappointments, frustrations, and the hostility they encountered from others will ring true for many readers in the field. These ‘grown up’ stories are supplemented by equally revealing stories of children’s play relating to the issue being discussed. Many are powerful and poignant descriptions of the varied and complex ways children negotiate gender in their daily lives. ‘Tom and the after-shave bottle’ describes a four year old’s superhuman efforts to negotiate being different from ‘the other boys’ that brought a lump to my throat. Tom secretly shows Glenda a perfume bottle, but cautions: ‘Don’t tell the other boys it’s a perfume bottle. I’ll tell them its an after-shave bottle’ (p. 30). These cameos are then analysed from a variety of perspectives to explore the many ways of reading the situation. It is here that the DAP ‘gaze’ appears so clearly inadequate, and the feminist post-structuralist ‘gaze’ presents new understandings that can spur us to new responses.

In the chapter entitled ‘But it clashes with my multicultural program’ MacNaughton is at her most passionate, arguing against tokenism, homogeneity (sameness) and alterity (‘otherness’) which are still common approaches to difference in early childhood theory and practice. She cautions against the stereotypes we often hold of how ‘other’ cultures ‘do’ gender.

The aim in meshing work on issues of race, culture and gender in early childhood education is to produce complex understandings of the shifting struggles, tensions and possibilities in the lived experiences of race-gender-culture in children’s and parents’ lives. (pp. 220–221).

One of this book’s greatest strengths is the way Glenda MacNaughton unravels the complexities of thought and language so pervasive in post-structuralist writing. The writing is clear and accessible, making this a useful resource for both students and practitioners. The importance of a feminist perspective is articulated and gives focus and direction to the strategies she presents.

Children’s understandings of gender don’t change by just moving the blocks! Many of the suggestions given for working from a feminist post-structuralist perspective are focused on reflection and conversations with children. This emphasis on conversations has less relevance for those working with babies and toddlers. We need to find new ways of making gender equity work effective with these children too.

The group Research and Networking for Gender Equity in Early Childhood (RANGE), which grew out of the research project, is a tribute to all these women’s continuing commitment to making gender equity strategies more effective.

As technology and economic rationalism force us to increasingly look for quick and instant ‘answers’, this book encourages us to instead look for further questions. Rather than solutions, it presents the possibilities, excitement and uncertainties of the way ahead.

At times these explanations and provocations are unsettling, at times complex, and at times intellectually challenging. However, given that teaching young children is unsettling, complex and challenging, would early childhood teachers really accept explanations of it that are not? (p. xv)

A must for anyone who is serious about wanting to change the world!

Brian Newman

Brian Newman teaches Child Studies at Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE, and is currently a member of RANGE. Rethinking Gender in Early Childhood Education is available for purchase from AECA, ring 02 6241 6900 or 1800356900 (toll-free).
Invited Speakers
The conference has attracted an extensive array of speakers who will engage in plenary presentations, interactive workshops, small symposia and concurrent sessions to provide a platform for lively discussion throughout the duration of the event.

Fraser Mustard (CANADA)
Dr. Fraser Mustard has been a leader in Canada about the socio-economic determinants of human development and health. A particular emphasis has been on early childhood and the role of communities. He co-chaired a report for the Government of Ontario on early learning with specific community recommendations (The Early Years Study). Recognition of this has led Dr. Mustard and his colleagues to emphasize to all sectors of society the crucial nature of the early years to provide a healthy and competent population. Dr. Mustard is involved with governments in Canada, the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, UNICEF and the Aga Khan University in Pakistan in emphasizing the enormous importance to society of early childhood development.

Pam Schiller Ph.D. (USA)
Dr. Pam Schiller has an impressive career spanning nearly every facet of the early childhood profession. She is currently the Senior National Early Childhood Consultant for McGraw-Hill Learning Materials in Worthington, Ohio. Dr. Schiller was Supervisor of Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten for Pasadena (Texas) Independent School District and Assistant Professor at the University of Houston at Clear Lake.
Dr. Schiller has authored and co-authored over 30 books on topics ranging from curriculum development to the management of childcare centers to the use of current brain research in the classroom. Her most recent books for Gryphon House include The Complete Daily Curriculum and The Complete Book of Rhymes, Songs, Poems, Fingerplays, and Chants.
Beyond her professional life, she maintains a special and active interest in nature and the environment. Pam is the mother of two grown daughters and is a very proud grandmother.

Margi Carter & Deb Curtis (USA)
Authors of The Visionary Director and Training Teachers: A Harvest of Theory and Practice, Margi and Deb currently live in the Seattle, Washington area and teach at Pacific Oaks Northwest.
They have a wonderful reputation as presenters. Their workshops are aesthetically pleasing, intellectually stimulating and always thought provoking. Their writing has produced wise and practical books that inspire.
Margi Carter writes a regular column in Child Care Information Exchange and has contributed to several books and videos. She has worked as an elementary school teacher, a preschool teacher, and a childcare center director. She has a M.A. from Pacific Oaks College and serves on the adjunct faculty there.
Deb Curtis has been teaching and caring for children since 1989, and has been training teachers or over 20 years. She is a community college instructor. Previously she was Head Start Education Coordinator.

Louise Porter (AUS)
Dr. Louise Porter is a child psychologist specialising in early childhood. She worked in three early childhood agencies in Adelaide and subsequently lectured at university for 13 years in special and gifted education with a focus on young children. She conducts a private practice consulting with parents and practitioners about children’s developmental and emotional or social challenges. She has a particular interest in guiding children’s behaviour, which was the subject of her doctorate, for which she was awarded the Australian Early Childhood Association’s doctoral research award in 2001.

Professor Margaret Reynolds (USA)
Professor Margaret Reynolds began her professional career as an early childhood teacher before moving into political life. Professor Reynolds’ experience includes working in early intervention programs in Northern Queensland and involvement in teacher training programs for ATSIC teachers. She is an active parent and community advocate on children’s issues. Her current role is Australian President of the United Nations Association which is undertaking a report on children in detention.
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- Early childhood services: What can children tell us?
- The communicative competence of young children
- Assessing young children’s rhetorical strategies and knowledge: Providing learning opportunities for teachers
- When food comes from home

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- Children’s earliest memories: A narrative study
- Full-day or half-day kindergarten? Kindergarten teachers’ voices in the debate
- Jane and Gemma go to school: Supporting young gifted Aboriginal students
- Children’s concepts of teachers’ ways of relating to play
- Emerging concepts in chance and data
- Social skills training to reduce aggressive and withdrawn behaviours in child care centres
- Early childhood numeracy: Building an understanding of part-whole relationships
The Learning at Home Series is the latest series from AECA. The series has been developed to support parents, grandparents, family day care carers and all carers of young children in their most important task – starting young children on the pathway to a lifetime of living and learning.

These books provide an excellent guide to how young children learn and how best to help them at different stages of early childhood.

The first issue is called Learning about feelings and gives advice on how to help children manage their emotions so they can be safe, optimistic and enthusiastic about life and learning.

*Learning about feelings is now available for purchase from AECA

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